

California winemakers face worst drought in decades

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- by Chris Mercer

One of the worst droughts to hit California in recent decades is causing concern for winemakers across the state.



Low water levels at Bradbury Dam, Lake Cachuma. Image credit: Lisa Werner / Alamy

California's state governor, **Jerry Brown**, has this month officially declared a drought across the state, which last year saw its lowest annual rainfall total since records began 119 years ago.

The lack of rain is a cause for concern in many of **California's** vineyards. 'The soil is dry, the water table is lowering, shallower wells are drying up, [and] some neighbour relations are souring,' Tom Lane, winemaker at Bianchi winery in Paso Robles, told **decanter.com**.

'Last year we saw only 1.9 inches of rain, where we average about 12 inches per year.'

He added, 'there is a move to create a local water district to insure that water is distributed equitably among rural residents and agricultural concerns.' A key issue for vineyards is sourcing enough water for winter irrigation, to ensure the vines get enough water to grow healthily.

Other wine regions in California are also dealing with unusual conditions. 'In the 30 years that I have been working in the vineyards, I have never seen a Winter like this one,' said **Anne Moller-Racke**, president of **The Donum Estate**, in Carneros, Sonoma.

'Thus far we have less than 2 inches of rain for the season and normally we would have 17 inches by end of

January.' She added, 'We certainly have to be thoughtful in how we farm in 2014.'

Tj Evans, Pinot Noir winemaker at **Domaine Carneros**, added, 'While it is too early to panic, it is not too early to devise a strategy that covers worst-case scenario.'

'Chances for January rain are nil, but I remain cautiously optimistic for a wet February, and a "March Miracle" is not out of the question. It has happened before.'

According to Moller-Racke, the drought is causing particular concern for those dealing with frost. 'Vineyards that are using water for frost protection are in bad shape as there is no water to pump out of creeks or rivers,' she said.

However, some areas are faring better than others. **Michael Beaulac**, president of the Napa Valley-based **Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association**, said, 'because we don't have the same frost issues in the District as regions in Napa Valley, we are not as worried about the water deficit.'

'We feel extremely fortunate that this current situation might prove to only minimally effect our wines in any meaningful sense,' said Beaulac, who is also general manager and winemaker at **Pine Ridge Vineyards**.