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Frost Devastates German Vineyards

Millions in Losses as Frost Cripples German Vineyards

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Germany's wine industry faces a significant setback as late spring frosts have inflicted extensive damage on vineyards across key wine-producing regions. According to Allianz Agrar, a leading agricultural insurer, the recent frost events are the most severe in at least four decades, with insurance payouts potentially reaching tens of millions of euros. The frosts, occurring at the end of April, have been particularly detrimental due to the preceding warm temperatures, which advanced the growth of the vines, making

them more susceptible when temperatures plummeted to as low as -7°C at night.

Martin Heiß, head of crop insurance claims at Allianz Agrar, highlighted the unusual severity of this event, noting that the timing of the frost was especially harmful as the vines were at a vulnerable stage of development. The advanced growth, spurred by warmer weather earlier in the month, left the young shoots exposed to the sudden drop in temperature, causing widespread damage.

The northern parts of the Baden and Württemberg regions, along with sections of Franconia, have been among the hardest hit. In the eastern regions of Sachsen and Saale-Unstrut, it is estimated that approximately 80% of the vines have been affected. While these regions collectively represent about 1.3% of Germany's total vineyard area, the impact on local producers is severe. Despite this localized damage, the overall effect on Germany's 2024 wine harvest is expected to be relatively minor.

Allianz Agrar has initiated an extensive assessment process, with experts set to visit more than 30,000 vineyards to evaluate the extent of the damage. Some vineyards may face a total loss of their 2024 grape harvest. The variability in frost impact across different sites complicates the overall damage assessment. There remains a possibility that the vines may partially recover through a secondary budding process, though this outcome is uncertain and can vary significantly by location and vine variety.

The German Wine Institute (DWI) noted that vineyards unaffected by the frost have experienced a successful flowering period. However, the secondary budding in frost-damaged areas has been delayed. Grape varieties such as Müller-Thurgau and certain members of the Burgundy family are capable of producing flowers after a second bud break, a trait less common in Riesling vines, which are predominant in Germany.

Allianz Agrar emphasized the importance of multi-risk insurance for vineyards, particularly as extreme weather events become more frequent and severe due to climate change. Researchers have pointed out that warmer winters, a consequence of climate change, advance the growing season, leading to earlier bud break and increasing the risk of damage from late spring frosts. This phenomenon has broader implications for the wine industry, necessitating adaptive strategies to cope with the changing climate.

A recent historical parallel can be drawn from the 2017 spring frosts across Europe, which caused an estimated €3.3 billion in damages to fruit and wine producers, with insurance covering around €600 million of the losses, as reported by Munich Re and cited in a 2023 study published in the journal Climate Risk Management.

As the German wine industry navigates the aftermath of this frost event, the focus remains on recovery and resilience. The situation underscores the challenges faced by viticulture in an era of increasing climate volatility, highlighting the need for comprehensive risk management strategies and climate adaptation measures. The full extent of the damage and the potential for recovery will become clearer in the coming weeks as assessments continue and the growing season progresses.