Sustainable Wine Certification Report

Abstract

This report summarizes a 2025 feasibility study confirming stakeholder support for developing a Washington-specific sustainable wine certification program, building on Sustainable WA's grape program to deliver end-to-end "grape-to-bottle" credibility.

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2025, the Washington Winegrowers Association (Winegrowers) completed a one-month feasibility study to evaluate whether and how a Washington-specific sustainable wine certification program should be developed to complement the existing Sustainable WA grape certification. Sustainable WA, built by the industry for the industry, ensures Washington's vineyards meet high sustainability standards from planting through harvest. What it does not yet address are the post-harvest practices that process winegrapes into finished wine. Recognizing increasing market demand for products that are sustainably made, credible winery-level standards are essential to enable end-to-end sustainability claims that buyers and consumers can trust.

The purpose of this study was twofold:

1. Gauge Washington wine industry interest and ability to participate in a Washington-specific sustainable wine certification program.

2. Explore what a Washington-appropriate sustainable wine certification might require to be credible, particularly in EU and Nordic markets.

The project approach included research and analysis of nine existing wine/winery sustainability programs from across the globe as well as direct engagement with nine of the largest producers of Washington wine.

Reviewed Standards and Programs

- LIVE Certified (Low Input Viticulture & Enology – Pacific Northwest, USA)
- Napa Green Winery Certification (California, USA)
- SIP Certified (Sustainability in Practice – California, USA)
- California Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Work (California, USA)
- Freshcare / AWISSP (Australian Wine Industry Standard of Sustainable Practice – Australia)
- Sustainable Winegrowing GB (SWGB) (United Kingdom)
- Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand (SWNZ)
- Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) (South Africa)
- Salmon-Safe (USA & Canada – eco-label for watershed protection)
- KRAV (Swedish organic and sustainability standard for food and wine)

One-on-one Stakeholder Meetings

- Ackley Brands Ltd. — Will Wiles, Director of Winemaking

- Airport Ranch Estates LLC — Marcus Miller, Managing Member & CEO

- Coventry Vale — Adam Ramirez, President

- Four Feathers — Becca DeKleine, GM & Director of Winemaking; Christian Nance; Operations Manager; Megan Simmons, Compliance

- Goose Ridge — Taylor Monson, Ops/Marketing; Rryan Craig, Plant Manager, Alex Reitmann, Farm Controller

- Hedges Family Estate — Sara Goedhart, Director of Winemaking; Christophe Hedges, Director of Sales

- Pacific Rim Wineries LLC — Tim Henley, Winery Manager & Winemaker

- Precept Wine & Spirits — Phil Kazanjian, COO; Hal Landvoigt, Director of Winemaking

- RM Wineries — Brandon Rice, Owner/Partner

Each meeting followed a common set of questions, designed to capture candid feedback on perceived program value, standard requirements, implementation concerns, costs, timelines, and definitions of size and scope. This input, together with the comparative analysis and research of other standards and programs, provided a foundation necessary to support development of a sustainable wine certification program for Washington as well as outlined a "roadmap" for next steps.

The following pages summarize what was learned, how a sample of Washington wine producers see the value and challenges of certification, and how the Washington Winegrowers Association can build on this input to design a practical, credible, and market-ready program that strengthens the competitiveness of Washington wine through expansion of Sustainable WA.

It should be noted that while the information collected was thorough given the one-month project duration, it is not yet considered comprehensive. Future program development would include additional program as well as, importantly, significant additional stakeholder outreach to ensure a much broader representation of industry voices are informing decision-making.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS SUMMARY

As part of this feasibility study, a comparative analysis of nine winery and wine sustainability certification programs was conducted. The programs were selected--largely based on accessibility--from more than forty active standards globally. The reviewed programs included Napa Green, SIP Certified, LIVE, Freshcare/AWISSP (Australia), Sustainable Winegrowing GB (UK), Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand, Integrated Production of Wine (South Africa), Salmon-Safe, and KRAV (Sweden). Collectively, they represent a diverse set of geographic regions, regulatory contexts,

and market priorities. Each program was compared against the others in twelve common sustainability categories identified in the table below. This information was shared in detail during stakeholder meetings.

Sustainability Category Inclusion Table

Category	What It Entails	Programs
Management, Documentation & Training	Written sustainability plan, record-keeping, traceability, staff training, internal audits, continuous improvement projects.	LIVE, Napa Green, SIP, Freshcare, SWNZ, IPW, SS, KRAV, CCSW
Energy Use & Climate Action	Energy efficiency plans, renewable energy, GHG inventory (Scopes 1–3), carbon footprint calculation, climate action leadership.	LIVE, Napa Green, SIP, Freshcare, SWNZ, IPW, SS, KRAV, CCSW
Water Use & Wastewater	Measuring water use, leak detection, water conservation, wastewater treatment, stormwater mapping, septic system management.	LIVE, Napa Green, SIP, Freshcare, SWNZ, IPW, SS, KRAV, CCSW
Materials & Waste Management	Recycling, composting, hazardous waste disposal, packaging materials (lightweight glass, alternatives), circular economy practices.	LIVE, Napa Green, SIP, Freshcare, SWNZ, IPW, SS, KRAV, CCSW
Facility Design & Construction	Siting, use of local/recycled materials, efficient design, natural light, passive heating/cooling, gravity flow, living roofs.	SIP, Freshcare, IPW, SS, KRAV, CCSW
Air Quality & Emissions	Odor/dust control, monitoring, vehicle emissions, fermentation CO_2 management.	Napa Green, Freshcare, IPW, KRAV, CCSW
Winemaking Practices	GMO yeast restrictions, SO_2 limits, sanitation protocols, innovation in fermentation (e.g., carbon capture).	LIVE, SIP, IPW, KRAV, CCSW
Packaging & Distribution	Lightweight bottles, alternative formats (cans, kegs), distribution footprint tracking, environmentally preferable shipping.	Napa Green, SWNZ, KRAV, CCSW
Worker Health, Safety & Benefits	OSHA compliance, worker safety, training, fair wages, benefits, equity & inclusion practices.	LIVE, Napa Green, Freshcare, SWNZ, KRAV, CCSW
Social & Community Impact	Diversity & inclusion, disaster insurance, equity commitments, community education and engagement, neighbor relations.	LIVE, Napa Green, SWGB, Freshcare, SS, KRAV, CCSW
Supply Chain & Purchasing	Preferential purchasing of sustainable inputs, supplier sustainability,	LIVE, Napa Green, Freshcare, SWNZ, IPW, KRAV, CCSW

	responsible procurement, chain-of-custody traceability.	
Traceability & Chain of Custody	Systems to track certified grapes into wine, audit trails, product recall capability, brand/logo use rules.	LIVE, SWNZ, Freshcare, IPW, KRAV, CCSW

Several key findings emerged from this review. Across nearly all standards, there is strong alignment around the importance of management systems and documentation, resource efficiency in energy and water use, worker health and safety, and chain-of-custody procedures to ensure credibility. At the same time, new areas of emphasis are gaining ground: climate action, social equity, and packaging/distribution impacts are increasingly prioritized, particularly in response to European buyer and importer expectations (Ionel, 2022). For wineries targeting access to EU markets, meeting human rights and ethical labor standards is essential.

The analysis also confirmed that consumer demand for sustainable wine is no longer a niche trend. Research shows that sustainably produced wine now has broad purchase consideration: 74% of U.S. consumers, 70% of Canadians, 60% of Swedes, and 63% of UK consumers say they would consider buying sustainably produced wine (Pomarici, 2015). Millennials and Gen Z, in particular, show both high interest and a willingness to pay more, with one U.S. study finding an average premium of $3 per bottle (Pomarici, 2015). Certification logos increase trust and purchase intent, especially among younger consumers who see sustainability as a core expectation (Miller, 2020).

Finally, the comparison highlighted that while existing programs offer robust frameworks, they do not fully reflect Washington's specific production environment. California-focused programs such as Napa Green and SIP were developed around California's regulatory and environmental conditions, while IPW in South Africa embeds wildlife considerations unique to that region. Locally developed standards for regional use—such as CCSW in California or SWNZ in New Zealand—tend to be more effective because they incorporate region-specific realities (Stanbury, 2024). A Washington-specific winery certification would allow our industry to embed local conditions—including hydro-based energy, water access, wildfire risks, and labor context—into the program, ensuring both credibility abroad and feasibility for producers at home.

For the complete 36-page analysis please email Nathanial Helligso at
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STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK SUMMARY

Through nine structured, one-hour meetings with large Washington wine producers including Ackley Brands Ltd., Airport Ranch Estates LLC, Coventry Vale, Four Feathers, Goose Ridge, Hedges Family Estate, Pacific Rim Wineries LLC, Precept Wine & Spirits, and RM Wineries, consistent themes emerged about the opportunities and challenges of creating a winery-level sustainability certification. Those common themes are summarized below.

Perceived Value Proposition

Stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that the greatest value of sustainable wine certification is the access it can create to export markets, particularly Northern Europe, where buyers increasingly require credible sustainability credentials. Many stakeholders reported missed or at-risk opportunities without a recognized sustainable wine certification. Domestically, the value was more uneven: some believe sustainability certification could help open doors with distributors and retailers while others felt it would make little difference, at least in the short term. Importantly, despite business models of many participating stakeholders including custom operations and involving bulk wine, generally, they favored end-to-end "grape-to-bottle" certification, as it was perceived to offer stronger credibility than a "grape-to-winery" claim.

Credibility & Avoiding "Greenwashing"

Every stakeholder underscored that rigor and international credibility are essential. A program seen as superficial or a "money grab" would damage trust. They stressed the importance of clear definitions and proof-based requirements. Chain of custody was described as important to credibility; stakeholders advised leveraging existing TTB documentation requirements, weigh tags, and random traceability audits to ensure confidence in sustainability claims.

Costs, Effort & ROI

Associated annual program fees for the standards and programs reviewed in the Comparative Analysis ranged from $1,100-$5,600 depending on production volume and the audit type. Production volume ranged from 44,000 gallons to 3,000,000, and fees were slightly higher for in-person audits than desk audits.

While most stakeholders agreed that the example program fees seemed reasonable, the burden of time, documentation, and additional costs associated with standard compliance emerged as an obstacle that could deter participation. Suggestions to overcome identified obstacles included fee caps, transparent use of funds, a balance of standard rigor with compliance feasibility, and defined program ROI. Many explicitly suggested an industry "pitch packet" that quantifies the benefits of sustainable

certification—such as identified buyer requirements and access to new markets and data pointing to increased sales volume—to help secure industry buy-in.

Program Architecture and Scope

Upon discussion, most stakeholders supported development of a tiered certification (Bronze/Silver/Gold or similar) to balance rigor with accessibility and continuous improvement. One stakeholder strongly preferred a simplified model involving no tiers.

The need to clarify what could be certified—and how--frequently surfaced.   One option discussed was a "grape-to-winery" model that would essentially start at the crush pad and end with wine production. This model might allow for bulk wine to receive certification. Another option was a "grape-to-bottle" model that would start at the crush pad and carry through to the finished, packaged products.

Moving forward, architecture and scope decisions will require continued dialogue with industry members, service and supply providers, importers, and others. While accessibility is critical to encourage broad industry adoption, the program's credibility must remain strong enough to be accepted by global buyers. Logo use will also need to be reviewed with label space and clarity of understanding kept at the forefront of thought.

Technical Design & Expectations

Stakeholders stressed that the certification timeline must avoid harvest months (September–November) and be completed before harvest to allow for label lead time. Many preferred a timeline that started with applications open in December/January and conducted audits in spring or early summer.

Across standard categories presented to stakeholders from the Comparative Analysis, those identified to pose the greatest anticipated compliance challenges were facility design, climate action, packaging, and social/community standards. Stakeholders raised concerns about costs, what is and is not within their control, and potential political pushback. Stakeholders urged flexibility for older facilities and realistic baselines for carbon emissions and water use. It was also suggested that, under a tiered program architecture, top-tier requirements could more closely align with the rigor of organic or biodynamic certification requirements. Integrating existing WineryWise content to avoid reinventing the wheel was recommended.

Preference was strongly voiced for securing program auditor(s) who have some knowledge of the wine industry.   Additionally, stakeholders expected auditor interactions to be educational in nature, avoiding a "gotcha" approach.

Stakeholders were asked whether requirements should be elevated for sustainable wine certification to include not just 95%, but 100% Washington grapes, or whether wine should be made from a certain percentage of sustainable grapes for certification.

Responses varied. A percentage less than 100% was often desired to allow for "topping off" and other related scenarios. Similarly, views ranged on the idea of requiring a percentage of sustainable grapes for wine certification. It was noted that sustainably grown grapes, sustainably made wine, and an end-to-end certification could all be options reflected with different logos.

Training, Marketing & Support

Stakeholders encouraged educational onboarding to set program participants up for success and understand program expectations from the beginning. Light annual updates thereafter were also encouraged. Suggestions for such support included short videos, templates, and auditor-informed training. Just as critical was market education as well as marketing enablement. Buyer-and-distributor-facing materials aimed at demonstrating the credibility of a Washington program was expressly desired as well as messaging for communicating with consumers about the certification. Targeting EU and Nordic-markets with such education was deemed essential.

Industry Role in Program Funding

There was strong skepticism for successful industry fundraising to contribute to program development at this time, although some stakeholders offered that contributions could serve as proof of buy-in if handled with fairness and transparency. What is ideal vs. what is realistic may not align in this operating environment.

SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS TO PROCEED

Based on the stakeholder feedback obtained, there is clear support for developing a Washington sustainable wine certification program. Every stakeholder engaged affirmed that certification will become increasingly essential, particularly for export markets where buyers already demand credible sustainability credentials. Domestically, while consumer pull is less consistent, stakeholders viewed certification as a valuable tool for differentiating Washington wine and opening doors with distributors and retailers.

At the same time, stakeholders were explicit that the program must avoid the pitfalls of greenwashing, unnecessary cost, or impractical requirements. They urged a design that is rigorous yet achievable, leveraging existing compliance systems (e.g., TTB record-keeping requirements), offering flexibility for older facilities, and supporting wineries through onboarding, training, and marketing. Example program costs were viewed as acceptable if ROI is clear and transparent. With these guardrails, stakeholders expressed high likelihood of program participation.

What the Program Would Look Like

A Washington sustainable wine certification program would extend the credibility of Sustainable WA by moving beyond the vineyard to encompass winery operations and

thorough chain-of-custody systems. Like the grape program, it would be built on clear standards, third-party audits, and transparent claims, ensuring that Washington wines labeled sustainable can be trusted as authentically sustainable.

The twelve core categories consistent with international standards and identified in the Comparative Analysis would be a starting point for development of Washington standards, with a gap analysis, additional stakeholder feedback, and expert input continuing to shape them.

Supporting wineries through the certification process would be incorporated into the program. Onboarding materials, short training videos, and marketing enablement tools would need to be developed.

NEXT STEPS & TIMELINE

The Washington Winegrowers Association will pursue grant funding and continue engaging industry partners to build out a Washington sustainable wine certification program. The following is a tentative development plan anticipated to occur between approximately 2026 and 2029, pending adequate grant funding.

Planning and Design
A workplan and timeline will be established, and Winegrowers will conduct more, broader stakeholder outreach, including meetings and surveys to gather input and confirm priorities. A gap analysis and additional comparative analysis of global winery standards will be conducted by a professional contractor, culminating in the conceptual design of the Washington certification program.

Standards Development
Efforts will focus on developing detailed standards and educational support based on the above framework. A digital platform will also be built to support certification applications, recordkeeping, and audits.

Testing and Training

The program will move into a pilot phase, including auditor training and testing of certification processes. A stakeholder review period will occur to gather final input and ensure industry alignment.

Program Finalization
The development phase will be completed and the program will be ready to transition into long-term operations.

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