

Following the Rules

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A few years ago, Lodi-area winegrape grower Robert Abercrombie wanted to know when he was irrigating his grapes with just enough water to get the job done - but not too much water.

By studying the minimum amount needed for his grapes, Abercrombie said he no longer wastes water, didn't waste electricity to pump the water and produced better-tasting wine.

Saving water is one of several reasons Abercrombie and five other Lodi-area vintners were recognized Tuesday for following "Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing."

The winners were certified by an organization known as Protected Harvest, a nonprofit organization that independently certifies farmers' use of stringent environmental growing standards.

"I know it first hand; Lodi kind of led the way," said Karen Ross, president of the California Association of Winegrape Growers. "The really progressive kind of work that Lodi has done is really being looked to as a model."

The Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission, which represents 750 wine growers farming 90,000 grapes in the Lodi area, adopted the Lodi Rules for Suitable Winemaking in 2000.

Lodi Rules has two basic components - sustainable winegrowing practices standards and a pesticide environmental system.

According to Cliff Ohmart, research director for the Lodi-Woodbridge commission, the program benefits everyone. For example:

- It benefits consumers because it produces great wines and great care.
- It benefits growers because it increases the crop's value.
- It benefits the community because it lives in a healthier environment.

Winegrape winners at a glance

- Robert Abercrombie, Sutter Home Family Vineyards. Grows 21.7 acres of zinfandel at West Side Ranch, west of Lodi.
- Joe Dexter, Lobo Loco Wines. Grows syrah on two vineyards totaling about 7 acres in Wilton.
- Jerry and Bruce Fry, Mohr-Fry Ranches. Grow 172 acres of zinfandel on two ranches, one on West Lane and one on DeVries Road.
- Robert Pirie, Colligere Farm Management. Has 220 certified vineyard acres, including 60 acres at the J&D Ranch northwest of Lodi and 160 acres at Clay Station Ranch in Herald.
- John Ledbetter and Kim Ledbetter-Bronson, Vino Farms. Have 959 certified acres on four ranches, one in Acampo, one in the Elk Grove area, one in Herald and one southwest of Elk Grove. They grow pinot grigio, zinfandel, chardonnay, syrah, viognier, merlot, semillon and cabernet sauvignon. The grapes contribute to wines made at Mondavi Woodbridge Winery, Domain Chandon and Fetzer Winery.
- Keith Watts, K&S Watts Vineyards. Four certified zinfandel vineyards east and west of Lodi, three of them owned by his mother, Janet Watts.

- It benefits state regulators because the Lodi-area is way ahead of them in compliance.

- It benefits because growers are good environmental stewards of their land.

Or to put it another way, Ohmart said, "This must be a special occasion because I'm wearing a tie."

Carolyn Brickey, executive director of Protected Harvest, said that certification by an independent auditor hired by her organization is a way to show what Lodi-Woodbridge growers are really doing.

Growers from area, even from the Napa Valley, may have used similar conservation measures as Lodi, but they haven't been independently certified, Brickey said after Tuesday's program ended.

"It's a great day being in Lodi," Brickey told an estimated 70 people Tuesday at the gathering at Wine and Roses Country Inn. "It's like being at graduation, except that all of the graduates are valedictorians."

Ross, the state winegrape growers president, said that Lodi is becoming known nationally and internationally, especially in Australia.

"Not only (has Lodi) made a commitment, they've made a commitment to improve, raise the bar higher," Brickey added.

For more information, see the Web site, <http://www.lodirules.com>.