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Wine industry works to create research center

Leaders in Idaho's growing wine industry are teaming with two colleges to establish a research center designed to teach the art of growing grapes and making wine while helping newcomers get into the business.

The industry is partnering with Boise State University and the College of Western Idaho to establish a \$1.1 million Idaho Viticulture Research Center outside of Boise.

The nonprofit center would include a teaching winery, a co-op winery where fledgling winemakers can share equipment, a tasting room, classroom space, a grape-crushing pad, lab and warehouse and distribution center at a 30-acre site in Eagle. A separate greenhouse and nursery for growing grapes is planned for the neighboring town of Star.

Organizers say the center will be financed mostly with private donations. But last month, the Idaho Department of Commerce awarded a \$300,000 economic development grant to Eagle to help pay for infrastructure costs.

The goal is to open the center in 2010 and begin offering classes through the College of Western Idaho on all aspects of the industry, from building and operating a winery to marketing wines. Boise State University would be involved in research projects.

"At this time, there are no classes on viticulture or winemaking in Idaho," Larry Mahaffey, owner of Floating Feather Vineyard in Eagle, told the Idaho Statesman.

"Furthermore, there is no teaching winery ... or a co-op winery where small winery startups can start making their wine until they can afford their own facility. These are important capabilities to grow the industry," he said. MaHaffey is expected to serve as the center's chairman.

A recent Boise State University study found wine producers in Idaho, located predominantly in the southwest corner, contribute \$73 million in economic value to the state.

The study also found the industry supports 625 full-time jobs and produces \$19 million in employee wages. The number of wineries in the state has grown to 38, up from just 11 in 2002.