Winemakers are learning that conservation can be good for business

Several producers also described efforts to reduce their reliance on chemical pesticides, which is beneficial not only for the environment but also their businesses as chemical costs continue to rise. We heard about vineyards that monitor pest populations closely and respond in targeted ways rather than using pesticides broadly.

Some growers encourage beneficial insects and manage habitats that support natural pest control. The creation of habitats for natural pest predators can reduce the overall disease risk too. While chemical treatments remain part of many vineyard operations, growers reported increasing interest in other approaches that prevent disease and pest outbreaks, such as pruning, to reduce their total chemical use.

Sustainable practices like these are well established in South Africa’s wine industry, but our interviews suggest their use has been expanding in recent years. Rather than focusing solely on treating problems after they arise, these approaches emphasize prevention, monitoring and ecological balance.

Sustainability must also make economic sense

The stewardship practices we observed in South Africa are investments in long-term business resilience for many growers.

Many of the wine producers we interviewed described facing

rising costs and market uncertainty. Exports, labor and chemicals are all expensive. They emphasized that maintaining healthy soils, conserving water and reducing vulnerability to drought and disease are essential to keeping their vineyards productive.

As concerns about drought, climate pressures and profitability rise, the area in vineyard production in South Africa has also decreased. Several growers described diversifying their business models and even switching crops to make their businesses more resilient to hotter, drier conditions.

Lessons beyond South African wine

Farmers around the world are confronting the realities of a changing climate. Our research shows that effective solutions can come from recognizing the interconnectedness of nature and production.

The experience of South Africa's winegrowers shows that farms can be managed more sustainably when they're seen as part of larger ecological systems.

Students Zoe Van der Walt, Jack Spining and Dryver Finch contributed to this article.

Hannah V. Herrero is Associate Professor of Geography & Sustainability and Director of Sustainability at University of Tennessee; Erin L. Bunting is Assistant Professor of Geography at Michigan State University; Jane Southworth is Professor of Geography at University of Florida; Jason K. Blackburn is Professor of Geography at University of Florida; and Stephanie Insalaco-Wyner is Assistant Professor of Geographic Information Sciences at Southwestern University.

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