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## **WEATHER SHINES ON WINES** By **KATHRYN REED**

Mother Nature apparently knew what she was doing when she doused Sierra foothill vineyards with an unusual amount of spring rain, then briefly fired things up in July before returning to mild temperatures.

The wine grape harvest started after Labor Day and in some areas will continue into next month.

"I've never seen weather like this and I've been growing for over 30 years," said Paul Bush, who with his wife, Maggie, owns Madrona Vineyards, in Camino, Calif. "I think it's going to be one of those vintages where you get more complexity."

Complexity is a good thing coming out of a 750 milliliter bottle, even if it isn't until 2008 that any reds from this year are uncorked.

"I would say right now, based on what I am seeing with winery customers, I would be looking forward to the 2006 red wines. They may be a step or two above what has come out the last two or three years," said Ron Mansfield, grower for Gold Bud Farms in Placerville, Calif. His company sells grapes from their 150 acres in El Dorado County to wineries in the foothills, as well as vintners in Sonoma and Napa counties.

He is most impressed with the color of the Syrah grapes.

Tonnage and quality in El Dorado and Nevada counties is surpassing last year, according to officials.

A mantra of "good sugar, good acid levels, good color" is echoing from winemakers throughout the foothills. El Dorado County, off U.S. 50, is the more established region. It has 2,165 acres of wine grapes. Nevada County, off Interstate 80, has 122 acres of grapes.

Agriculture is big business for Reno's neighbors. Agriculture's impact on El Dorado County's economy last year totaled \$434 million, according to the 2005 Agricultural Crop & Livestock Report. Fifteen percent of that was from wine grapes, which is the fastest growing segment of the county's agriculture business.

Last year's harvest brought in 4,650 tons of wine grapes with a value of \$4.94 million, according to the El Dorado Winery Association. Tonnage for this year is projected to be higher in both regions compared to 2005.

"The crop is larger and better looking than last year," said Phil Starr, owner and winemaker for Sierra Starr Winery in Grass Valley, Calif. "I tried different pruning techniques this last year because we traditionally run smaller yields."

Down the road in Nevada City, Ginny Hilsman, owner of Double Oak Winery, didn't start harvesting her grapes until the end of September. Grapes started to be plucked just after Labor Day in El Dorado County.

"The crop is larger than last year and is an above average yield," Hilsman said. "The spring rains this year were well timed "" not at bloom, giving a healthy start to the fruit."

Despite Napa and Sonoma wineries complaining about a grape glut, the foothills doesn't have that problem.

"Small wineries usually don't feel the glut. It doesn't seem like there are lots of grapes on the vine that people haven't sold," Bush said.

Greg Boeger, vineyard master at Boeger Winery in Placerville, Calif., concurred with Bush's assessment, adding, "The glut is not affecting El Dorado County mainly because most of the wineries here buy local grapes and sell them locally."

He is thrilled with his Barbera haul, especially since it's one of his major varieties out of the 30 he grows. The tonnage is up by 30 percent. "I don't know why. The vines look better this year," Boeger said. "I think the quality might even be a little better. The sugar was not in excess and the acid dropped better. Normally Barbera has high acid and it's a struggle to get it down."