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Napa Valley wineries pledge $2.5 million for red blotch virus research

The industry-backed initiative will fund three years of work aimed at earlier detection and vineyard management tools.

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A group of Napa Valley wineries and winegrowers has pledged $2.5 million to launch the first phase of a new research effort aimed at Grapevine Red Blotch Virus, a disease that growers say is hurting vineyard performance, fruit ripening and wine quality.

The funding will support Phase One of the Grapevine Red Blotch Virus Research Initiative, an industry-led public-private collaboration that organizers say is meant to speed up practical research and turn scientific findings into tools growers can use in the field. The effort is based in Napa Valley and will support work at multiple research institutions over three years.

Organizers said the first round of funding was driven by a group of Napa Valley wine industry leaders that includes Christian Moueix of Dominus Estate, Darioush Winery, Joseph Phelps Vineyards, Joe Wender and Ann Colgin, Louis P. Ciminelli of Laelius Winegrowing, Opus One Winery, Phillips Family Farming and Vine Hill Ranch, Tom Gamble of Gamble Estates, and the Araujo family, along with other donors.

According to the initiative, Grapevine Red Blotch Virus is one of the most serious unresolved disease threats facing wine production. The virus can weaken vine performance, slow fruit maturation, change grape composition and reduce wine quality. Growers also face higher management costs and, in some cases, the expense of replanting vineyards. Organizers said those problems are made more difficult by the lack of early detection tools and by the limited number of proven strategies to contain the disease and manage infected vines in commercial vineyards.

The new initiative is designed to bring together wineries, growers, researchers and public institutions under one coordinated research program. Organizers said the goal is to focus on work that can produce practical vineyard solutions rather than leave research efforts scattered across separate institutions and projects.

The first competitive calls for proposals are expected to focus on earlier and more reliable detection methods, the biology of the virus and the insects or other vectors that may spread it, vineyard mitigation and management practices, and nursery testing and clean plant material. The program may also back work on vine physiology and longer-term resistance, but organizers said the main focus of the first phase will be on outcomes that can help growers sooner.

The initiative grew out of talks that began in 2025 among wine industry and research leaders. Those discussions were started by the Moët Hennessy Robert-Jean de Vogüé Research Center, according to the announcement. Organizers said the talks centered

on gaps in current knowledge about red blotch disease and the need for a coordinated response across institutions.

In July 2026, those discussions led to a meeting of industry and research participants to refine research priorities and consider a shared funding strategy. Organizers said a smaller working group was then formed to study governance and administrative options for the new program.

The initiative plans to distribute research awards through open calls for proposals that will be available to qualified institutions. A proposed 10-member governance committee, with equal representation from the wine industry and research community, would set research priorities, approve budgets, authorize calls for proposals and make final funding decisions.

Proposals will also be reviewed by an independent technical panel, according to the organizers. That panel is expected to evaluate each application for scientific merit, feasibility, team experience, measurable milestones and likely impact in vineyards. Organizers said that structure is intended to provide outside review and accountability for how the money is spent.

The American Vineyard Foundation is expected to serve as fiscal agent and program administrator for the first phase once administrative agreements are completed, the initiative said. Organizers said the governance committee would still remain responsible for oversight, program performance and decisions about whether to continue the effort beyond the first phase.

Dr. Ben Montpetit, chair of the Department of Viticulture and Enology at UC Davis, said in a statement released by the initiative that researchers and industry leaders had identified the most urgent red blotch research needs and built a plan to coordinate the work. He said the financial support from the wine community would help move that plan forward and support the development of tools growers can use.

The first calls for proposals are expected in January 2027, with initial funding decisions planned for the spring of 2027. Organizers said fundraising will continue as they seek to expand the research program and prepare for later phases.

The announcement reflects growing concern in Napa Valley and the wider wine industry about the long-term cost of grapevine diseases that reduce crop quality and force growers into expensive management choices. By pooling private funding and using outside scientific review, backers of the red blotch initiative said they hope to create a clearer path from research to vineyard use at a time when many growers say they need better information on how the virus spreads and how infected blocks should be managed.

Organizers said people or companies interested in contributing to the effort can contact Bart Araujo, who is helping lead fundraising for the project.