

Damage may be millions

Downpour causes splitting in grapes

By Peter Lamb

SUNRAYSIA grape growers are closely monitoring their vineyards following the long, steady rain and humid conditions on the weekend.

The combination has caused berry split and left crops vulnerable to serious disease.

Big casualties appear to be in carina currants, shiraz wine grapes and sultanas, with carina losses reported as high as 80 per cent.

Carina currants and shiraz are usually considered the two most durable of grape varieties.

The enormity of the losses, likely in the millions of dollars, might not be known for several weeks.

Growers are already being encouraged to revisit the earlier crop estimates they made to packers and wineries.

Murray Valley Winegrowers chief executive Mike Stone said he had fielded "many calls" from anxious producers.

"The common message among big and small growers is that there's very serious splitting in the shiraz," he said.

"One bloke said he'd bought water and now his crop wasn't worth harvesting.

is not an issue). Growers will have to inspect their vines on a daily basis, and if they have a problem, they can call me at the ADFA.

"Because conditions also triggered primary infection of downy mildew, growers should check by putting a suspect leaf into a wet plastic bag overnight.

"I'm also hearing reports the maturity in sultanas probably won't be high enough to harvest for about another three weeks, making a decision to spray or dust easier, and removing summer pruning as an option.

"In the meantime, growers should consider improving the air flow in their vines by removing unwanted foliage."

Mr Hawtin said he hoped the split berries in the carinas might drop off.

Sunraysia Table Grape Growers chairman Cos Cirillo said where Thomson seedless sultanas were not covered, losses were extensive.

"We'll know a bit more when our branch meets tonight," he said.

Irymple-born agricultural scientist Ashley Johnstone has come home and purchased his 25-hectare property.

The vineyard was previously

owned by his parents who've retired and live in Mildura.

"This is my first crop," Ashley said. "I'd have preferred a few less challenges in my first season."

"Losses in the carinas so far could be up to 40 per cent, but less in the sultanas.

"If we get more rain, the sultanas are more prone to future rot and the losses there could become quite significant."

Mr Johnstone said he'd start summer pruning immediately in one patch of carinas where maturity levels were already high.

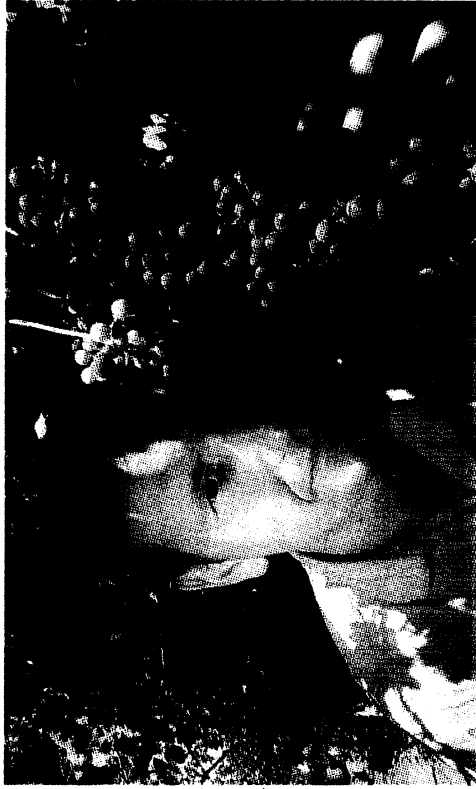
Mr Stone urged any wine grower considering spraying to first speak to their winery.

He said according to growers, chardonnay crops were already down about 40 per cent around the district before the rain.

There had been additional damage, but the big loser was shiraz.

"The worry is that there are many shiraz growers hit who bought water and had a reasonable irrigation program to ensure they got a crop," he said.

"Shiraz was showing some price improvement, and a lot of growers had bought more water because of this," Mr Stone said.



ANXIOUS: Irymple grower Ashley Johnstone inspects his carina currants for rain damage and disease.

whether or not to spray for disease, particularly powdery mildew.

"There's been a little wind and cool conditions since the rain, but if we get more rain, the damage from moulds could be a whole lot greater," Mr Hawtin said.

"Growing for dried vine fruit requires a withholding period of seven days if dusting with sulphur or applying sodium metabisulphite (if the additional moisture on bunches

His losses are huge. We didn't think things could get much worse this season."

He said there's also some splitting, but not too bad in semillon, sauvignon blanc, columbard, chardonnay and riesling.

Australian Dried Fruits Association industry development officer John Hawtin said split berries in carinas and sultana had growers in that sector "on edge", deciding