

# *Winegrower Perceptions of Sustainability Programs in Lodi, California*

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## **Issue**

Established in 1995, the Lodi Winegrape Commission's (LWC) Sustainable Winegrowing Program (SWP) promotes grower adoption of best management practices via informational meetings, workshops, vineyard demonstrations and research, the Lodi Winegrowers' Workbook for sustainability self-assessment, and the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing third-party certification program. Understanding grower perceptions of agriculture programs like the LWC is important because similar organizations are operating at the state level (California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, CWSA), in other winegrowing regions, and in other agricultural commodities. This research brief presents results from a mail survey and semi-structured interviews of winegrape growers to evaluate the success of the LWC from the perspective of growers themselves. Survey respondents identify whether or not they participate in various LWC outreach and education activities, how successful they think the LWC has been across a range of objectives, and the degree to which they support local and statewide programs.

## **Key Findings**

Participation in LWC activities ranges from over 90% of growers (reading the LWC newsletter) to less than 40% (completion of Lodi Rules third-party certification program), with lower participation in more resource-intensive activities. 70% of growers think the LWC has improved consumer perception of the region, and they rate the LWC's achievement of environmental objectives more highly than they do economic objectives, particularly reducing input costs and streamlining operations. Survey respondents are generally supportive of the LWC and the CSWA, as well as their respective certification programs, but they show a preference for local programs.

## **Management Implications**

Growers are heavily influenced by economic factors, and therefore are more likely to avoid costly program participation activities. At the same time, they believe the LWC is less successful in realizing financial objectives despite improving consumer perception of the region. Therefore, programs should seek to reduce the cost of participation and demonstrate that an initial investment in time, money, or commitment can yield a benefit to growers down the road. This must be done without reducing the accountability required to achieve program goals. One important strategy is to highlight the cost reduction inherent to many best management practices, and to think about how information technology can reduce the effort of monitoring and reporting.

The cost of participation is particularly salient for the Lodi Rules certification program, which has a lower level of participation than other LWC program activities. In interviews, growers question the financial viability of certification, since it currently generates little additional revenue but can be costly in terms of additional management time and required fees. These costs may be less of a concern if the market for sustainable winegrapes continues to mature, and price premiums are more widely available for certified grapes.

Our results also reflect ongoing tensions between local programs like the LWC and statewide programs because it is a challenge to obtain growers' buy-in at both levels. In interviews, several growers voiced frustration and confusion regarding the existence of multiple programs. State and local programs, however, can work together

to provide growers with services that neither program could provide as well alone. State programs are better positioned to represent California wine in the national and global marketplace while local programs are well-equipped to provide on-the-ground outreach necessary to mobilize and influence growers. A statewide program will not be effective at meeting the broader goals of sustainability if it does not build on the bottom-up, local social capital created by existing local and regional partnerships.

### Methodology

We conducted a mail survey and follow-up telephone calls of 500 winegrape growers in the Lodi area identified through 2009 Pesticide Use Reports. We also conducted 16 semi-structured interviews of growers in Lodi, the Central Coast, and Napa. An advisory team consisting of over 25 growers and outreach professionals from around the state assisted in survey design and outreach. We collected a total of 210 survey responses, for a response rate of 49%.

### Detailed Results

58% of respondents are full-time growers (the rest are part-time) and they have been farming for an average of 28 years. Respondents farm from less than one acre to over 10,000 acres, with a median of 70 acres.

Figure 1 illustrates the wide range of grower participation in LWC outreach activities. For each of ten different activities, survey respondents indicated whether or not they had participated in the last five years. While growers participate in all activities, they participate in low-cost activities such as reading the newsletter much more than they do high-cost activities such as certification.

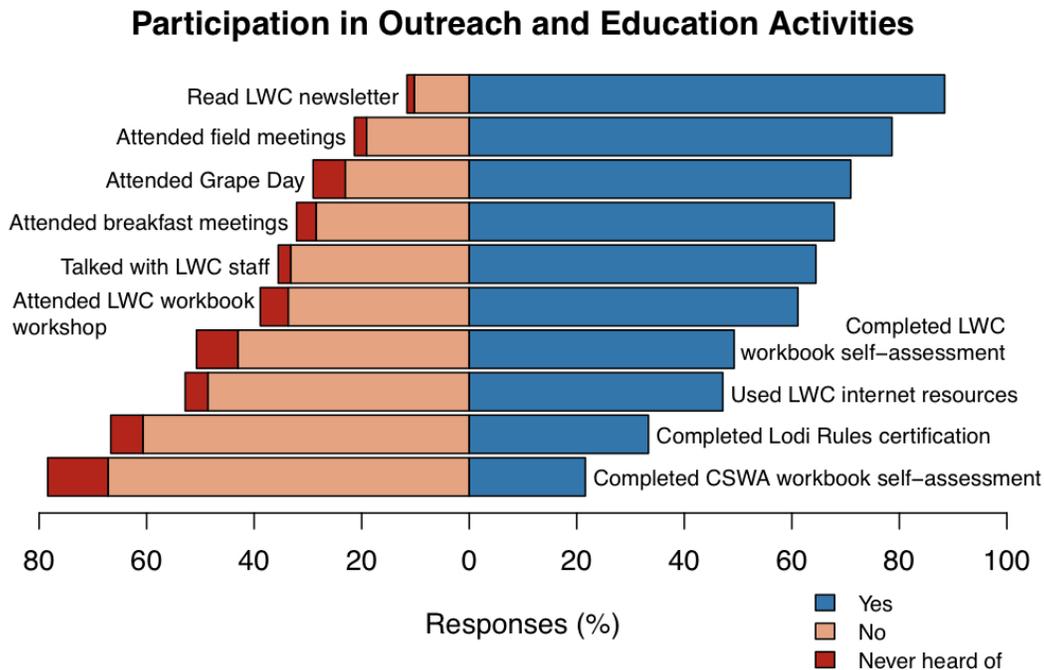


Figure 1: Percentage of growers who participate in each activity

Figure 2 depicts growers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the LWC across a range of objectives. Survey respondents rated the success of the LWC in achieving a range of 15 environmental, social, and economic objectives on a 5-point scale ranging from "Very Unsuccessful" to "Very Successful". The figure excludes the "Neutral" category in order to more easily display a comparison of positive and negative responses. Among economic goals, growers are most satisfied with improved consumer perception of the region and winegrape quality. They are also relatively satisfied with environmental objectives especially in comparison to those related to the reduction of inputs, costs, management effort, and paperwork. Interestingly, the more growers that select "Dont Know" for a given objective, the lower the average rating among growers who did have an opinion about that objective. This negative relationship between lack of knowledge and evaluation of success was also found in our earlier research regarding outreach professionals' perceptions of specific viticultural practices.

### Perceived Success of Lodi Sustainable Winegrowing Program

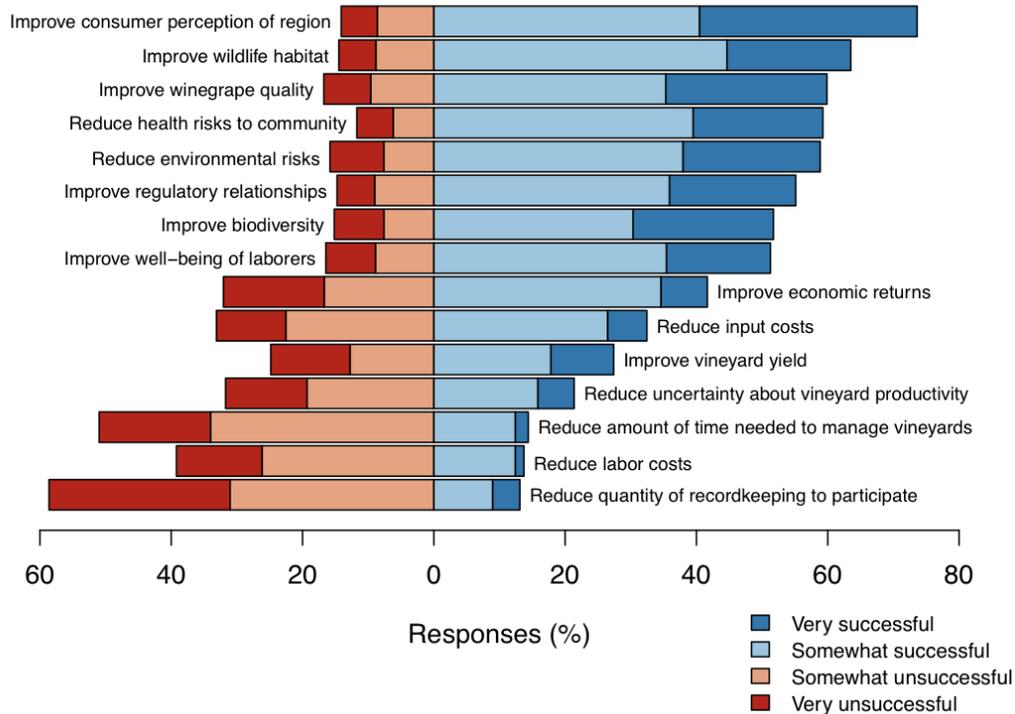


Figure 2: Percentage of growers for each category of success

Figure 3 reports grower support for the LWC’s sustainability program and third-party certification program (Lodi Rules), and for the CSWA’s sustainability program and third-party certification program (Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing). Respondents indicated their degree of support on a 5-point scale ranging from “Strongly Oppose” to “Strongly Support”. Each bar represents the percentage of growers that selected the rating category for that item, and neutral ratings are not shown to facilitate a comparison of the negative and positive ratings. While growers rate all programs relatively highly, they show a preference for the LWC’s sustainability program, and they indicate relatively less support for the certification programs than the sustainability programs generally.

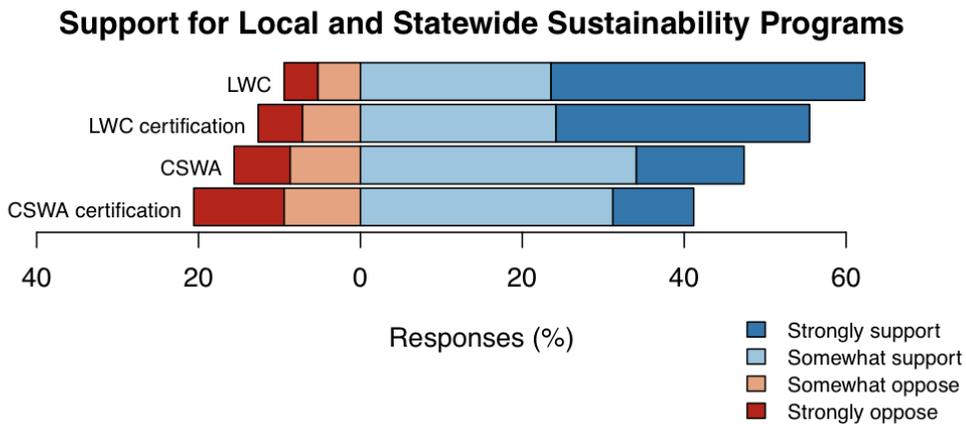


Figure 3: Percentage support for local and state sustainability programs

### Future Research Directions

Similar surveys will be conducted in the Central Coast and Napa winegrowing regions of California in the winter of 2011-2012. Additional analyses of these data are forthcoming, particularly in regards to a formal integration of the results found here and the results from our previous survey of outreach professionals on similar questions. The data reported here, along with the data gathered previously from surveys of outreach professionals and future data from the Central Coast and Napa, will help provide a broad understanding of grower behavior and the operation of sustainability programs in California. More research is needed to link grower behavior and agricultural practices to measurements of actual social, environmental, and economic outcomes.