Handling of Propagation Material: Vine Improvement Perspective

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Vine improvement activity over the past 20 years has centered around the three major winegrowing states, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. As a result of considerable selection and importation of high performance selections and clones in the 1960s and 1970s the respective Departments of Agriculture in each state commenced trialling and disease-testing various selections to evaluate their performance under Australian conditions. This resulted in many clones being termed 'superior', based primarily on vigour, yield and health of the vine. It is from these clones that most registered multiplication blocks in vine improvement have been established.

It should be noted that all vine improvement schemes are funded solely from sales of registered material and are administered by voluntary involvement of industry-based committee members.

The three major states now have vine improvement organisations that are industry-managed, all having grown from schemes initiated by Departments of Agriculture. Western Australia is also in a transitional period of establishing a Vine Improvement Association. Queensland, Northern Territory and Tasmania are represented at national level by government personnel who in turn have close links with the industry in their state or territory.

The transition from Government to private scheme has seen the formation of South Australian Vine Improvement Committee (SAVIC) which in turn oversees some 7 regional vine improvement committees in SA; the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area Vine Improvement Society (MIAVIS) in NSW; and the Victorian & Murray Valley Vine Improvement Association (VAMVIA) in Victoria.

This transition developed as each vine improvement scheme grew into a commercial size, able to generate sufficient funds through levies from nurserymen and growers from the sale of cuttings to cover operational costs as well as build up reserves for lean years of low demand for propagation material.

1988 saw the vine improvement groups unite to form the Australian Vine Improvement Association (AVIA). This industry-based body took on the role of co-ordination of vine improvement activities on a national basis. AVIA achieved instant recognition and immediate benefits to viticulture in all States by eliminating competition between states for newly imported varieties and clones by establishing itself as a recognised and responsible marketing agent for overseas breeders and institutions. In so doing AVIA took on the responsibility of collection of levies or royalties on imported selections, and this in turn resulted from the preparedness of member States to administer the distribution of new selections and monitor recognised licensed propagators of certified material and collect royalty payments from the same.

In 1992 AVIA requested that the three major states impose a half cent levy per cutting distributed, in order to allow AVIA to continue its work in vine improvement. This levy has now become the sole funding for AVIA's various activities, including promotion of vine improvement, and of the state vine improvement organisations and recognised propagators of material from the vine improvement program.

And so we come to the recent demand for vast increases in vinegrape material. To some degree this demand has lessened the relevance of vine improvement organisations as growers, nurserymen and corporations have sought large quantities of vine planting material that could not be supplied through vine improvement organisations.

Although difficult to estimate, there is a general assumption that as many non-certified cuttings as certified vine improvement material were distributed last spring for planting this season. Fortunately a large percentage of non-certified material could be considered as improved material as it has come from the progeny of vineyards established from vine improvement source material.

Nevertheless it cannot be overemphasised that every care must be taken in sourcing material and it may well be better to wait a season or attempt to source material from a recognised (in future accredited) nursery rather than risk the use of inferior material which will cause yield reductions for the life of the vineyard.

AVIA currently has in place a process for writing and implementation of a National Vine Accreditation Scheme. The provision of high quality planting material is the foundation of all horticultural industries. It is especially critical for the grapegrowing industry during the current period of rapid expansion in plantings to ensure the use of the best available clonal material.

In 1992 a discussion paper on the establishment of a national grapevine accreditation scheme was released by the Wine and Brandy Producers' Association of South Australia. This paper outlined the need for uniform and practical quarantine regulations, certification of grapevine propagating material and accreditation of nurseries using certified material and product quality assurance.

A steering committee was formed which established three expert working groups to develop a model for a scheme with particular reference to quarantine and hygiene, vine improvement and nursery propagation. The working group papers were collated into a draft document and referred back to the steering committee. The steering committee then placed the development of the scheme in the hands of the Australian Vine Improvement Association. The development of the standard operating procedures for the scheme is currently in progress. The scheme will be applied to vine improvement operations for the 1995 season, with plans for the nursery scheme for 1996.

This scheme, once successfully implemented, will offer not only the vine improvement organisations traceability of planting material but the nurseryman, grower/winemakers and marketers of Australian wine a firm footing to compete with confidence on the ever-changing international arena bringing better wine to the world at a better price through competitiveness for greater export returns to Australia.