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American Wineries Slash Emissions by Switching to Lighter Bottles and Greener Practices

Industry leaders focus on packaging and transportation to cut carbon footprint as climate change reshapes winemaking operations

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Wineries across the United States are taking new steps to address climate change, focusing on reducing carbon emissions in their operations. The International Wineries for Climate Action (IWCA), a group founded six years ago by Jackson Family Wines and Spain's Familia Torres, is leading this effort. The organization now includes 176 member wineries in 15 countries, representing 3.5% of global wine production. Unlike other sustainability groups, IWCA has a single goal: cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

Spottswoode Winery in Napa Valley has long been known for its environmental practices. Recently, it switched to wine bottles that are 38% lighter than traditional ones. Molly Sheppard, Spottswoode's Director of Winery Strategy, said the response from collectors was positive. "We had a lot of people thank us. The cases are lighter. They're easier to carry and easier to fit in the cellar," Sheppard said at a recent luncheon at St. Supery winery in Rutherford, hosted by IWCA.

The event brought together wine writers and representatives from member wineries such as Henschke, Opus One, and Troplong Mondot. The discussion focused on practical changes like reducing plastic wrap use and encouraging carpooling among workers.

Katie Jackson, daughter of Jess Jackson and Barbara Banke, leads the climate action efforts at Jackson Family Wines. She explained that IWCA members must make their own emission reductions rather than buying offsets. "Members who join are asked to make their reductions themselves. They're not buying offsets," Jackson said.

The biggest source of emissions for wineries is not winemaking itself but packaging and transportation, which account for 85% of total emissions. Reducing bottle weight is a key strategy. A standard pallet holds 672 bottles; if each bottle is 300 grams lighter, the pallet weighs 444 pounds less. This means less fuel is needed for transport at every stage—from glass producer to winery, winery to distributor, and distributor to retailer.

St Supery CEO Emma Swain recalled that when her winery switched to lighter bottles in 2012, some trade partners were surprised by the change. "Heavy bottles don't enhance anything, except carpal tunnel," Swain said.

Kendall Jackson Vintner’s Reserve Chardonnay, one of the most popular wines in the U.S., also moved to a lighter bottle without announcing it publicly. Sean Carroll, head of communications for Jackson Family Wines, said consumers did not notice the change but now appreciate the sustainability effort. “All the studies we see from consumers is that they do care deeply about sustainability,” Carroll said.

IWCA members are also making smaller changes with big impacts. At St Supery’s Dollarhide Ranch, 85% of workers carpool thanks to a $9 daily incentive from the company. Winemaker Brooke Shenk organized a recycling program for stretch film used on pallets and found a company willing to buy and reuse it.

Another overlooked source of waste is PET label release liner—the plastic backing from wine labels—which all wineries use unless they have etched labels. Shenk’s group has collected 244,000 pounds of this material so far and is expanding efforts to recycle nitrile gloves as well.

Tori Williams, Managing Director at Frog’s Leap Winery, pointed out that these changes can save money as well as reduce waste. For example, recycling programs can cut trash hauling costs by $7,000 per year.

Despite these efforts, wineries do not expect immediate marketing benefits from their climate actions. John Williams, founder of Frog’s Leap Winery, compared today’s movement to early organic farming efforts: “There was a community that realized it was necessary to make changes that were important.”

The IWCA does not use stickers or labels on bottles to promote its certification—partly because producing stickers would add emissions but also because the focus remains on real change rather than marketing.

As climate change continues to threaten agriculture worldwide, wineries are finding that reducing emissions is both an act of self-preservation and a way to contribute positively beyond their industry. The work may be behind the scenes for now, but it is changing how American wine is made and delivered.