

Farming

Bendigo calling space control

By Aimee Wilson

SATELLITE-GUIDED technology has enabled the transformation of barren land that barely supported sheep into a vineyard at Bendigo, north of Cromwell.

Using sophisticated Global Positioning Systems (GPS) technology, Mike's Vineyard, on the shores of Lake Dunstan, has finally taken shape after nine months.

Owner Mike Wilkinson said that at a cost of about \$200,000, it was quite a reasonable scheme.

"Without this sort of technology, the planning and planting of this vineyard, particularly on our steep slope faces would have been virtually impossible."

Designed by Great Hill Contracting, the vineyard establishment solution has been refined and modified over the past few years.

"By using a base station and a dual frequency receiver, we can pick up signals from an average of nine satellites," Mr Hill said.

"And with corrections transmitted at a rate of up to 20 times a second, we are achieving centimetre-level accuracy for marking out the ground irrigation system and for the planting process — even on the rugged and steep faces of these terraces," he said.

The establishment of Mike's Vineyard was initially made possible by the provision of water as the creek and water races did not yield enough to irrigate the terraces.

Early last year, Mrs Wilkinson, along with husband Andy, joined up with John Perrin from Bendigo Station



Drip feeding . . . Irrigation drip lines follow the machine planter on Mike's Vineyard at Bendigo.

and an adjacent vineyard owner, to develop an irrigation scheme.

"That was our first crucial step in transforming land that was considered too dry and stony, and with soils too thin and poor to be considered for anything other than extensive sheep grazing in the past," Mr

Perrin said.

After the initial stages of ground preparation, which proved a long and arduous process due to the amount of schist and reef rock on the terraces, Mr Hill used a quad bike also equipped with a GPS system so that the vineyard drip irrigation scheme could be marked out according to the

irrigation plan.

With the combination of the GPS system and the optimized mechanical planter, vines could be planted at a rate in excess of 15,000 vines a day with absolute precision, Mrs Wilkinson said.

The irrigation scheme, designed by Fruited Supplies,

pumped water directly from Lake Dunstan up a steep escarpment which runs over a kilometre or so along the terraces.

The investment once though too hard and too costly to implement, has now proved it worth with over 40ha of vineyard already established on the terraces.