

NEW RULE PRESENTS THREATS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANIC VEGETABLE PRODUCERS

Organic production standards will soon require that all seeds and seedlings used in organic production are organically raised.

Whilst this provision has been in force for some time now, organic producers able to demonstrate that they were unable to source organic seeds or seedlings were permitted to use seeds or seedlings that had been conventionally produced. However, by 1 January 2004, this clause will cease to exist and organic producers will be required to use organic seeds and transplants exclusively - with exceptions granted in writing only from the certifier.

The new rule could impact significantly on Australian organic vegetable producers. Estimates indicate that up to 15 million seedlings may be required annually by the industry and with annual industry expansion estimated at 15%, this demand could increase significantly over the coming years.

The Australian Organic Industry, in recognition of the potential problems faced by organic vegetable producers in sourcing organic planting material, has commissioned a 6-month study to increase awareness of the requirements of the new rule and to determine industry needs. Funded by the Rural Industry Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC), the project will be coordinated by NSW Agriculture's Organic Industry Liaison Officer, Robyn Neeson and Vegetable Research Horticulturist, Dr. Greg Howell.

The project will involve the establishment of a database of organic vegetable producers and input suppliers (seeds, seedlings, fertilisers, pest control products etc), that are appropriate for organic production. Organic vegetable producers and input suppliers from NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, will be invited to attend information and networking workshops to learn more about the new rule and to discuss issues that may impact on their ability to meet its requirements. At the conclusion of the project, production guidelines for organic vegetable seedlings will be presented to industry.

Ms. Neeson said that whilst the short time frame proposed for changes to be implemented could be seen as a threat to the organic vegetable industry, there are potential opportunities that could come out of the new ruling. "The new rule will force the suppliers of seed and seedlings to reconsider how their current production techniques comply with the requirements of the National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce. Whilst some will decide to cease supply to this market, others will see it as a market opportunity and diversify or expand their production", Ms. Neeson said. "Organic seedling production will require the use of organically approved potting media, fertilisers and pesticides, and this requirement could lead to the development of new products."

The ultimate objective of the project will be to assist industry to make the transition to the production and use of organic seeds and seedlings as smooth as possible.

Organic producers and input suppliers who would like to be included in the data base or participate in the workshops should contact Robyn Neeson or Greg Howell on (02) 6951 2611.

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