Tests will be carried in October to see if Darwin and Palmerston are clear of the grapevine leaf rust disease, Primary Industry Minister Kon Vatskalis announced today.

A national campaign was launched last March to eradicate the grapevine leaf rust disease, which has the potential to devastate Australia’s $4.4B wine and table grape industries.

Between March and December last year, the Department of Business, Industry and Resource Development grapevine team inspected 610 grapevines in Darwin and Palmerston, removing 435 diseased plants.

“Palmerston has been clean of grapevine leaf rust since November last year, and with a steady decline in the number of infected plants across Darwin, we are hopeful Darwin will soon be have a clear result,” Mr Vatskalis said.

In March this year, 50 grapevines in Darwin were found to be infected, with that number dropping to 23 in June and five in August.

“The disease is only found in the grapevine – meaning it doesn’t spread to the soil or other plants – and infected plants are removed with healthy ones left in place,” said Mr Vatskalis.

“Since last November there have been no new infected plants in Palmerston, and Mr Stephen West and the rest of the DBIRD team are to be congratulated on their efforts in stamping out the disease.”

Once there are no more infected grapevines, it is a case of ‘watch and wait’ for Darwin and Palmerston, with the quarantine zone needing to be clear of cases for two years before it can be officially declared free of grapevine leaf rust.

The current quarantine period will be in place until June 2006, during which time there is a ban on propagation, replanting and movement of grapevine plant material.

“This is the first team an eradication program such as this has been tried in Australia, and could not have worked without the support of the community,” said Mr Vatskalis.

“All houses in the Darwin and Palmerston were door-knocked and it is only with the support of residents that we are now so close to being clean of the disease which has the potential to be so devastating to the industry.”