



FOR LIFE

keeping water flowing

LIFEstory

Regional community stalwart celebrates pipeline security but warns against losing drought memory

By Melissa Pouliot for GWMWater

Passionate water and regional development advocate, community leader, farmer and former Hindmarsh Shire councillor and Mayor Mick Gawith hasn't lost his drought memory. But he worries other Wimmera Mallee people have.

"I was reading an article not that long ago about recreational water and someone said that with the pipeline there should be enough water for everyone. But I think that people are forgetting if we don't get enough rain delivering water to the storages, the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline is just a pipe."

Mick's passion and care for the Wimmera River, the 14,000-hectare Lake Hindmarsh and the long-term survival of rural communities is known far and wide in community and government circles. As a fourth generation farmer in the district famous for being the birthplace of Australia's longest-serving prime minister Bob Menzies, Mick has lived through many droughts and will live through many more.

With the cracks starting to show from two successive dry years he says it is imperative governments, water managers and the community stick to the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project's original business plan.

"Although I understand the need for tweaks along the way, if we don't stick to the original game plan we could find ourselves in a similar situation to what we faced before the pipeline. Last summer people from all parts of the region were calling for their lakes to be filled but pipe or no pipe - there's nothing to say we won't run out of water if we start filling up water storages left, right and centre.

"What we need to keep in mind is that in the Wimmera-Mallee, apart from the one-off flood event in 2011, the region's had 17 years of below-average rain. The pipeline will keep the water clean and won't let it evaporate but we still need rain to put into it."

The first thing Mick sees each morning when he has his breakfast and first coffee is the Wimmera River. He loves the river so much that when building his house in 1997 it was built around river views. He only needs to walk around 300 metres to be right on the riverbank and when the long dry kicked in, his morning cuppa broke his heart.

"I'm a pretty positive person so I always live in hope, but after so many years without decent rain and watching the river die, I really started to wonder if the drought would ever end. We were so close to losing our river - in places it was four times saltier than sea water, and all the old trees alongside were dying."

Six years after his daughter phoned from her Jeparit home to tell him black, stinking water was running out of the tap as she tried to fill the bath for her young children, Mick's drought memory still brings a tear to his eye. At the time, some likened the smell to a rotten egg; others a toilet bowl.

The year was 2008. The northern Wimmera town was to be the first town to connect to the pipeline, but it came several weeks too late for their untreated water supply which had become so low it was rendered unusable.

There was no water for miles around. The river had long dried up and the lake had been a cracked dry bed for many years.

“I can still remember that night. It was a very emotional time because here was my daughter and my grandchildren with rotten water coming out of the tap, and there was nothing I could do. I had water in my dam but it was extremely salty and unusable because dam fills had stopped two to three years earlier. So what do you do?”

In true rural Australian style, Mick and a band of others from the community, Hindmarsh Shire Council and GMMWater rallied around to get clean water to Jeparit in a hurry.

Mick cleaned out the tank at the Jeparit caravan park and GMMWater tanked water in. People lined up with their towels and toiletry bags for their daily shower which doubled as a therapy session.

Facing third-world conditions in a first-world country is something Mick and many others from Jeparit will never forget.

“We never took the water for granted because we have always lived through droughts and times without water, but it was bad. Morale was extremely low in the town. Every now and then you do need to remind yourself of these times, because people can quickly forget just how bad things got for the Wimmera Mallee.”



Mick was also involved in a council and GMMWater initiative to deliver 'pods' to households around Jeparit, particularly the homes of older community members, which the council filled each week.

"Keeping a few pot plants alive was important therapy, so that weekly pot of water went an awful long way towards their health and wellbeing," Mick says.

The council nominated Jeparit Hospital as the town's 'green zone' and all available water went to keep lawns and gardens around the site alive. Mick says they chose the hospital, which also housed a doctor's surgery, because of the negative impact on the ill and elderly to be surrounded by dust and dead vegetation.

"They're only little things and probably don't seem all that important now, but at the time they were quite significant to the Jeparit community."

When the river flooded in 2011 and water flowed into Lake Hindmarsh, filling it to levels not seen for 15 years, Mick was one of many to celebrate.

"I got the fishing boat out onto the river and took my girls and their friends for a bit of a putt around – looking at birds and telling stories – the things my grandad used to do with me when I was growing up," he says.

"Getting the water back into the river and the lake was just sensational and now all the trees are starting to come back. In the river, families are out on their kyaks and swim boards and the local kids go down to the river for a swim the first chance they get. Plus people are catching fish again – it's just great."

He said completion of the pipeline project a year before the floods meant there was plenty to celebrate for the long term future of the region.

"The pipeline is the best thing that's ever happened in this region. I believe the open channel system is the second best thing because it opened up such a huge amount of area for development, but it was to the detriment of our environment. The modern generation, through initiatives like the pipeline project, is now addressing the long-term problems of water wastage from the open channel system and we're also enjoying the benefits of quality water that we haven't enjoyed for a very long time."

Mick says Jeparit recreation reserve, the beating heart of the community summer and winter, had never had decent water on it until the pipeline. It was now looking 'a picture'. And the simple things, like better quality water to wash your clothes, make 'a hell of a difference'. Not to mention better water for farmers to mix with chemicals. Then there's water for recreational lakes in far-flung isolated communities such as Hopetoun's Lake Lascelles and Tchum Lake near Birchip.

"Pipeline water has rejuvenated individual households, towns, farms and the natural environment in so many ways. It's amazing what a difference a secure, quality water supply can make."

And in true Mick Gawith style, he's ready to swing into action again if a sequence of wet years sees water filling the Wimmera River then flowing into Lake Hindmarsh before spilling into Outlet Creek and snaking its way towards Lake Albacutya, a Ramsar wetland of international significance.

"I've got a crew all set to canoe the whole length of the Wimmera River, across Lake Hindmarsh, up Outlet Creek and all the way to Albacutya and even beyond. I hope I live to see the day and make this trip – that would be the absolute ultimate for me."