

Zero carbon adds up at Zilzie

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Who: Forbes family

What: viticulture

Where: Kardoc

Why: carbon-neutral wine

Report: SANDRA GODWIN

WHILE many farmers wait nervously to see what effect government-imposed carbon emissions trading schemes will have on their bottom line, a small number of winemakers have tackled the issue head on.

The Forbes family, of Karadoc, south of Mildura, has embraced the challenges posed by climate change, drought and changing consumer attitudes.

Third-generation farmers Ian and Roslyn established the first vineyards at Zilzie Estate in 1971 and built a winery in 1999.

When their sons Andrew and Steven took on leading roles in 2003 and last year, Zilzie became one of a handful of Australian winemakers to produce carbon-neutral wines.

Certified by the Carbon Reduction Institute of Australia, the Bulloak range of wines is named after a stand of threatened buloke trees on the property, which has been dedicated as the Yatpool reserve and is part of a revegetation and biodiversity project.

The zero environmental impact of the Bulloak wines was achieved through a combination of reduced energy consumption, packaging and waste, improved water-use efficiency and buying carbon credits and planting trees as carbon offsets.

Zilzie managing director Andrew Forbes said the idea had initially been "floated around" for two years.

The certification process took 18 months.

"It was not as difficult as we first thought," he said.

"There was a lot of paperwork initially in terms of understanding the carbon footprint, but that also led towards us forming groups within the organisation that targeted key emissions, such as power and water, where we found savings."

An audit showed electricity use was responsible for almost 55 per cent of emissions, followed by grape production and packaging at 13 per cent each.

Andrew said refrigeration alone accounted for 40 per cent of the cost of production, so the company was investigating ways of using solar energy to cut its electricity use and obtain credits by feeding excess power into the national grid.

Water use in the vineyard had been progressively reduced over time, cut by more than a third between 2005 and 2007.

"With drought and water restrictions, it was a natural thing to do," he said.

"We also found some advantages with that -- there was less groundwater run-off, more efficient uptake."

Most of the water savings were found in the winery itself, where flushing pipes and tanks were computerised to cut waste, that could "accumulate into a hell of a lot" over a vintage.

Andrew said production of carbon-neutral wines was more expensive, but he declined to say how much.

Regardless of the extra cost, Zilzie has an ambitious plan to undertake the process for all its brands within three years.

As well as falling in line with their focus on environmental sustainability, Andrew said the extra green credentials would be a

useful "point of difference" in marketing the wine.

The average household produces 12 tonnes (equivalent to 240,000 black balloons) of greenhouse gases each year.

"We estimate that each standard 750ml bottle of wine consumed will contribute approximately 40 black balloons (2kg) of Co2 gases into the environment, whereas we've reduced the net impact of the Bulloak wines to zero," he said.

"We've been re-presenting the brand to a few of the majors and a few key distributors and people are genuinely excited by the prospect.

"With major companies, particularly overseas, trying to reduce their own emissions, one of the easiest ways for them to do it is if they have carbon neutral products coming into the organisation as opposed to those that aren't.

"The UK supermarkets are looking closely at it and have their own targets in mind for reduction in the future."

The importance of the UK market to Zilzie was recognised when the company changed the name of the range from Buloke to Bulloak.

Andrew said many Brits were finding Buloke hard to say -- often pronouncing it "bull-oaky" -- which could hinder a brand's recognition.

Zilzie, which has 735ha of vineyards and buys fruit from 40 growers in different wine regions, expects to crush between 34,000 and 35,000 tonnes of grapes this vintage.

Andrew said this was about 10 per cent less than last year, but fruit that had survived the February heatwave looked "pretty good".

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