



FOR LIFE

keeping water flowing

LIFEstory

Pipeline provides security and assurance to commercial vineyard

By Melissa Pouliot for GWMWater

When Don and Wendy Spence and their son Chris decided to establish the first commercial vineyard west of Great Western in Victoria's Wimmera and Grampians area in 1996, they had full dams, soaked soils and prospects of a bright future.

They were already running sheep on the farm and growing timber for future firewood supply but were keen to diversify into one of the family's long-time passions - wine. The farm ticked all the boxes; good elevation, frost free and an ideal climate of warm sunny days and cool evenings.

With excitement and vigour the family starting planting their first hectare of shiraz vines at Norton Estate Wines in April 1997. By the end of the year the region was in drought conditions but with plenty of water still in their dams from the previous year, the vines were looking great.

Still confident they planted a further two hectares in 1998 - cabernet sauvignon this time. Although the drought pattern was continuing they were still feeling confident their dams would get them through.

Chris's brother Peter and wife Anne from a long-time grape-growing family, were growing grapes in the Geelong area and were able to pass on their knowledge to get the Norton Estate grapes started. The Spence's also had a network of support from the Grampians Winemakers group including Viv Thompson, Bruce Dalkin and the late Kym Ludvigsen.

Best's Winery at Great Western make the wine and awards started to flow right after the release of their first bottling. Encouraged by the quality, they pushed the worry of continued drought conditions aside and planted new vines in 1999 and 2000.

As the drought worsened they turned to the Wimmera River for backup irrigation water but after their 2000 planting they decided to put further plantings on hold until they had better water security and access to improved quality water.

The drought was also taking its toll on their livestock which provided their regular income while they established their winery. As discussions for the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project ramped up, they could see secure and quality water on the distant horizon.

But the reality they faced as the dry years continued was being able to survive until pipes were in the ground and water started flowing. When pipeline construction started in 2006 Chris remembers feeling peace of mind might not too far away. He looked to the skies for rain clouds while contractors dug pipes into the ground and felt if they could just hold out a few more years it would all be okay.

Then came 2007. It was a wipeout. Norton Estate Wines picked five tonnes of shiraz grapes. This was way below their average harvest of between 22 and 24 tonnes. Although the pipeline was on its way and project completion was fast-tracked to five years instead of the original 10-year construction plan, the grim situation for the Spence family and the broader region continued.

Then came 2009. The worst day was Black Saturday on February 7 when temperatures reached close to 50 degrees Celsius and fires burnt areas around Horsham and other parts of Victoria. The extreme heat and wind de-foliated the vines and cooked the fruit. The Spence's had only one choice. Cut the fruit from the vines and drop it on the ground.

Chris says Black Saturday was a frightening ordeal that would stay in their minds forever. The fire started about seven kilometres from the vineyard and was heading towards them before the wind turned it away.

"2009 was a disastrous year and by far the hardest year that we, plus so many others in the Wimmera, have ever faced. With record breaking drought after record breaking drought and so little rainfall leaving our dams, lakes and rivers dry – it really was an extreme event during an already difficult time," Chris recalls.

In December 2009 relief was in sight as water from the pipeline started flowing to the vineyard. On March 30, 2010 the last pipes were laid and thankfully for the Spence family and the rest of region, significant rain arrived in spring 2010. Weather conditions turned around so much that many people experienced extensive flood damage that spring and summer, but for Norton Estate Wines the floods provided welcome relief and hope for a brighter future.

"September 2010 rain followed by flooding rains in December and then January 2011 filled our dams and provided the sub-soil moisture we hadn't had in a long time. We were already connected to the pipeline which was delivering secure and quality water to our vines, but the rain was the extra boost that us and the whole region needed."

It was also a boost for Chris's other passion in life – fishing. The combined stress of the struggling winery and seeing his favourite recreational fishing lakes and the Wimmera River dry up, took a serious toll on him and his family.

"We are fortunate in the respect that we cellar our wine so can insulate ourselves a bit from climate conditions by dipping into other vintages to sell, but the long drought took quite a toll on our family. We also lost Mum suddenly so there were a few bleak years for us all. And not being able to take the kids fishing to places we love meant we had no escape from the long dry."

But Chris is not one to dwell on difficult times. He says the silver lining of the extended drought was quickly learning how to manage their winery on miserly water rations. As a result, some of their wines are rated among the best in Australia, receiving gold medals at national and international levels plus recognition and high praise from wine writers and critics.

And the other silver lining of the drought is the pipeline, providing people like the Spence's with security and assurance to 'get on with business'.

"Now that we've got all the infrastructure in place to access the pipeline for our vines and livestock, we have the reassurance we can produce a crop and run the farm effectively forever. It gives us great planning ability – we can plan ahead now and know we'll get a quality crop of some sort."

Chris says having secure access to high quality water eliminates a major stress from their business.

"We know what it's like to have no water. The pipeline gives us confidence which is great not only for the business but for peace of mind."