

Insight  Opinion

Collateral Damage

Budget cuts may lead to the loss of the Viticulture Consortium.

Bill Nelson and Mark Chien

Bill Nelson helped to establish the USDA Viticulture Consortium and recently stepped down as president of WineAmerica. He is now living in Portland, Oregon. **Mark Chien** is the statewide viticulture educator at Penn State Cooperative Extension. They worked in Oregon together and served for many years on the board of the National Grape and Wine Initiative, an advocacy organization representing table, raisin and wine grapes (www.ngwi.org).

WE RECENTLY LEARNED THAT the **USDA Viticulture Consortium** has stopped reviewing grant proposals and will likely not be funded by Congress this year. This should be an unwelcome surprise to anyone in the wine industry who believes that research and education help to push wine quality. VC East (www.nysaes.cornell.edu/pubs/vitcon/), administered by **Cornell University** and supporting viticulture research in Eastern, South-Eastern and Midwestern states, and VC West (ucanr.org/sites/vcw/), administered by **UC Davis** and funding research and extension education in the western states, Texas and Oklahoma, have provided up to \$2.3 million of core funding for essential viticulture research for the wine industry over the past decade. Mark served on the Eastern regional guidance committee and can attest to the rigorous peer-review process each project endured and the quality of the work done by the researchers.

The Viticulture Consortium emphasizes applied research, and the deliverables to industry in the past decade have been impressive. In the East, examples of the effectiveness of VC-funded research abound. In New York, Dr. **Andrew Landers** has revolutionized sprayer design and use to help growers reduce their costs and simultaneously increase the effectiveness of their pesticide applications. **Alice Wise** on Long Island, guided by input from an industry advisory committee, has run critical variety and clone trials, along with practical research in the use of bird netting and alternative methods of disease and weed control. Dr. **Tony Wolf** at **Virginia Tech** has done important work in vine vigor management and trellis and training using VC funds. A viticulture best practices program was developed in Missouri to get extension educators into vineyards with growers to assure that the latest ideas and technologies are being used. The list goes on and on. **Bibiana Guerra**, a science writer living in Sacramento, has been writing user-friendly abstracts of VC research to make sure that growers have access to this important information.

The federally funded Viticulture Consortium has been an enormously valuable resource for the grape and wine industry. In conjunction with locally developed industry funding, it sponsors the only nationwide, competitive, peer-reviewed, cutting edge viticulture research. Over the last 15 years, the VC has been an important engine of viticultural improvement and development. During this time, the grape industry in the United States has grown from a farm gate value of about \$2 billion to nearly \$3.5 billion annually. The number of wineries has expanded from approximately 1,800 to nearly 7,000 in all 50 states. This is a grand economic development success story with enormous economic paybacks. Losing the VC would be a serious blow to the wine industry. Yet, its loss is likely not to be noticed or even elicit a sigh. Why might it go away?

Now, as Congress is engaged in a paroxysm of cost cutting, seemingly without much consideration of merit, the VC is unfortunately on the chopping block. It

would be counterproductive if it were lost. The loss of this valuable program may be more a question of semantics than merit. It is considered an earmark, Congressionally directed funding, and therefore likely to be eliminated as the scandal of abuses, like Congress's insistence on building a "bridge to nowhere," has made all Congressionally directed funding toxic.

This is not the first time Congress has indiscriminantly tried to rein in "earmarks." In fiscal year 2007, all earmarks were eliminated. Nevertheless, Congress found a way to continue the agricultural research funding in jeopardy by increasing Hatch subsidies to state experimental stations. Maybe Congress will do something like that

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again. Research is an engine for economic growth in grape growing. Eliminating the VC will undoubtedly contribute to a slowing of growth and the concomitant increase of jobs and economics. Another approach might be to find an alternative funding mechanism or set up an appropriate structure within the **United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)**. These approaches will take time to develop. Many believe Congress should not relinquish its traditional role in setting agricultural research policy such as what types of local and regional programs to fund. The central administration of USDA might not be the best place for all these decisions to be vested. The focus of priority setting by the agency is often broad national goals, worthy in and of themselves, but shortsighted if particular needs of the agricultural production community get slighted.

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Research, particularly agricultural research, is a key element in providing a strong base for economic growth. It plays a huge part in building a healthy and competitive industry. VC-sponsored research has been instrumental in the following advancements:

- Helping address the important but routine task of improving pest management while reducing environmental impact;
- Developing the tools to facilitate sustainable grape growing;
- Providing a better understanding of appropriate grape varieties for local growing conditions;
- Developing new grape varieties to facilitate grape growing in non-traditional regions;
- Refining grape cultural and training practices; and
- Providing the knowledge to enable reductions in pesticide and water use.

These advances have both strengthened the economic basis of grape growing in established areas and catalyzed the amazing diffusion of grape growing from its roots in California to almost all parts of the country. These advances in grape growing have enabled the formation of economically valuable, farmer-owned wineries with tremendous local value-added components, providing rural jobs at all skill levels and a strong engine for rural tourism.

It's a shame that Congress, while trying to address the sound bites of "banning earmarks," is preparing to take itself out of the priority-setting business. Congress has always been an institution where delegations of citizens can ask for help addressing local and regional needs. If the VC loses its funding, industry input and its insistence on the dissemination of valuable practical knowledge for grape growing—concepts embedded in the operation of the Viticulture Consortium since its inception—could easily be lost. To compensate, America's grape and wine industry will have to seek new ways for the USDA to help drive the economic engine of growth in a dynamic and economically valuable sector.

We, as an industry, have never been particularly well organized. We always seem to be getting run over by other interest groups like the beverage wholesalers. Today, more than ever, the wine industry needs to be proactive in defending its interests. Have you ever wondered who is in the trenches doing this dirty job? The work of the industry has always been done by an inspired few, and we'll call out **Jerry Lohr** from the Paso Robles region of California as the model of activism working tirelessly on your behalf. Jerry has fought to defend extension resources across the nation and has never wavered from putting his ideas and money where they can make a difference. You may not know Jerry, but he has helped your business prosper.

Always, it is the same people who gather in endless meetings to talk about the issues, create action plans, envision a better future and wonder how all the work will get done. It is the hard and persistent work of these few inspired individuals who prop up the industry with very little notice or appreciation. Despite their efforts, holes in the dike appear and suddenly something of great value like the VC is lost. We belong to an industry with needs, from research and education to direct shipping and opening export markets. We live in a country of limited resources dispersed among thousands of industries and worthy causes that all vie for the attention and support of legislatures. Unless we become more engaged in our interests, we will lose more than the Viticulture Consortium, and our future will be much more uncertain.

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