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Bavaria’s biggest wine producer asks 1,100 growers to delay grape payments

The Franconian cooperative says deferring 2024 and 2025 harvest proceeds is necessary for survival through 2027

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Bavaria’s largest wine producer is asking its member growers to delay payments for grapes from the 2024 and 2025 harvests as it tries to avoid insolvency and keep operating into 2027, according to BR24.

The company, Winzergemeinschaft Franken, or GWF, is based in Repperndorf, a district of Kitzingen in Lower Franconia. BR24 reported that the cooperative is facing an acute liquidity crisis and that Chairman Claus Hochrhein informed growers about the situation on Friday, November 20, while also asking for their support.

Under the plan, about 1,100 members and winegrowers would temporarily forgo payments that are still held in their accounts at GWF for grapes delivered in 2024 and 2025. Hochrhein told BR24 that the deferral is necessary if the cooperative is to remain capable of doing business in 2027.

The request highlights the strain on Germany’s wine industry, where producers have been dealing with a tougher business climate for some time. High production costs and weaker demand have been weighing on wineries and cooperatives. For the beverage sector, the case is a sign that falling wine consumption and higher costs are no longer only a problem for small producers. They are also pressuring large cooperatives and, in turn, the income of grape growers who depend on those businesses to market and sell their harvest.

GWF is now preparing a broader shift in strategy. Hochrhein told BR24 that the cooperative needs to move beyond a narrow regional focus. Working with a consulting firm, GWF has developed a plan to reposition itself in the market. The cooperative wants to expand more aggressively outside Franconia, push exports more strongly for the first time, and increase its presence in supermarkets across Germany.

That supermarket push is expected to include brands developed specifically for food retailers. GWF also wants to sell “wine from Bavaria” to restaurants nationwide, according to the plan outlined by the company’s leadership.

It was not immediately clear how growers would respond to the proposed moratorium on payments. Their decision could be critical for the cooperative’s short-term survival, since the request is aimed at preserving cash inside the business rather than paying it out to members.

The financial pressure comes after GWF had still been investing in new areas earlier in the year. Since April, the cooperative has been operating Franconia’s first dealcoholization facility. According to specialists cited by BR24, non-alcoholic wine remains a niche product, but demand is rising.

That investment shows the difficult position many beverage companies now face. Producers are being pushed to spend on new categories, retail access and product development at the same time that traditional demand is under pressure and costs remain high. In wine, the challenge can be especially sharp for cooperatives, which must balance investment needs with payments to growers.

GWF’s difficulties did not emerge suddenly. BR24 reported that the cooperative has been in crisis for some time. It has cut 20 jobs this year, and employees are giving up their Christmas bonus as part of the effort to stabilize the business.

The company has also gone through another leadership change. Mainpost first reported that Managing Director Bernhard Etzel had to leave his post after only four months. Hochrhein and his deputy, Steffen Zink, have now taken over management on an interim basis.

GWF is one of the biggest wine cooperatives in Germany and is described by BR24 as the country’s sixth-largest wine cooperative. Its problems therefore reach beyond one company in one region. They show how quickly pressure on demand, costs and distribution can spread through a cooperative structure, from the winery itself to member growers and employees.

The cooperative’s planned reset is centered on finding new outlets for its wine, especially in large retail chains, the restaurant trade and foreign markets. That reflects a wider shift in the beverage business, where producers are increasingly looking beyond their traditional local customer base and trying to build volume through national retail networks, exports and low- or no-alcohol products.

Whether that strategy will be enough may depend first on a more immediate question: whether GWF’s growers agree to wait for money they are already owed from two harvest years so the cooperative can keep functioning while it tries to remake its business.