

Crop Production Research Statement

My name is Sonet Van Zyl and I am an Assistant Professor of Viticulture at California State University, Fresno. I have been with the Department of Viticulture and Enology at Fresno State for five years. Previously, I worked at the University of California Davis as a researcher while completing my PhD degree in Viticulture. I was also employed as a researcher at the Agricultural Research Council in South Africa where I was part of the new cultivar development team for table grapes and raisins. I have an extensive background in table grape production, raisin production and processing, grapevine rootstock development, grape cultivar development and grapevine genetics.

I have served as the Alternate Public member and later as the Public member on the California Raisin Marketing Board since 2012 and as the Public member on the Raisin Administrative Committee since 2014.

As a researcher, I apply for research funding on a regular basis through commodity groups, federal and state agencies and private industry organizations. Performing crop research creates a constant flow of new knowledge that I can relay to students in the classroom. As a teacher, research activities ensure that students learn about the newest technologies for their future in the grape industry. Fresno State is the only University in the USA that offers an extensive class on raisin production and processing and actively involves undergraduate students to participate in research activities.

Over the years, crop research has benefitted the raisin industry by introducing new and highly successful raisin cultivars, for example, Fiesta, DOVine, Selma Pete and the most recent cultivar, Sunpreme. Research also resulted in the development of new rootstocks, pest and disease management strategies, mechanization practices and optimum cultivation techniques for each specific raisin cultivar. Crop research is an ongoing practice to find solutions to problems and will often lead to new questions that need answering through additional or expanded research projects. Climate change also lead to questions about drought and salt tolerant cultivars, water management strategies and adapted cultivation practices. Any interruptions in these kinds of research projects create gaps in datasets that are impossible to fill.

In 2012 the CRMB funded a joint research project between Fresno State and UC Davis to investigate newly released grapevine rootstocks, their performance and affinity to Selma Pete raisins. This project was funded for two years out of the requested three years. As with any crop research project, at least three years of repeated research is needed to develop statistically sound data. If the Raisin Administrative Council was given the authority to fund crop research, we will be able to finish the project and give raisin growers valuable information regarding which rootstocks to use with Selma Pete to get optimum yield and quality for the best possible price point.

Sunpreme, the newly released raisin cultivar from the USDA created an exciting and new research path since it is the first natural DOV cultivar. As the first natural DOV cultivar, a number of questions arose, for example, how do growers cultivate Sunpreme for optimum yield and quality, and what does the training and trellis systems look like? But since its release in 2013, the CRMB was not able to fund any research projects regarding Sunpreme. Although an initial lack of plant material also contributed to the delay in research opportunities, a new vineyard has been established that will be ready soon for research activities. If the RAC is given the authority to fund crop production research, we as researchers can initiate trials sooner to answer grower questions regarding Sunpreme.

As a researcher, I am involved in research sub-committees for other commodity groups, and served as a member of the CRMB research sub-committee in 2012. Past research activities proved how the Raisin Industry has adapted to new cultivars, technology and cultivation practices. It will continue to benefit all parties involved in the Raisin Industry if the RAC is given the authority to fund crop production research while the CRMB is currently unable to do so, or in the unlikely event where the CRMB ceases to exist.

Thank you for your time. I am now available to answer any questions.