

Increasing Adoption of Sustainable Practices in Central Coast Vineyards

Kris O'Connor (Farmer Rancher Grant Program)

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Title: Increasing Adoption of Sustainable Practices in Central Coast Vineyards

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**CENTRAL COAST
VINEYARD TEAM**

Promoting Sustainable Winegrowing



Goats are used for weed suppression in place of chemical controls. -- Photos by Jill Kimmel

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SARE Grant: \$13,000

Situation

Much of California's Central Coast Agriculture occurs on slopes susceptible to erosion and in watersheds that drain into the Monterey and Morro Bay estuaries or into rivers listed for salmon and steelhead protection. Farming this terrain raises the risk for contamination from pest, weed and fertility management chemicals.

Wine grapes producers traditionally have used a wide array of these chemicals. But as pest resistance to them increases and as the Food Quality Protection Act strikes options from use, growers must learn to incorporate alternative practices.

In recent years, Central Coast growers began integrating farming practices that reduce reliance on ag chemicals. In 1995, the Central Coast Vineyard Team (CCVT), a nonprofit grower group with a mission to promote sustainable practices, developed the Positive Points System -- a 1,000-point self-assessment tool for evaluating the extension of sustainable practices in a vineyard. The Positive Point System (PPS) focuses on integrated farm management approaches, addressing pest, soil, water, and viticulture management along with wine quality and continuing education.

Early efforts focused on using PPS as an *evaluation* tool. This SARE project focused on *demonstrating* PPS practices through grower-to-grower tailgate meetings in the vineyard and other outreach efforts.

Objectives

- Demonstrate sustainable practices through quarterly tailgate meetings in Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey counties
- Develop and distribute educational materials regarding sustainable practices to a local and statewide audience



Insectary plantings between rows draw beneficial insects.



Vineyard floor management is a major subject of discussion at tailgate meetings.

Actions

Tailgate Meetings

CCVT conducted 29 tailgate meetings and PPS workshops throughout the Central Coast, addressing specific grower practices and incorporating technical information from cooperators. This included:

- Tours of the Clean Water Project demonstration sites
- Weed and pest identification
- Beneficial insect identification and their use in biological pest management
- Irrigation performance
- Canopy management
- Equipment demonstration
- Best management practices for sulfur use
- Vineyard floor management

Presentations and Events

- CCVT gave eight industry presentations during the grant period to a variety of audiences
- CCVT participated in 12 industry events by hosting a booth and engaging in conversation with event attendees
- CCVT attended and hosted booths at 10 community and youth events



Falconer Tom Savory explains how falcons frighten avian pests like starlings, which can cause significant loss by eating grapes off the vine.

Tailgate meetings create a relaxed atmosphere where growers can discuss sustainable practices. More than 600 people attended 29 such meetings during the project.



Results

Tailgate Meetings

Attendance totaled 633 people representing 194,424 acres farmed. Several meetings addressed Spanish-speaking farm workers, with 118 Spanish speakers attending. This underrepresented community also received independent training in safe pesticide handling.

PPS self-assessments increased 26.5% in 2003 to 81 from 64 the year before.

Presentations and Events

- Industry presentations reached more than 1,000 people. Included was a presentation at the Unified Wine and Grape Symposium addressing the newly translated Spanish version of the Positive Points System and its use to educate Spanish speakers on sustainable vineyard practices.
- Hosting a booth at industry events allowed CCVT to reach more than 4,000 people with project information and copies of PPS.
- CCVT estimates it reached more than 35,000 community member by attending and hosting booths at community and youth events.

CCVT also developed and distributed five newsletters to a mailing list of 1,500 and contributed materials for statewide and national industry publications.



Backhoe pits are used to determine root depth and vineyard irrigation needs.



Benefits or Impacts

This project allowed the Central Coast Vineyard Team to reach audiences beyond its immediate membership.

CCVT estimates considerable reductions in soil loss and erosion through the use of PPS practices and the RUSLE II equation, both used in the Clean Water Project. One Clean Water Project site estimated a decrease in soil loss from 38 tons per acre per year to 0.02 tons after PPS practices were implemented.

PPS continues to gain momentum as more growers complete the self-assessment and make changes to vineyard management practices based on results.

- 50% of people attending the meetings said they planned to change a practices as a result of what they learned
- 1,000 acres of demonstration sites for growers were added after the project to the 2,000 already in place

Among grower comments following tailgate meetings:

- We are in the process of planting a new vineyard. We will place a new importance on erosion and use of cover crops.
- Well organized, not too long; very pertinent information.
- Good coverage of many aspects of sustainable farming.
- I plan to incorporate more scouting.