

The cost of success...

By Jan Nary

AUSTRALIAN CONSUMERS ARE beating a path to the door of organic product retailers, often to be met, like Mother Hubbard, with a cupboard that's bare. Marketplace demands for organic cotton, wool and grain products are outstripping their local supply and research indicates that the demand will increase.

The organic grain shortage comes as no surprise to Steven McCoy, development officer with the Western Australian Department of Agriculture and Food; in 2002 he predicted a consumer-driven push for more organic foods and a greater uptake by producers and retailers.

"There is an increased consumer demand for healthy and responsible food production," Steve says. "Organic certification – with its rigorous standards, regulatory controls, regular checks and tracking systems covers all the issues - and consumers trust it.

"Recently I've received a lot of requests for organic wheat from domestic and overseas businesses but the industry couldn't supply the significant amounts needed so sales opportunities were lost."

Steve says that it is difficult to establish and develop markets with only a small pool of organic grain producers.

"We need more broadacre growers who will look beyond seasonal fluctuations and drought, and



ABOVE Australian organic wheat producer Bruce Uebergang, Miles, Central West Queensland.

seek to establish long-term relationships with buyers who will commit for buying a specified tonnage for several years.

"Some agribusinesses in WA are now aware of organic market opportunities and are putting small areas into organic production to test its technological feasibility and profit potential."

The last bale of Australian-grown organic cotton could become a collector's item. The increasing consumer demand for organic cotton products has depleted local supplies and manufacturers are being forced into offshore sources.

Peter Byl is the founder and manager of Organature, which manufactures, distributes and retails Certified Organic Cotton bed linen.

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Commodity markets

While his preference is for Australian-produced cotton, Peter has found it necessary to source his fabrics from Indonesia, where the mills use certified organic cotton from India, Africa and Turkey.

“This year, we are on the very last of our batch of Australian-produced organic cotton from a crop harvested three years ago,” he says.

“Without assistance, there are problems faced initially by Australian cotton producers competing on the open world market against products from less developed markets. In comparison, the cost of Australian organic cotton is high – but can still be made viable.”

That last organic cotton bale came from Alexander Fawcett’s Narrabri Edgeroi Organics. Alexander says that production of the 81-hectare (200 acre) trial had its challenges but the main restriction was the processing cost incurred in getting the cotton off farm and into a final piece of fabric.

“Because no-one in Australia is able to spin the fine yarn required or weave the bedsheeting fabric Organature has to go outside Australia,” says Peter. “To minimise the carbon footprint we send a container load of Alex’s organic cotton to

Indonesia to be spun into yarn and woven into fabric.”

Wool is another organic fabric where demand is exceeding supply, a trend likely to increase with interest being shown by large overseas retailers. At 300 clean tonnes, Australia’s annual certified organic wool production is only 0.1% of the national wool production total.

Don McDonald, managing director of Lanoc Wool, one of Australia’s major independent woolbrokers, says a growing number of consumers understand what organic means.

“There are a lot of people interested in organic wool; the biggest thing that will hold it back will be supply,” he says.

“A few more growers are investigating going down the organic path – but they are very much in the minority. Lanoc has a client base of some 900 wool growers and only four of them have commenced the process of organic certification.”

Don sees growing organic wool as a great opportunity for those that can do it – if they have the passion.

“You need a strong commitment to be successful in organic – the decision will mean a complete re-adjustment of your management system.”

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