Irrigation now official in France

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Quietly, irrigation has now officially been legalised in France.

A decree dated December 6 and published at the end of February permits irrigation from June 15 up to the French national holiday of August 15, although for AC vineyards it is allowed only if sanctioned by the individual appellation authorities. Until quite recently the French officially viewed rainfall as a boon but irrigation as a wicked New World ploy and a potentially dangerous way of boosting the volume of wine produced. Global warming seems to have changed this view.

Curiously, permanent irrigation systems such as the particularly efficient and ecologically sound drip irrigation are specifically outlawed.

Needless to say, the whole process is to be wrapped in bureaucracy. Individual permits will have to be applied for, for each parcel of land a producer wishes to irrigate, giving details of exactly what sort of irrigation is proposed. Here are the details in French:

L'Irrigation légalisée
L'Irrigation du vignoble a enfin été légalisée. Le décret paru au JO du 6 décembre 2006 autorise l'irrigation des vignes jusqu'au 15 août au plus tard.
Concernant les vignobles d'appellation, l'irrigation est également possible si le décret de l'appellation le prévoit. Mais cette pratique est alors très strictement encadrée. Le syndical d'AOC doit en effectuer la demande à l'INAO en précisant la durée souhaitée et en accompagnant cette demande de résultats d'études réalisées au préalable sur un référentiel de parcelles. La période d'irrigation est limitée du 15 juin au 15 août. Les installations fixes (goutte-à-goutte) sont interdites. Chaque producteur d'AOC ayant recours à l'irrigation devra faire une déclaration aux services locaux de l'INAO au plus tard le premier jour d'irrigation, en précisant la désignation, la superficie et l'encépagement des parcelles concernées ainsi que la nature des installations.

I sent this to James Herrick who set up three ground-breaking, Australian-designed vineyards in the Languedoc in the early 1990s to produce his eponymous Chardonnay Vin de Pays d'Oc before selling the operation to what was then Southcorp. As one who has witnessed systematic (and extremely wasteful) spray irrigation in the Languedoc every summer for years, I asked him whether this new edict really represented anything new. This is his reply:

"Good question. It is new in that it breaks the holy notion that God does everything and in her wisdom has decided the best spot for such and such is just over there in the corner. It admits that human intervention could just improve on some aspects of terroir. Thin end of a wedge?

"On the other hand it is a ridiculous compromise (like banning smoking except in restaurants). They have put limits on the dates you can water; once again Paris knows better than Nature when something needs a drink."

If you have any comments to make on this, feel free to add them - although if you are not logged in as a member of purple pages, please preface your remarks with your name and location.