The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management says the spotted lanternfly is now established in all five Rhode Island counties. Local vineyards are helping the state monitor for the invasive insect. MATT ROURKE/AP FILE

Vineyards in Rhode Island bracing for booming spotted lanternfly population

By WJAR Staff
Sinclair National Desk

Rhode Island vineyards could be at risk as the spotted lanternfly population continues to grow across the state.

The invasive insect has already caused extensive damage at vineyards in states including Pennsylvania, where it was first detected in the United States in 2014.

Paul Nunes, owner of Newport Vineyards, said the insect has not caused problems at his vineyard so far, but he is closely monitoring its spread.

"The spotted lanternfly has been a big topic of discussion at any seminars or webinars I've attended the last five years or so," Nunes said. "I imagine, inevitably, it'll find its way here. They haven't found us yet."

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management says the spotted lanternfly is now established in all five Rhode Island counties. The insect was first detected in the state in Warwick in 2021. Rhode Island's first confirmed population was identified along Route 7 in Smithfield the following year.

As sightings increase, some local vineyards are helping the University of Rhode Island and RIDEM monitor spotted lanternflies and other invasive species.

"Both URI and DEM come about every two weeks," said James Verde, owner of Verde Vineyards. "They check the traps, not only for the spotted lanternfly, but also for other new invasive species."

Verde said he believes his vineyard has largely been spared because there are no nearby tree-of-heaven trees, a preferred host of the spotted lanternfly.

The insects feed on the sap of grapevines and other plants. Large infestations can weaken vines, reduce crop yields and make plants more vulnerable to cold temperatures. Spotted lanternflies also produce a sticky substance known as honeydew, which can promote the growth of sooty mold.

URI researchers are studying potential methods of controlling the population, including a parasitoid from China known as Dryinus sinicus. The parasitoid attacks spotted lanternfly nymphs, but URI says no biological-control agents are currently approved for release.

Verde said he hopes the continuing research will eventually provide vineyards with an effective way to control the pest.

Researchers elsewhere are also considering whether specially trained dogs could help. A Virginia Tech study involving more than 100 volunteer dog-and-handler teams found that owners could train their dogs to detect spotted lanternfly egg masses.

Still, neither strategy offers an immediate or foolproof solution if a vineyard experiences a large infestation.

"I suppose if I ever discovered quite a few of them, they would be able to spray the periphery with insecticides, but I've never used insecticides here," Verde said. "Ultimately, we'll find some species, predators or disease that will affect them, but it takes quite a while."

RIDEM says spotted lanternflies pose their greatest threat to agriculture, particularly vineyards, orchards and nursery crops.

The insects do not bite or sting, but residents are encouraged to photograph and report suspected sightings to the state.