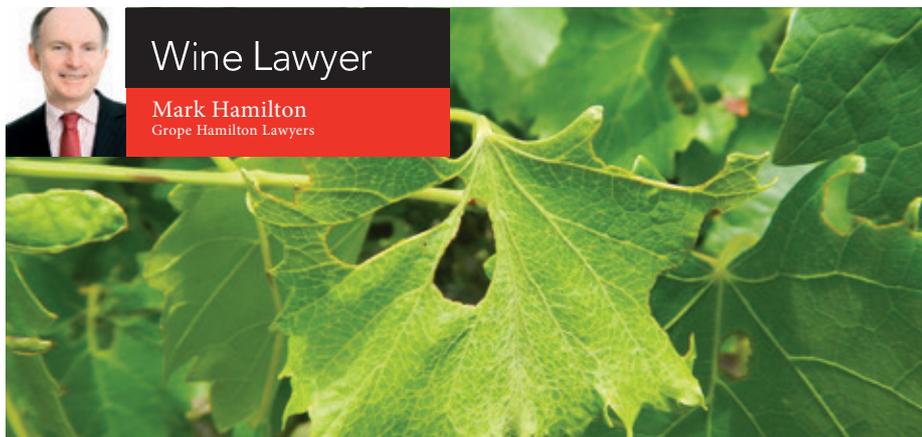


Australian wine export spray risk



A NOTICE TO WINE EXPORTERS from the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation (AWBC) entitled 'Wine Grapes and the Herbicide 2,4-D', issued in April 2005 to wine exporters, was a reminder from the peak winemaking body that incidences of damage to vineyards from herbicide spraying carried out on nearby farms had increased alarmingly in Australia's expanded winegrowing regions, with estimated crop losses in some instances reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This notice was issued at the height of vineyard expansion.

Apart from the direct financial loss which individual grape growers face, this topic remains of considerable importance to the industry as a whole as it potentially puts all Australia's wine exports at risk.

With the dramatic increase in vineyard plantings in Australia since 1995, there have been increased problems caused by farmers using highly volatile chemical sprays to eliminate weed growth in paddocks adjacent to or in the vicinity of vineyards.

This has, in particular, been caused by farmers using Ester 2,4 D to suppress weed growth in paddocks prior to cropping activities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many farmers have continued with spraying practices which do not reflect the changed circumstances in which they operate.

This appears to be based, at least in part, upon a view that they are entitled to continue spraying practices which predate the establishment of vineyards in their area.

Apart from the economic impact of grape crop loss, it is vital that there be no suggestion, justified or otherwise, that there could be chemical residue present in Australian wines.

To avoid chemical contamination, the

grape growing industry is already subject to chemical withholding protocols in the period leading up to harvest with respect to spray applied to vineyards by grapegrowers themselves.

It would be most unfortunate if anything happened to adversely affect the "green" image which the Australian wine industry enjoys and upon which in part the unprecedented growth of Australian wine exports is based.

In the 2005 notice, AWBC said that it had become aware of incidents involving herbicide drift onto vineyards in north-western Victoria, Clare and Langhorne Creek.

AWBC pointed out that the body Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) determines the maximum levels of various substances that can be present in food, including wine, in the Food Standards Code.

Importantly, AWBC noted that no maximum residue level has been determined for the presence of 2,4-D in grapes or wine and that, accordingly, wine containing detectable residues of 2,4-D cannot be sold on domestic or export markets.

This remains the position in 2016.

The AWBC Notice continued:

"2,4-D is the most widely used herbicide in the world and is commonly used for the control of broad leaf weeds in pasture and crops.

"Some formulations of the product, particularly the ester forms, can drift at least 35 km from the source of application and affect crops other than the intended target.

"Any area in which viticulture is in reasonable proximity to broadacre farming could potentially be affected by 2,4-D vapour drift.

"The extremely low levels of residual 2,4-D detected in affected grapes from

the 2005 vintage, and wine made from those grapes, pose absolutely no threat to human health.

"Maximum allowable levels for 2,4-D have been established in Australia for a range of widely consumed food products including milk and water.

"Furthermore, no maximum allowable levels for 2,4-D in grapes have been established in most of our major wine export markets."

In the past decade, an increasing number of incidents have been reported. Because of two spray drift issues at around bud burst, I obtained injunctions from the Supreme Court of South Australia for a group of 21 Lower Murray grape growers, and also for vine nursery operator in the Penola area in south-east of South Australia, restraining local farmers from breaching governmental spraying guidelines in their future spraying activities. Any breach of the injunctive orders would have been punishable as contempt of court.

Of crucial importance to vineyard operators is the need to carry out immediate, exhaustive, documented enquiries to reliably identify the source of spray drift, immediately spray drift is suspected, rather than waiting for damage to become apparent.

Apart from potentially recovering damages for any loss caused by spray damage, a major advantage to local grape growers in taking immediate action to obtain injunctive relief to restrain repetitive conduct is the message which this sends to farmers in the local community who have not yet adapted to their changed circumstances.

Prevention is obviously better than cure. I have previously prepared a 'circular' letter for a grape grower in the Wrattonbully interim area outlining the general obligations which farmers owe to grape growers when carrying out their spraying programmed.

The client had smelt chemical drift in his vineyard and wanted to visit farmers in the locality to alert them to the problem and to their obligations.

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