

Fire and flood - fighting back

AUSTRALIAN FARMERS fill the food basket of the nation, often in conditions that are unpredictable and extreme. Rarely are those extremes so painfully evident as in the simultaneous twin terrors that ravaged the landscape in February; bushfires that obliterated much of Victoria and floods that poured relentlessly over north-east Queensland.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) we have not been successful in researching an organic flood victim to interview however in this article we hear from two of those Victorian organic farming families who report on the effects that fires have had on their organic operations.

Sylke Rees and her partner David Miller (founding father of the iconic Grass Roots magazine) own Rees Miller Estate, a biodynamic vineyard and winery at Yea in Victoria. They lost their full year's crop of 7ha of grapes to the Victorian fires - but ironically, the flames never reached their vines.

Frost and flame have dealt the couple a double whammy in recent years; in 2007 they lost a year's crop to severe frost (the effects of which won't be felt until next year) but Sylke says that they didn't think about smoke taint at the time of the fires.

"Smoke taint occurs when the vineyard is subjected to a smoky environment for a few hours or even days. In our case, the vines were in an atmosphere of smoke for two weeks. This resulted in the absorption of a foul tasting chemical called guaiacol through the porous skin of the fruit. It doesn't take a lot of smoke to taint grapes; you may not even notice it when they're eaten fresh, but during fermentation, more and more guaiacol is released into the wine, making it taste like charcoal, burnt rubber and even disinfectant," Sylke says. "A level of one microgram per litre is enough to indicate taint; tests on our grapes showed that we had levels of between four and ten."

"As a result, our whole crop will have to be donated to the birds this year, and if the birds don't like the grapes, we'll have to pay pickers to come in and clean up. We've just spent the last few days taking down the nets that we'd put up a month ago to protect the entire year's crop from the very birds we are now encouraging!"

Sylke says the fires were an extraordinary experience.

"Fires were on three fronts around us. People were arriving unannounced and using us as a refuge from Kinglake and Buxton. They had no other way of escaping the flames that threatened their properties."

"Initially we thought we were safe, then at about five o'clock in the evening, the wind



YOUR ORGANIC STATUS – WHERE DO YOU STAND?

Q: Are there special certification requirements or exemptions to sourcing organic fodder and inputs for producers who have experienced extreme weather or uncontrollable events such as fires?

A: Section 5.1.35-37 of the Australian Organic Standard (AOS) outlines requirements for exceptional circumstances (EC).

In case of extreme climatic or other extenuating circumstances, exemption to fodder requirements may be granted. Under such exemption, the operator may use In Conversion fodder or conventional fodder (free from agrichemical residues). Full organic certification status may be maintained if IC fodder is used. In the case of conventional fodder, a consecutive 6 months period of feeding organic feed is required before organic status may be regained.

Section 3.9 of the AOS outlines deferral of certification in cases such as loss of production due to fire, drought or other natural disaster.

Requests for exemptions must be made in writing to the Certification office and approval granted before proceeding.

changed and the smoke became more intense. The fires were being blown in our direction. The air was so thick, we couldn't go outside without choking, we couldn't see anything - the fire was out there but we didn't know how far away or even if it was at the back door.



David Miller and Sylke Rees, Rees Miller Estate.

"People react differently when under stress. My partner, David, cooks, and he just set about making an interesting meal for us all. The following day we packed up as much as we could, stashed it in a fireproof shed, and went into town - to Yea - and waited with a lot of other people, just sitting on the oval. It was like being in a war zone and for a while the idea of living in the city looked pretty good.

"In the aftermath, it is remarkable how supportive people are. Farming can be a lonely occupation, at times, but with the support of the brave members of the local community who fight the fires, and the understanding support of those in the city, we can all survive the challenges of life in a changing climate."

Robert Gibbon's Jocoluro Orchard, in the



COBE BEEF

Channel country flooding, Queensland's north-west.

ORGANIC BITES

• **Kylie Minogue** is selling her 222 acre eco-friendly property, located on French Island, Australia. The property features a wide range of renewable energy sources, has no piped water, electricity, or gas and features a large organic fruit and vegetable garden.

• **First Lady, Michelle Obama**, is helping to promote fresh organic produce by planting an organic vegetable garden on the White House lawns. Mrs. Obama is planning on growing 55 varieties of vegetables – which will not only benefit the presidential family, but will also be used as an educational tool for local children.

• **Many cotton farmers in West Africa** have been making the transition to organic cotton as fuel and fertilizer prices continue to rise. According to the UN humanitarian news service, IRIN, global organic cotton production grew by more than 150% worldwide in 2008, and West Africa saw a two-fold increase over 2007.

process of becoming certified organic, had a promising twenty-one acre crop of plums, pluots and apples before the outbreak of the Victorian fires. Forced to evacuate his property for two weeks, Robert hoped that the fruit trees would survive but had grave concerns for his heritage vegetable crops of beans, zucchinis, tomatoes, pumpkins and cucumbers.

Temperatures reached 50°, crisper northerly winds reached speeds of 80 km, there was no electricity to drive the three-phase pumps in the watering systems and Robert, in exile, couldn't water the fields. The vegetables had no chance and the whole crop was lost.

The fruit survived the heat but was lost to an unexpected fire hazard. For hungry birds driven out of their usual habitat the orchard was a well-stocked oasis, and they stripped the trees bare.

His twelve hundred free-range chickens, on the

other hand, sailed through the experience – as did his 50 alpacas.

"While it will take a year for the fruit tree cycle to come around again, we have already re-planted the vegetable paddocks and are hopeful of a bumper crop.

"The smoke was so dense you couldn't see past the nose on your face," he recalls. "Fires were travelling distances in twenty minutes that would normally take three hours."

One poignant footnote to Robert's story is the metre-high carved wooden apple that has pride of place outside his shop. It was carved from a cypress pine stump by a local man, Harley Morgan of Marysville, who made a call asking if a plaque could be put on the apple for him should the worst happen. He perished soon after in the fire with his wife. Now the apple, complete with plaque, will become a loving memorial for the community.

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