

World of Organics

Taking a lesson from the burgeoning United States organic market

By **ANDREW MONK**

Our regular column on the international nature of organics this edition covers the organic industry in the US. Why look at the US? There are many lessons from looking at how other countries and regulatory regimes protect and monitor organic production and marketing. The Americans add their own unique flavour - or should we say flavor - to this. On top of that the US market accounts for over two fifths of the world market for organics - worth a look!

Last edition we looked at the non-government regulatory system of IFOAM - which is the organic industry's international network which maintains both an organic standard guideline, as well as rules for how certification organisations are required to conduct themselves. So too with the US model - only this time for obvious reasons this is a 100% government regulatory system.

Who controls and certifies product in the US market?

The USDA - United States Department of Agriculture - is the regulator of private (or government) certifiers which are in turn accredited (or authorized and endorsed) by the USDA to conduct certification work. The certifiers then are required to administer what is known as the USDA NOP - National Organic Program. There are 92 private and state certifiers in the USDA program.

Two Australian certifiers (ACO & NASAA) are USDA accredited, and those certifiers, like all 92 in the program, may then be active any where in the world in the certification service game.

The USDA caused a ruckus last decade when it announced a draft organic standard would be released for comment. Included in this draft were such things as possible use of sewerage sludge in organic systems, the use of irradiation, and possible use of GMOs in organic production. Suffice to say this caused such a reaction in the organic and consuming and farming community that there were ulti-

mately over quarter of a million submissions and responses to that draft that led to a rewrite - one of the largest reactions ever to a public consultation process.

Eventually from this came the USDA NOP which is now in place and it looks mightily similar (surprise surprise) to the organic standards around the world that both IFOAM as well as government regulatory systems administer.

The reason for this similarity of course is that organic is an internationally recognised concept now. The differences lie in the minutiae and may be such things like different allowances for non organic feed in livestock feeds (the Americans require 100% organic whereas some systems allow less than that), certain inputs allowed by some and not by others etc.

The critical difference is, like with the IFOAM system we explored in Spring edition, the way in which the USDA accredited certifiers are required to conduct their business of certification. The Americans have a laudable and no nonsense approach to this which it could be argued has assisted in raising the bar of professionalism that bit higher once again in terms of certification service provision.

One example is that the USDA has a strict requirement for no member on the Board or

the staff of that certifier being certified by that certifier in their own right - or indeed with familial or family links. This may seem draconian until you think that a certifier must be fully independent and to that extent cannot have such pressures and biases on it as to making certification decisions that might favour a Board or executive over other clients. It clearly builds extra confidence in the consumer's eyes and further helps to prevent not only perceived but also real conflicts of interest in the certification program.

There are other very smart reporting requirements as well as a transparency which makes the program all the more reliable. Again, like with the IFOAM system, there are aspects which the Australian program could take on board to its benefit.

As has been said before, without consumer trust in the integrity of the certification program, there is arguably no organic industry. The only assets "owned" by the not for profit organic regulatory industry is that of trust and integrity. Certification organizations work hard to ensure that this is maintained, and it is arguably the single main driver behind more and more consumers now seeking organic foods - what they are truly seeking (behind the "goodies" containing within the organic package) is a sense of control and trust in the foods and fibres they purchase and use.

So that is the US system. It has an organic logo, which often appears with the mark of the certifier (though the certifier's own mark may not appear greater than that ▶

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About the author

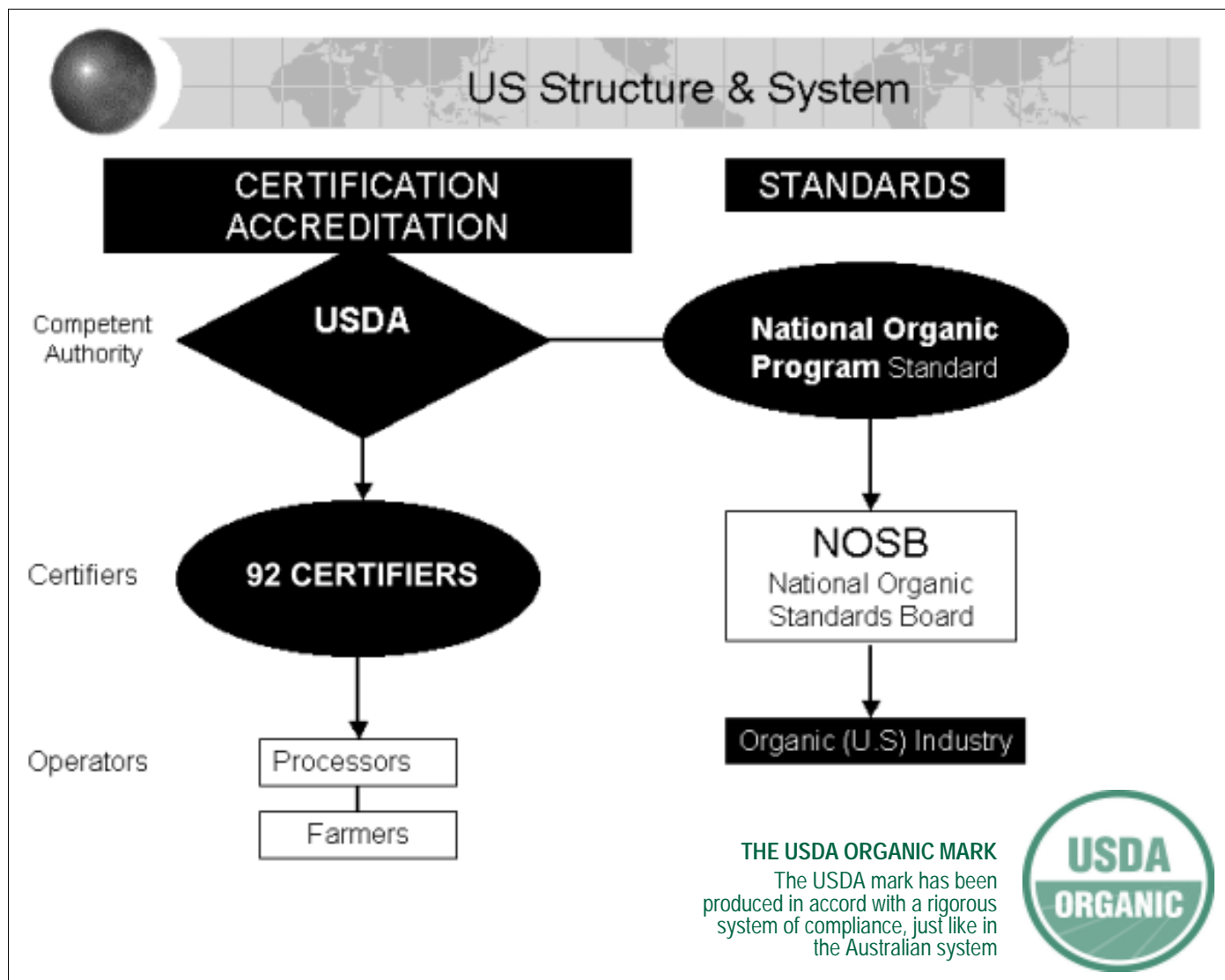
Dr Andrew Monk is CEO of the Biological Farmers of Australia.

Before becoming CEO, Andrew carried out organic audits across Australasia for 8 years, whilst being involved in horticultural production.

He currently chairs the BFA's Standards Committee which manages the Organic Standard on behalf of industry. He and his wife own a small organic processing and farm operation in QLD.

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of the USDA's mark). It is starting to pop up all over supermarket shelves in the US. Indeed the US market has such a gravity field around it that other countries are starting to look to it also as a key organic standard of the future. Such markets as South Korea, Japan, and even Australia now have evidence of this logo in the market place.

The Americans of course have created high drama on the international organic trade scene as the US system operates strictly on compliance (or exact conformance with the letter of their law) whereas the EU sys-

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tem in Europe operates on what is called "equivalence" which enables the EU to recognize the Australian system as equivalent. This is really just another manifestation of the many cross Atlantic differences and stouches that occur and are currently still being played out behind closed doors.

Fear not, the Americans will not be taking over the world. But their lead in this regulatory approach will clearly have implications for certification and standard setting around the world - and mostly in a positive way. It has also modified the approach of Australia's

main two certifiers, and this has all been for the better. There are of course always challenges of trade, when standards and requirements are different. This market has faced those issues like any other.

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For further information

Contact your certifier for more details.

Alternatively, you can look up the NOP section of the USDA website www.ams.usda.gov/nop/