

Regional news

Visitor reflects on Australian GM

A top policy adviser to the US Government for 20 years, Charles 'Chuck' Benbrook toured Australia late last year. Dr Benbrook's aim was to provide an analysis of official US data, which reveals major problems in growing, handling and marketing GE crops. The following is an extract of his account of GM technology use in Australia.

For years, Brazil was the global pressure point for pro-biotech promoters and anti-GE activists. Australia is poised to take over this dubious distinction.

As a major agricultural producer and exporter, Australia will gain increasing leverage in the marketplace as long as no GE food crops are commercially approved.

This leverage will become more and more obvious and economically significant. Given that Australian farmers are at the mercy of market forces and prices, and lack the considerable government support of farmers in the US, the EU, and Japan, it is hard to imagine farmers walking away from this advantage without a really good reason and some kind of assurance that they will not suffer as a consequence.

The pro-GE community will continue to use its political connections and economic clout to chip away at the state-level moratoria and divide the Australian farming community. They are likely to make little progress until a technology is ready for commercial adoption that:

- will deliver real and significant benefits to either consumers or farmers, or both;
- has passed open, rigorous safety testing and is widely regarded as safe; and,
- leaves some money on the table for farmers.

No such technologies could conceivably emerge for at least



Chuck Benbrook

a few years, so Australia has some time to sort out how it wants to proceed down the GE-food road.

The emergence of the Australian National University GE-field pea study just before the trip was fortuitous, since it made it possible to raise lingering issues about the safety of GE-foods. The future of scientific inquiry, and public concern, over GE-food safety is hard to predict, but clearly volatile. The GE food industry around the world is highly vulnerable and will suffer enormous costs if there are even a few studies published each year like the ANU study.

Two studies have come out in the last few months raising important concerns, with at least two more likely to appear by spring 2006. Still, the pro-GE community continues to argue that there are no reasons for any concern. If and as new reasons for concern emerge in peer-reviewed scientific journals, even for a modest level of concern, the marketplace reaction will be strong. In addition, those choosing a more cautious approach will be incrementally more sceptical as they hear further assurances from those still convinced that GE-foods are fully tested and safe.

Australia is a land of contrasts. One that I found perplexing is how to square the fundamental kindness and civility of Australians with the savage side of your politics and public discourse. Tom Delay would fit right into Australian politics. Clearly, two weeks is not enough time to gain an appreciation of even a shire, let alone such a large and diverse country, but it was sure fun trying.

Source: <www.geneethics.org>

Organic industry gets federal funding for drought workshops

Local communities will continue to tackle the drought across the country with a helping hand from the Australian Government's Envirofund.

A total of 1145 projects will be funded with \$20 million from the 2005 Drought Recovery Envirofund.

Senator Ian Campbell said the level of interest in 2005 Drought Recovery round prompted a doubling of the Envirofund from \$10 million to \$20 million.

"Unprecedented demand for this special Drought Round from 'Exceptional Circumstances' declared

areas across the country has resulted in a doubling of the funding available," Senator Campbell said.

"Projects will include regenerating native plants and grasses along eroded watercourses, controlling noxious weeds and feral pests, erecting temporary feedlots to spell paddocks and reduce erosion and desilting dams."

Senator Ian Macdonald said that one national project was a grant of \$10,227 to Biological Farmers of Australia Co-op to run 10 practical workshops on organic farm management for farmers and catchment

managers throughout drought affected Australia.

New South Wales, which has been hit particularly hard by the drought, had 689 projects funded for a total of \$9,900,839.

Queensland has 325 projects totalling \$6,981,448; Victoria, 76 projects totalling \$1,544,999; Western Australia, 33 projects totalling \$1,153,747.

South Australia, 19 projects totalling \$420,496 and the ACT has two projects totalling \$22,127.

Source: <www.farmonline.com.au>

Notice to organic livestock producers

As a young growing industry it is important that we share information with fellow producers in order to grow the 'pie' for all concerned. This is a key role of the BFA Livestock Committee, acting as a 'portal' for organic livestock production information, relating to production, certification or marketing issues.

This sharing of information is particularly important at the production level as without consistent supply lines, processors will not be encouraged to enter the organic industry.

In past years, the Livestock Committee has provided information on marketing opportunities, held field days and conducted production-based research. We will be renewing this service to the industry as a whole and invite those interested in being on an email circulation list to subscribe to <live-stock-broadacre@bfa.com.au>.

With enough interest it may be possible for BFA to facilitate the development of co-operatives between growers. As a group, producers could more easily provide consistent supply and combine marketing forces.

If you have any livestock for market, ideas to share or production tips please forward them to <livestock-broadacre@bfa.com.au>.

– Quentin Kennedy
Livestock Committee Chairman



Working the yards at Jervois station, Mt Garnet, Queensland

WA MINISTER APPOINTS ORGANIC REPRESENTATIVE TO GM REFERENCE GROUP

BFA wishes to congratulate Western Australian Minister Kim Chance on his announcement of the formation of an advisory committee on genetically modified crops.

The GM Reference Group consists of representatives from various industries and stakeholders. It will report to the government with expert advice on the use of GM technology in WA's agricultural crops.

BFA GM spokesperson Scott Kinnear says he is pleased that BFA's nomination, Steven David, who has extensive experience in the organic industry in WA as a consultant, has been appointed to represent the industry's interests.

"This is the first time that an organic representative has been selected on such a government advisory panel in Australia," he says.

"We commend the minister on recognising the importance of the views of the organic industry on issues relating to GM crops."

GOVERNMENT GRANTS FUNDING FOR HEALTHY SOILS FOR SUSTAINABLE FARMS WORKSHOPS

Land and Water Australia has approved 24 workshops to be carried out across south-east Queensland educating landholders on soil health.

Subject to final contract negotiations, BFA has been awarded a grant to carry out the workshops in partnership with regional national resource management (NRM) experts, covering three NRM regions, stretching from Gladstone to the NSW border and as far west as Toowoomba.

BFA project manager Greg Paynter says the project is expected to have far-reaching benefits for broader communities by influencing the way farmers and landholders manage their soils. "Improvements in soil organic matter levels and biological activity will provide more stable, productive and resilient soils contributing less sediment and nutrients to waterways, enhancing farm biodiversity and leading to long-term economic viability in our farming communities," he says.

Paynter says the project, to commence early this year, will be beneficial to all sectors of land resource managers to reduce energy use, enhance buffering capacity against changes in pH and increase productivity in periods of climatic extremes, both wet and dry.

CALL FOR SUB-COMMITTEE MEMBERS: CONSUMER, HORTICULTURE, POULTRY AND BIODYNAMICS

BFA is continually working to ensure the organic market grows in a sustainable manner and a key component of this is working with experts in the organic sector. BFA is seeking expressions of interest for the consumer group (retailers, marketing/media consultants and others), from the organic horticulture industry (fruit and vegetables), the organic poultry industry (layers and meat birds) and the biodynamic agriculture industry for contributing to these subcommittee groups. Interested applicants must be able to meet in Brisbane twice a year and have access to email. Email <media@bfa.com.au> for more information.

CUSTOM COMPOSTS WINS WA ENVIRONMENT AWARDS 2005

The Western Australian Minister for the Environment, Judy Edwards, announced the winners of the state environmental awards at a gala dinner in Perth late last year. The overall winner was Custom Composts, which also won the category of Small Business – Leading by Example.

In 1998 Andy Gulliver and David Cullen, joint directors of Custom Composts, took on the challenge to improve environmental management on an intensive piggery near Mandurah, south of Perth. They saw the opportunity to achieve a 'triple environmental benefit' and set themselves a challenge to achieve three objectives simultaneously:

- to eliminate the piggery as a potential source of pollution for the Serpentine River;

- to develop a significant recycling business, manufacturing recycled organic products; and,
- to create new environmentally friendly products to support improved farming practices

When asked to describe why Custom Composts had been successful Andy Gulliver said: "We are positive and proactive and have a genuine desire to get the best possible results. We are not afraid to challenge the status quo."

A passion for the environment, commitment and a will to succeed helped surmount seemingly impossible challenges over the past five years.

In that time, an ambitious plan has significantly reduced potential pollution at the same time as developing a business producing high quality recycled products that help protect our environment.

Contact: Custom Composts: phone (08) 9581 9582; email <info@customcomposts.com.au>.

NEW GROUP FORMED TO PROMOTE BIOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE

BFA has formed a new sub committee to promote the principles, benefits and good practices of biological agriculture.

Biological agriculture is identified as farming practices that seek to improve soil health by minimizing chemical input and pursuing best practice while still maintaining yields and product quality.

BFA chief executive Paul Dargusch said that the Bionutrients sub-committee sought to promote the advantages of biological agriculture and educate people about best practice.

"We often hear about the state of the environment and the various initiatives that are launched to reduce degradation. Through the Allowed Inputters – companies whose products are approved for use in organic farming – we have a wealth of knowledge about biological agriculture and the benefits it provides," he said.

"The biological agriculture industry is growing and it is time there is a representative group that can clear up some of the myths surrounding this industry and communicate sound, well researched information to farmers, government and peak bodies."

The broad objectives of the Bionutrients sub-committee are to promote the principles, demonstrate the benefits and educate about the good practices of biological agriculture.

Through this, the sub-committee aims to strengthen and unite the biological sector and partner with other organizations that are focused on sustainability in agriculture.

"BFA is committed to providing this group with the support and resources it requires to take a lead role in the area of biological agriculture," Paul said.

"The role of the sub-committee will be to provide accurate information for growers and demonstrate to the broader industry that sustainability goals are achievable." ■

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