

# CAWG HISTORY BEGINNINGS AND EARLY YEARS: 1974-1989

By Ted Rieger

*On November 21, 2024, at the Kimpton Sawyer Hotel in Sacramento, CAWG will host a special event aimed at commemorating its 50th anniversary. The primary objective of this event is to unite and celebrate all who have contributed to CAWG's journey over the past five decades. Sponsorship opportunities are available. Leading up to CAWG's milestone celebration, each issue of The Crush will highlight key moments and milestones from each decade of CAWG's 50-year history.*

CAWG's history dates to 1974 when a group of winegrape growers raised concerns about fair prices being paid for winegrapes by some of California's largest wine producers at the time. Based on recollections by CAWG founding member and long-time Director Jerry (Jerry) Fry, Jr. of Mohr-Fry Ranches in Lodi, grape grower Frank Lagomarsino of Tulare was an early leader in forming an organization that would engage in winegrape price bargaining. Lagomarsino recruited Ralph Bunje as an agricultural marketing consultant who helped organize and facilitate the initial meetings. Bunje was the retired president of the California Canning Peach Association and had previously helped form several western cooperative farming associations and developed farmer bargaining procedures for commodity crops.

For a short time, a group of winegrape growers from throughout the state met as the "Wine Bargaining Association" to discuss issues of mutual interest. Not everyone in this group wanted bargaining to be a function of the organization, but there was consensus that a statewide organization specifically focused on the interests of winegrape growers was needed. Bunje was interviewed for an article published in the December 1974 issue of *Wines & Vines*, and cited the fact that the California wine industry had "enjoyed tremendous growth in recent years" and was served by "strong, well-managed trade associations." But he further explained, "Grape growers, on the other hand, have no comparable vehicle to address the problems of the wine grape producers. In fact, grapes are the only large commodity in California for which there is no trade association or agency to deal with producer problems."

A meeting to form a statewide winegrape grower organization was held on November 19, 1974, in Burlingame. Hopland grower and co-owner of McDowell Valley Vineyards Richard Keehn was selected to preside over the meeting. Minutes from that meeting show proposed names for the new organization were Winegrowers Association of California, and California Winegrowers Association. When Articles of Incorporation

were drafted and approved by 25 incorporating directors on December 16, 1974, the official name was the California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG). Lodi grower John Kautz, of Kautz Farms participated in early organizational meetings and holds the distinction of being the first official CAWG member, by virtue of writing the first check to join and fund the new association.



**CALIFORNIA  
ASSOCIATION  
of WINEGRAPE  
GROWERS**

Following incorporation, Richard Keehn was elected as CAWG's first Board Chair, serving until 1978. Fry was Vice Chair, and Bunje served as a Secretary/Consultant during CAWG's early years. CAWG also began contracting with Les H. Cohen and Associates in Sacramento to assist with government liaison services at the state level.

CAWG began work in several priority areas that the Board had identified: legislative advocacy and government relations, fair and uniform grading standards for winegrape quality acceptance and pricing at crush, industry marketing and promotion, and viticulture research and education.

Progress on grape pricing and quality acceptance was made through the legislative and regulatory process. According to Fry, "Two of the biggest achievements during CAWG's early years were the creation of the California Grape Crush Report, and third-party grading and inspection for winegrapes if their price was affected by rot and material other than grapes (MOG)." Legislation to establish the Crush Report, signed in 1976, was carried by State Senator Clare Berryhill of Ceres with support and testimony from many of CAWG's founding leaders including Keehn, Fry, and Al Scheid of Scheid Vineyards in Monterey County, CAWG Chair from 1978-1979 and a long-time Board member. The annual Grape Crush Report, with publicly available grape pricing data by district and grape variety, has since been used to negotiate grape prices and contract terms and also provides a pricing basis for crop insurance benefits, and for asset valuation in banking and financial analyses and transactions. Winegrape grading issues have been addressed and improved through the California Wine Grape Inspection Advisory Committee. Fry and other

CAWG members have served on this committee that recommends inspection procedures for certification of the quality of winegrapes.

CAWG's official office address was in Burlingame until February 15, 1977, when the Board moved to locate the office at the same address as Les H. Cohen and Associates on 10th Street in Sacramento. Following the completion of his term in the legislature, Senator Berryhill was named President of CAWG at a February 15, 1977 meeting. According to Fry, "Clare Berryhill was a huge factor in helping CAWG develop, serving as its first President after being a legislator, and then later when he became California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Secretary (1983-1987)."

Berryhill stepped down as CAWG President in August 1979 but stayed on as VP of Legislative Affairs. In 1979, Robert (Bob) Hartzell was employed by CAWG, initially as Manager, but his title later changed to Executive Director, and then President, the title of CAWG's full-time staff executives since that time. Hartzell was a University of California Davis (UCD) graduate in Plant Sciences, worked in the food and ag industry in the Stockton area, and served as a Deputy Director at CDFA during Governor Ronald Reagan's administration. At a June 18, 1980, meeting, a resolution was passed by the CAWG Board to create a State Political Action Committee (CAWG PAC). Later, CAWG expanded its PAC to address issues and advocacy at the federal level.

### CAWG Educational Events

In early 1977, CAWG began a relationship with the University of California Davis (UCD) Department of Viticulture & Enology and agreed to co-sponsor an educational meeting that year, Winegrape Day at UCD. CAWG worked with then UC Cooperative Extension Viticulture Specialist Amand N. Kasimatis, a member of the UCD faculty from 1955-1984. This relationship between CAWG and Kasimatis, a member of the American Society for Enology and Viticulture (ASEV) led to an annual Winegrape Day, a precursor event to what later became the ASEV/CAWG-presented Unified Wine & Grape Symposium. Winegrape Day was also held for some years at Fresno State University with assistance from Viticulture Professor Vince Petrucci.

Another educational program CAWG started in 1986 was the "Smart Marketer" series of workshops, a program that spanned many years, held in conjunction with regional grower groups, to improve individual and industry marketing and promotion efforts.

**CAWG's Influence at the National Level and Beyond**  
In March 1979, the CAWG Board began planning "a goodwill trip to Washington, DC to meet with the California Congressional delegation and others." This trip was organized with assistance from Fresno-based



Ralph Bunje, right, and Bernie Mettler, and Jerry Fry launching California Winegrowers Association, 1974

Allied Grape Growers and its President Robert McInturf, also a CAWG District 5 Director and a founding CAWG member. CAWG's trip to the nation's capital has become an annual event to network and present grower concerns at the national level.

Fry credits Clare Berryhill and Richard Keehn with getting CAWG involved with national and international policy issues. Berryhill realized that national policies, and issues related to wine imports that affected the California wine industry and grape growers had to be addressed nationally in Congress, and it was important to build support from other states with wine and grape production. Thus, CAWG was influential in helping establish the national association, Winegrape Growers of America.

In 1987, CAWG contracted with Washington, DC lobbyist Robert Schramm for services to represent CAWG at the national level.

Keehn had written letters to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) since 1977 supporting its program for Appellation of Origin and American Viticultural Areas, both in general and to support approval of specific California AVAs. Keehn also provided comments on issues related to wine labeling practices regulated by BATF. Keehn later got involved with the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV) based in France, and attended General Assembly meetings throughout the world, sometimes with other CAWG members and California industry representatives. Keehn provided a voice for U.S. grape growers on issues such as importing of grapevine nursery stock, pest management, labeling issues, and his involvement led to BATF becoming the U.S. member representative to OIV.

# CAWG HISTORY: 1990-2005

## PEST AND DISEASE CHALLENGES, SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMS, RESEARCH AND COLLABORATION

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The middle years of CAWG's 50-year history as an organization were highlighted by its response, in coordination with other industry groups, to invasive pests and diseases that threatened production in California vineyards, and its involvement in creating programs to improve grape-growing practices and promoting sustainable winegrowing. Those efforts resulted in establishing successful industry programs that continue today. These years also saw major efforts to collaborate with other industry trade groups, and to promote and fund viticulture research to address new and ongoing challenges.

CAWG also saw significant leadership and staff changes during this period. In 1996, Bob Hartzell retired as CAWG President to pursue other interests, including operating his vineyard and winery in Lodi, Harmony Wynelands. CAWG Chair and Kern County grower Kevin Andrew (1995-1997) appointed a search committee for a new president. After reviewing 300 applications and interviewing five strong candidates, the committee recommended Karen Ross, then VP of Governmental Affairs for the Agricultural Council of California, who began work at CAWG on June 15, 1996. CAWG's long-time contract Legislative Advocate Les Cohen announced his retirement on December 31, 1997, after 22 years. In January 1997, CAWG contracted with Jack Gualco of The Gualco Group to be the new Legislative Advocate in Sacramento. Later, long-time CAWG staff member and VP Shirley Winston retired at the end of 2001 after 22 years of service.

### Pests and Diseases

In the 1980s, the re-emergence of the root louse phylloxera (the newly identified Biotype B) in North Coast vineyards began taking a toll on grapevines planted on the popular AxR#1 rootstock. By 1992, nearly 1,600 acres of vines were removed. Estimates of up to 70,000 acres in Napa and Sonoma Counties were affected as replanting continued through the 1990s. This was a call to grape growers to invest in improved



*Past CAWG President, Karen Ross, addressing the crowd at the Unified Wine & Grape Symposium.*

pest management, rootstock and viticulture research, clean and disease-resistant plant materials, and more site evaluation and data-driven decision-making when planting and replanting vineyards.

Phylloxera, rootstocks, and replanting were major topics at CAWG's annual Winegrape Day in the early 1990s. UC Cooperative Extension Viticulturist Jim Wolpert from UC Davis presented information on alternative rootstocks and highlighted the need for trials and research to develop new rootstocks. Other program topics addressed economic factors, as in 1991, "What Will be the Short-and Long-term Impacts of the Phylloxera Epidemic," and in 1993, "Re-establishing the Vineyard," and "Financing Vineyard Development and Replanting in the 90s." At CAWG's 1993 Annual Meeting, 1991-1993 Chair Ronald Khachigian, a Kern County grower, stated, "CAWG faces the issue of funding new phylloxera rootstock research and to be sure that chemicals that suppress the pest are registered."

CAWG supported legislation carried by then State Senator Mike Thompson (now U.S. Congressman) and signed in 1992 to create the California Rootstock Improvement Commission, founded in 1993 to conduct research to develop rootstocks resistant to phylloxera and nematodes. Another Thompson bill signed in 1992 provided tax relief for growers with phylloxera-infested vineyards and tax credits for replanting.

CAWG leaders expanded efforts to support research through contributions to the American Vineyard

Foundation (AVF) and encouraged member donations. Monterey grower Rich Smith, a CAWG Director, and Chair from 1989-1991, was a major promoter of viticulture research and funding at both the state and national level. In 1993, Smith met with then Wine Institute President Jerry Lohr to create more industry unity and cooperation by bringing together representatives of CAWG, Wine Institute, the National Wine Coalition, AVF, and the American Wine Alliance for Research and Education to discuss and develop industry goals.

Another major vineyard threat emerged in the late 1990s, the invasive glassy-winged sharpshooter (GWSS) as an efficient vector of Pierce's Disease (PD). At CAWG's October 29, 1999, Board meeting, Chair and Lodi grower Randy Lange reported that he and President Ross traveled to Temecula in Riverside County to view the devastation created by the GWSS in area vineyards. Local grape grower Ben Drake (who later served as CAWG Chair from 2003-2005) provided a tour and commented on how quickly the vineyards in Temecula became infested, from the first signs in 1997, quickly followed by a larger number of infected vines seen in 1998. In 1999, Governor Gray Davis signed AB 1232 to provide an annual appropriation of \$750,000 for three years to fund Pierce's Disease research, and this legislation authorized the Secretary of Food and Agriculture to appoint a PD and GWSS Advisory Task Force.

In 2001, Governor Davis signed AB 1394 (Patricia Wiggins) to create a statewide industry assessment to fund research, outreach, and monitoring activities for a newly-created CDFA PD and GWSS Board. This legislation was co-sponsored by CAWG, The Wine Institute, and Family Winemakers of California. CAWG Board Chair Dana Merrill (1999-2001) played a major role in working with CAWG President Ross to get the legislation passed and build industry support. At the first meeting of the PD/GWSS Board, Merrill was elected as the inaugural chair of that body. Merrill and Ross accompanied CDFA Secretary Bill Lyons and other leaders on a trip to Washington, DC to seek and obtain federal funding through the USDA budget for the state's PD/GWSS program, which continues today as a significant source of funds for GWSS monitoring, containment, and ongoing areawide programs.

### Sustainable Winegrowing

Efforts to promote and implement more sustainable vineyard practices and reduce pesticide use and risks became higher CAWG priorities as environmental and regulatory requirements became bigger issues and as development continued growing closer to vineyards and ag lands. In 1990, California became the first state to require full reporting of all agricultural pesticide use. The California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) was

created in 1991, within the then newly-created California Environmental Protection Agency.

In 1999, CAWG began working with Dr. Jenny Broome of the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program to compile a "Resource Guide on Environmental Issues in Vineyard Development" to be made available to growers. CAWG took a proactive leadership role in organizing the Winegrape Pest Management Alliance. CAWG retained Jeff Dlott (founder of SureHarvest and later Chair of CDFA's Environmental Farming Act Science Advisory Panel) to prepare a grant proposal to DPR that resulted in CAWG being awarded \$99,380 in 2000 for the first year of a project to produce and disseminate educational materials on sustainable strategies related to sulfur applications and reduced-risk weed management practices in vineyards.

CAWG announced in June 2001 that it would work with Wine Institute to develop a voluntary code of sustainable winegrowing practices. Ross was chair of the Wine Vision Task Force on Sustainable Practices and supported the development of this code as one of its primary objectives. In October 2002, CAWG and Wine Institute launched the Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices, managed by the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, and implemented in 2003 with 65 workshops throughout California's major winegrowing regions.

### CAWG Launches New Events, Programs

In another collaboration, CAWG joined forces with the American Society for Enology and Viticulture (ASEV) to transform CAWG's Annual Winegrape Day into a multi-day program and trade show in Sacramento co-hosted by both groups. The Unified Wine & Grape Symposium was held under that name for the first year in 1995. On April 15, 1997, CAWG held the First Annual Winegrape Day at the Capitol in Sacramento for CAWG members to meet with members of the Legislature. This annual event, now called CAWG Advocacy Day, provides important information to CAWG members on priority legislation, and allows members to provide input directly to legislators.

In 1997, the CAWG Board began discussions to create a program to award annual college scholarships to high school seniors who are children of vineyard employees. The first scholarships were awarded in 1998 to five students. CAWG established a separate non-profit California Wine Grape Growers Foundation, that now holds an annual fundraising golf tournament, to provide a perpetual source of funding for scholarships with awards now given to students annually.

# CAWG HISTORY: 2006-2015

## WINEGROWER PROMOTIONS, LEADERSHIP CHANGES, MORE INDUSTRY AND PEST CHALLENGES

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The years 2006-2015 of CAWG's 50-year history saw significant changes and milestones in leadership at both the staff and Board levels, continued involvement to address industry and pest and disease challenges, an expansion in communications programs and media, and a major campaign to promote California wine and winegrowers.

### Promoting California Wine and Winegrowers

CAWG Chair Rodney Schatz (2005-2007), a Lodi grapegrower and owner of R&G Schatz Farms and Peltier Winery & Vineyards, led a vision with then President, Karen Ross for CAWG to engage in the promotion of California wine. Quoted in CAWG's 2006 Annual Report, Schatz said, "To be successful in today's business climate, California winegrape growers need to be much more than just farmers, we need to be spokespersons for our industry." In addition to having a yearly budget for pest control, labor, and other inputs, Schatz believed, "Growers need to put a line item in their budget that says 'marketing'. It doesn't have to be a great deal of money, but they need to participate in promoting California."

In March 2006, Schatz and the CAWG Board formed an ad hoc committee to explore program paths with PR and marketing professionals. With Board support and volunteer financial contributions from members, CAWG initiated the "California Winegrowers Promotion Program" in 2006. Program events occurred through 2009, including activities in partnership with the Wine Institute and regional associations, activities in New York City and Washington, DC, and trade and media events. Growers and vintners appeared on the Today Show in New York City in September 2009 to promote California Wine Month. Promotional partners included the San Francisco Chronicle, Wall Street Journal, the California Restaurant Association, Safeway Stores, and the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board. This program was considered successful in creating favorable media and



CAWG and Wine Institute in New York Promoting California Wine Month

consumer impressions for California's winegrape growers and California wine.

### Leadership: Highlights and Changes

A historic first for CAWG took place in 2009 when Kimberly Ledbetter-Bronson of Vino Farms in Lodi became the first female CAWG Chair. In addition, this marked the first time a next-generation member of the same family served as CAWG Chair, with Ledbetter-Bronson following in the footsteps of her father, John Ledbetter, Chair from 1987-1989. CAWG President Karen Ross resigned in 2009 to take a position as Chief of Staff for U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack in Washington, DC. Following Ross' exit, Ledbetter-Bronson took on additional responsibilities starting December 1, 2009, under a resolution approved by the Board, authorizing her to handle day-to-day management responsibilities until a new CAWG President was hired.

John Aguirre was hired as CAWG President effective June 1, 2010. He previously served as executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries. Before that he worked in Washington, DC for food industry associations, and had extensive experience as a Congressional staff member with the House Committee on Agriculture; and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.

After Ledbetter-Bronson's historic service as CAWG Chair from 2009-2011, Bill Pauli, a Mendocino grower chaired

the board from 2011-2013. Heidi Scheid of Scheid Vineyards in Monterey County then became the second female CAWG Chair, serving from 2013-2015, also following in the footsteps of her father, Al Scheid, CAWG Chair from 1978-1979.

### Industry Issues

CAWG's involvement with issues of statewide concern to winegrape growers was ongoing, with pests and diseases, clean plant material, and "hang-time," to name a few. Winery grape buyers began the practice of requiring additional ripening on the vine, or "hang-time," to develop more intense flavors, bigger wines, and reduce pyrazine characteristics in Bordeaux varieties to meet the demands of wine styles and critics scores at the time. This was a major concern of growers because it reduced berry weights, tonnages, and payments for grapes. CAWG authorized and funded research on the issue, although studies indicated "too many variables to draw conclusions." Growers and wineries were encouraged to work together to resolve issues in contracts.

CAWG supported legislation to authorize renewal (by grower referendum) of the CDFA Pierce's Disease and Glassy-winged Sharpshooter Board and statewide industry assessment, SB 2 (Wiggins), signed in 2009. This legislation gave the Board additional authority to designate other pests and diseases of winegrapes to allocate resources for research and outreach. This has significantly expanded the scope of knowledge for growers to manage critical pests, such as the vine mealybug, and grapevine leafroll viruses.

The European grapevine moth (EGVM), *Lobesia botrana*, was discovered in a Napa Valley vineyard in 2009 where it created significant crop damage. Major efforts involving federal and state agencies, the Napa County Ag Commissioner, and growers statewide, mobilized to begin trapping, outreach, and treatment activities to stop its spread. CAWG closely followed these efforts and provided support at various levels, including supporting USDA's decision to dedicate \$1.75 million in Farm Bill funding to fight the spread of EGVM. The pest was declared eradicated in California in 2016.

The official identification of Grapevine Red Blotch Virus (GRBV) in 2012 in California vineyards raised concerns by growers about clean plant material and nursery protocols to test and supply virus-free vines. CAWG member John Crossland of Vineyard Professional Services in Paso Robles (CAWG Chair 2007-2009) submitted a letter to CDFA in 2014 and led efforts to revise CDFA regulations under the California Grapevine Registration and Certification (R&C) Program. As a result, GRBV was added to the list of viruses and diseases required for testing and for exclusion during vine propagation and management practices by Foundation Plant Services and

by nurseries within the R&C program.

### Communications Programs

In 2010, through the efforts of Ledbetter-Bronson, new President Aguirre, and Membership and Communications Committee Chair Dennis Wittchow (Lent-Burden Farming in Oakdale), CAWG hit the road to launch a series of grape grower town hall meetings to interact with members in Lodi, Paso Robles, Monterey, Temecula, Madera, and Lake County. In 2010, CAWG redesigned the monthly print newsletter, *The Crush*, and introduced the weekly CAWG eNews, sent by email to members. In July 2010, CAWG Communications Director Sharlene Garcia reported to the CAWG Board on the soft launch of CAWG's social media campaign with five posts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. CAWG had previously started a consumer website in addition to CAWG's main website. Ron Lopp joined CAWG in 2011 as Communications Manager, further expanding CAWG's websites and media technologies for communications and marketing programs.

At a May 2011 Board meeting, the CAWG Board approved the development of an annual awards program to recognize a "Grower of the Year" and a "Leader of the Year." Since its inception, CAWG's Awards of Excellence program has recognized 11 individuals or grower families in each category, with awards now presented at the annual Unified Wine & Grape Symposium.

### Government Relations

In 2012, President Aguirre reviewed CAWG's history with its contract federal lobbyist since 2001, the firm of Mercury/Clark & Weinstock, to explore other options. On November 2, 2012, the CAWG Board selected Cornerstone Government Affairs to provide federal lobbying services. In December 2010, CAWG's VP of State Government Affairs Camron King left this position after serving with CAWG since May 2002. King later served as Executive Director of the Lodi Winegrape Commission from 2012 to 2016. Brenda Coleman served as CAWG Director of Government Relations from 2012 to 2015. Tyler Blackney joined CAWG staff in September 2015 to fill the same position and handle state government relations.

### CAWG Office Moves

After the expiration of a 5-year lease in December 2007, CAWG moved its office location from University Avenue near the CSU, Sacramento campus in East Sacramento to 1325 J Street in downtown Sacramento. President Ross reported the move would put the office "closer to the State Capitol and CalePA and to increased legal and scientific resources for the government relations team." The CAWG office moved again in early 2014 to its present location in the former Senator Hotel building, directly across the street from the State Capitol, at 1121 L Street.

# CAWG HISTORY: 2016-2024

## CONFRONTING CHALLENGES (WILDFIRES, COVID, LABOR ISSUES, REGULATIONS) AND MOVING FORWARD

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The most recent decade in CAWG's history brought new and unexpected challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, major wildfires, drought and heat events, water regulations, and a host of new labor laws and requirements for employers including ag overtime pay and minimum wage increases. CAWG leaders and staff responded to keep members informed and keep growers in business.

### Wildfires and Smoke Exposure

Smoke impacts on winegrape quality in vineyards exposed to wildfire smoke became an industry issue as major wildfires occurred in California from 2017 through 2020. In 2017, North Coast Wine Country experienced a devastating fire season in Napa, Sonoma, Lake, and Mendocino Counties resulting in losses of lives and property, including wineries destroyed, such as Signorello Estate Winery in Napa Valley. Some vineyards and grapes were directly impacted by fire and heat. Many others had smoke exposure affecting grape quality. The 2020 fire season was even more widespread in terms of acreage burned and vineyards exposed to smoke. By this time, many grape contracts required growers to test grapes before delivery for smoke taint markers. However, commercial labs were backlogged with samples that could not be tested before harvest or delivery. University researchers developed protocols for grape sampling and performed in-house micro-fermentation to assess potential smoke taint that CAWG promoted via website resources and webinars. CAWG provided information and legal resources to address contract language on smoke exposure and grape acceptance.

CAWG worked with other trade associations and Congress to secure federal funding for disaster relief for grape growers under the USDA Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program (WHIP) and later the USDA Emergency Relief Program, including coverage for crop quality losses due to smoke impacts beginning in 2018. CAWG worked with the USDA Risk Management Agency which administers the Federal Crop Insurance Program and with crop insurance underwriters to develop clear

standards regarding smoke exposure claims, and to promote the benefits of crop insurance for winegrape growers.

Past CAWG President John Aguirre played a major role in these efforts and in the formation of the West Coast Smoke Exposure Task Force (WCSETF) by industry leaders in California, Oregon, and Washington that includes university researchers at UC Davis, Oregon State University, and Washington State University. CAWG President Natalie Collins continues to Co-Chair WCSETF that has held an annual Virtual Smoke Summit since 2021 with updates on research, testing and mitigation, and crop insurance. Ongoing federal funding was obtained for winegrape smoke exposure research now being conducted through the USDA Agricultural Research Service and by university researchers. In August 2024, a website was launched for information and resources ([www.wcsetf.org](http://www.wcsetf.org)).

### COVID-19

One impact of COVID-19 on CAWG business was a change from in-person meetings to online meetings. As more CAWG members started doing business this way, it created opportunities to expand CAWG's webinar program and meetings, and increased participation. Six weeks before the March 2020 government orders to shelter-in-place, CAWG and ASEV held the 2020 Unified Wine & Grape Symposium for the first and only time at the Cal Expo fairgrounds in Sacramento, during construction to upgrade the downtown Sacramento SAFE Credit Union Convention Center. In 2021, due to COVID, an abbreviated version of Unified was held virtually with online sessions. In 2022, Unified returned to in-person sessions at the newly remodeled convention center, but with requirements for all attendees to wear masks and follow COVID protocols. Traditional Unified meal, tasting, and social events were canceled in 2022 as health precautions.

COVID impacted all employers, including CAWG members, with new regulatory requirements to provide masks, personal protection equipment, sanitation stations, and materials to employees; and for health screening, testing, and vaccination. The nature of vineyard work did not allow work-from-home options, however, the outdoor work environment enabled social distancing to allow agricultural work to continue. CAWG staff worked continuously to stay informed about COVID-19 requirements, created a website page for information, and conducted training and educational webinars.

## Labor/Employment, Regulatory Issues

CAWG employers faced challenges following state legislation signed in 2016 (SB 3) that increased the minimum wage over several years, and legislation requiring overtime pay for ag workers (AB 1066). At the federal level, with stricter immigration and border policies, ag employers and CAWG members looked to the federal H2A program to recruit temporary ag guest workers to their vineyards and vineyard owners built housing facilities for guest workers.

CAWG started holding annual vineyard and harvest tours for policymakers to inform state legislators, regulatory agencies, and staff about issues involving labor, vineyard mechanization, harvest safety, night lighting regulations, and sustainability. CAWG members hosting these events included Brad Goehring at Goehring Vineyards in Clements; and Clarksburg growers Tom Slater at Slater Farms, Steve Heringer at Heringer Estate Family Vineyards & Winery, David Ogilvie at Wilson Farms, and Warren Bogle at Bogle Family Vineyards.

With enactment of the California Sustainable Groundwater Management Act in 2014, CAWG provided growers with resources and webinars on new requirements for monitoring and reporting groundwater use, and the formation of new Groundwater Sustainability Agencies and Plans to manage local groundwater basins throughout the state. In 2023, CAWG sponsored legislation that was signed into law (SB 659 Ashby, D-Sacramento) to assure the State Water Plan prioritizes efforts to capture rainwater and excess runoff and to allow growers to flood fields for groundwater recharge.

## Staff Moves CAWG Forward

Natalie Collins joined CAWG in 2015 as Director of Member Relations. She grew up in Lodi, with parents involved in the dairy industry. She developed a deep appreciation for agriculture at an early age, participating in 4H and FFA activities, and obtained a degree in Agricultural Business from CSU, Chico. With CAWG, she soon began hosting a webinar program that has expanded and become a key educational resource for members on important issues. In early 2022, President John Aguirre announced his plan to retire, effective May 31 after 12 years with CAWG. Collins was appointed Interim President, and in December 2022 was named CAWG President, the youngest person to hold this position in CAWG's 50-year history.

Business Manager Carolee Williams, one of CAWG's longest-serving staff members, held this position full-time for 21 years, since November 2001. In December 2022, she moved to a contract position as Business Manager and continues to administer the CAWG Foundation Scholarship Program.



Jenny Devine has been CAWG's Events Manager since March 2011, initially as a full-time staff member, and on a contract basis since 2015. She is the key person involved in planning and organizing major events including the annual Unified Wine & Grape Symposium.

Michael Miiller joined CAWG in January 2017 as Director of Government Relations, bringing more than 30 years of public policy experience working in the California Legislature, for state regulatory agencies, and in the administrations of two California Governors. In 2018, he began publishing "California Vine Lines," a bimonthly e-newsletter sent to every legislative office, key regulatory agencies, and staff, with winegrape industry news and updates on important issues. Miiller was named a "2023 Wine Industry Leader" by Wine Business Monthly for his advocacy work for CAWG. He is also the drummer in the Sacramento-area band "Remedy7," that performs at CAWG PAC fundraising events.

Mindy DeRohan joined CAWG as Communications Manager in January 2023 and was promoted to Manager of Membership and Communications in January 2024. Mindy plays a key role in managing membership development, recruitment, and retention, as well as overseeing regular communications.

Madeline (Mady) Schenken joined CAWG in May 2024 as a Program Coordinator. Mady provides support with office administration, membership communications, events, and governmental affairs.

The current CAWG staff provides the organization with the experience, ability, and teamwork to move CAWG forward into its sixth decade and continue its mission to protect and promote the interests of California winegrape growers by providing members a unified voice, effective advocacy, and strong leadership.