

National Organics Conference

Conference Highlights

Taken from notes of MARGARET JAKOVAC

The National Organic Conference was held in Adelaide in early October 2003.

Keynote speakers

Paul Holloway, the South Australian Minister for the Department of Primary Industries and Resources talked about a new study which identifies growth opportunities for SA's organic food industry. Some of the top growth areas include dairy, ready meals, fruit juices and wines.

Robin Williams, ABC science broadcaster, then spoke saying he did not believe the organic industry and Australia in general should dismiss GMO technology 'holus bolus'. He then fired up the predominately anti-GE audience by stating "GMO crops have served as the seeds of change ... we are yet to reap the commercial rewards."

Dr Urs Niggli, Head of the Swiss-based Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, explained how the business, started 30 years ago as a private institute, has grown into an organisation which employs a some 110 staff in its head office in Switzerland, and has small offices in Frankfurt, Vienna and Berlin.

Niggli said that 10 percent of agricultural land is used for organic produce in Switzerland, and organic products are sold in under a unified brand, the BIOSUISSE 'green bud'.

He then spoke on the lack of money being put into organic farming research, saying that the European Union were funding in kind projects to the tune of \$120m, the USA less than \$120m, and Australia just \$650,000. He finished by saying "The potential for organic agriculture has not been exploited ... research has been sparsely funded."

Shane Heaton, Nutritionist and Researcher gave a fascinating talk arguing that we need to question scientific studies that compare organic with conventional produce. Shane encourages us to ask how rigorous the studies were and whether the subjects were controlled - comparing like with like?

Shane authored a book, produced by the UK Soil Association, 'Organic Farming, Food Quality and Human Health: A review of evidence', which said of the 99 studies looked at, only 29 were fair comparisons (between organic and conventional produce).

His comparative study showed amazing results, indicating that organic food in fact has higher dry matter, mineral and Vitamin C content and phytonutrients (antioxidant compounds which can be 10 percent higher in organic produce).

Shane needs \$120,000 funding to conduct a landmark Australian comparative study of vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients in organic and conventional produce. Those wishing to help change the face of Australian organics can donate to the research fund - for more information email media@bfa.com.au

Concurrent sessions:

The conference launched into the first round of concurrent sessions, of which there were three: soil management; converting to organic; and price issues - competing with 'cheap' food. I attended the latter.

Nick Andrews, an organic olive oil producer in western NSW spoke about how in the mid1970's, he and his family moved 4,000 trees from near Liverpool, south-western Sydney to western NSW to set up an olive grove. He explained the importance of 'telling your story' as an organic producer - as a key part of marketing.

Nick sells his oils for \$20 a bottle at Sydney Growers Market, but has seen it for \$36 in shops. Nick is a firm believer that "Food is cheap, but too cheap for sustainability."

He then reiterated the importance of integrity, talking about an olive oil producer charged by the ACCC because it had been found substituting its purported pure Australian oil, with 50 per cent imported oil for some three years.

Steve McCoy then spoke about the equation:

$$\text{Value} = \text{Benefits} - \text{Cost}$$

Steve urged the organic industry to educate consumers about the true and full cost of food.

Funding is needed to conduct a landmark Australian comparative study of vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients in organic and conventional produce. Those wishing to help change the face of Australian organics can donate to the research fund.

He explained that it is essential to argue your price is justifiable. Steve explained the importance of increasing the benefits of your product beyond JUST taste and health. He believes that by promoting factors such as environment and social benefits of organics, you can help increase the value of your products to customers.

Steve based his talk on a long and varied involvement in the organics industry. He has spent time working in vegetable production, running a business in wholesale and home-delivery of organic and biodynamic produce, as well as serving time on the board of an organic certifier, and of more recent times, working for the WA Department of Agriculture.

Steve Bartolo, President of the Organic Sugar Producers Association of Australia, plants once and harvests for five to 10 years from that, with eight months fallow. He has found organic sugar farming allowed his soils to hold water better, despite him having poor white soils. Despite the fact that sorghum, soy and barley are not supposed to grow in Mackay, Steve produces all three crops.

Whilst Steve produces 25 tonnes/ha less sugar than conventional growers, he has a higher sugar content, for which he is paid. He says that there is a greater use for sugar cane, explaining the biomass should be used for paper, ethanol, and biodegradable plastic.

Brenda Fawdon gave an interesting talk about the industry from the other end of ►

10 percent of total agricultural land is used for organic produce in Switzerland

Organic products are sold in under a unified brand, the 'green bud'



About the author

Margaret Jakovac is a freelance journalist specialising in organics, based in the Blue Mountains, NSW. Margaret has written professionally for 14 years, including being on the staff of the well-known entity, Fairfax Community Newspapers. Her by-line has appeared in more than 40 publications. Of more recent times, Margaret's interests have seen her branch into writing for publications read by many organic clients, namely, the Organic Gardener, Small Farms magazine and now the *Organic Journal*. We thank Margaret for providing extensive conference notes.

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the supply chain. Brenda is the Managing Director of Mondo Organics, Australia's first organic restaurant. Also an educator and caterer, Brenda runs a cooking school and has been in hospitality for 22 years.

One of the many interesting topics Brenda talked about was the cost of running an organic restaurant. She explained that she currently working on reducing the cost of food to the business from a massive 31 percent to 25 percent by the end of this year. This aim, which she says amazes other restaurateurs, will be achieved by tried and tested techniques such as buying in bulk, together with "outside of the square" cost cutting measures such as approaching growers directly to buy their organic seconds, for example apples that they would otherwise plough in.

Andre Leu, President of Organic Producers Association of Queensland then took the stand, disputing the myth that organic farming would lead to world starvation. Andre has re-written his talk into an opinion piece which starts on page 27 of this Journal.

Bernward Geier, the Director of International Relations, IFOAM spoke about IFOAM policy and the IFOAM mission, which was approved in March this year. He explained the GAP program, a scheme developed by the private retail sector (mainly European supermarkets), and means that there are strict standards for suppliers to fulfill before they can sell their produce in those supermarkets. Even conventional producers are finding the GAP standards hard to meet.

Bernward hopes that the fair trade and organic sectors can work together, and made it clear that on the other end of the spectrum, GMO's and organics were in absolute conflict, saying "organics is holistic, whereas gene technology is extremely reductionist."

There was an impressive attendance at some of the concurrent sessions.

Amongst the themes at these lectures: uniquely Australian systems, the relevance of organic certification for supply chains and consumers, pest control, weed management and animal health. Other sessions discussed water management, biodiversity, and organic certification as an instrument for industry development.

Other concurrent sessions included managing difficult soils; issues of conversion and finding new markets.

Final Plenary

Dr Helen Scott-Orr, Executive Director of Research Advisory and Education for NSW Agriculture took on the subject: research for the future. Previous proponents of the failed CRC organic bid, have reformed the Australian Organic Development Group to put the next bid forward.

The new bid should be developed by May 2004 and, if successful, implemented during 2005. A successful CRC would run for seven years and should eventually be self-funding, although it would be able to apply for a second lot of funding.

Programs included in the bid:

1. Enhancing soil biological processes;
2. Integrated management systems;
3. Commercial outcomes;
4. Capacity building.

The bid needs investors and partners, and interested parties were encouraged to donate.

Sharon Oldfield operates an organic beef property in the Channel Country known as Cowarie Station. She looks after one million acres across three desserts, on which she runs 3-4,000 head of cattle on an annual rainfall of just five to six inches.

Sharon is part of the OBE group which comprises 32 family enterprises covering more than seven million hectares from Queensland to South Australia. Certified in 1998, they export beef to Japan, and are working on developing exports to Europe and the USA.

The groups stocking densities can be as low as one-head per square mile. Her stock feed on 250 vegetation species, which she describes as an "enormous natural salad bowl."

Only one or two families in the group were NOT affected by the drought, so the group made a decision to keep exporting despite lower quality beef. They lost 15% of their market, but hope to regain it this year.

Sharon believes the fact there are no internationally accepted organic standards is an "enormous hindrance" to international trade. ■



TOP LEFT

The concurrent sessions discussed a variety of relevant topics and were very well attended



BOTTOM LEFT

Bernward Geier, the Director of International Relations IFOAM and Conference Coordinator, Cat Mills



TOP RIGHT

Nutritionist and Researcher, Shane Heaton, and Dr Urs Niggli, Head of the Swiss-based Research Institute of Organic Agriculture



BOTTOM RIGHT

(L-R) Sid Cowling, Jenny Patterson, Jan Denham, Cat Mills and Prof. Peter Cornish