



» By Dr Andrew Monk

AQIS changes

– the issues and how they may affect you

IF YOU ARE an exporter of organic produce, even indirectly by selling vegetables to someone who consolidates your order, then you will be impacted by what is to occur on 1st July this year under the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) accreditation program that Australian Certified Organic (ACO) and other organic certifiers are accredited to. Even if you are a consumer or a domestic retailer of organic produce you may find it worthwhile following the issues and debates surrounding this in the coming months, as such issues impact on us all.

Why might the domestic market be relevant to AQIS, which manages matters only relating to export? Because as with everything organic, all things are interrelated. Regulations, standards and certification need to be integrated to ensure the most effective outcome for industry – and in turn for our ultimate stakeholder, the consumer.

BFA is non-partisan in its approach to lobbying governments in relation to organic matters. Via lobbying and providing professional information and advice, we have ensured the term “organic” was for the first time noted in Labor party policy in the lead-up to the last election; a first for a major party in Australia. We are working to ensure this is in both major parties’ platforms in the coming election cycle. This was an important step in ensuring our governments become more aware of, and are able to effectively support our industry moving forward.

Having noted this, the following changes are planned from 1st July, with no “ifs or buts” being indulged by the Federal Government. The AQIS export program for organic products (along with other commodity export programs) will be stripped of the 40% co-contribution which has been a Government subsidy of sorts. Adding in expected rises in costs for management, it will mean that the AQIS accreditation program costs will rise for industry by over 50% from 1st July. AQIS

has proposed that these costs will be directly charged in the main to commercial exporters.

The BFA/ ACO Group has not voted in favour of the change. The new ruling will ultimately hamper export growth, at an important and critical juncture in our country’s economic cycle. This has flow-on effects for many – including farmers and consumers – as the export market for Australia will help build critical mass of supply for our industry, in turn building capacity to supply more product domestically and to grow the demand for organic produce – something many farmers continue to note is of concern for them.

AQIS is not allowing exemptions for those export goods destined for countries such as US, Canada, Japan which do not come under AQIS jurisdiction. Industry regulation to these countries is operating efficiently without AQIS’ supervision as these countries have their own criteria and accredit certifiers such as ACO directly for verifying compliance of goods.

The ultimate issue is that while on the surface a user-pays system all looks rational, unless there is a fundamental change in the Export Orders for organic produce, it will lead to bureaucratic and regulatory double-ups and greater, not less, costs which ultimately affect all of industry.

BFA will be working with AQIS and the Government to ensure that this blanket approach does not occur. Nothing short of a revision of the Act is needed to ensure that commercial exporters to those markets are not penalized.

The Act needs to change to be malleable enough to deliver “best of both worlds” to industry – for those who don’t export as well as those who do. As it stands right now, and if there are no changes to the Act from 1st July, the Act will be delivering inefficient bureaucracy at a time when the mantra is claiming that bureaucracy must achieve efficiencies. It will achieve “worst of all worlds”.

BFA is all for “user pays”. It is not



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for seeing doubling up of bureaucracy, doubling or tripling of regulations and requirements, and the hampering of the organic growth of our industry. Unless there is a change to the Organic Export Orders under the Act to reflect this, then the Government will have actively and knowingly created the negative outcomes listed above – not just by neglect, but by the active changes that are being put in force from 1st July.

Please look out for a future petition in relation to this, as this action may be required to obtain the Minister’s, if not also the Prime Minister’s attention to the issue.

It will be in our involvement and organising together as the great and proud institution that we are, that will achieve the Objects that the BFA was founded upon, and continue to ensure that setting standards, as well as regulation of the organic marketplace, remains firmly in the hands of the industry and movement that it is there to serve. Our ongoing vigilance and involvement is the only way to achieve this.

Dr Andrew Monk is BFA’s Standards Committee Convenor and BFA Board Director.



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A banana grower's perspective

Gary Grima and his brother have 80 acres under organic banana production in Queensland. A long-term farmer, Gary remembers the devastation of the banana industry caused by Cyclone Larry but says that the proposed Philippine imports are a greater threat to organic growers. “On the dollar side of the issue, the Philippines can bring in bananas cheaper than I can grow them,” he says. “Organic bananas cost a few more dollars per carton than conventional ones so if the market's flooded with cheap bananas that'll bring down the base price and make organic produce look even more expensive – people just won't buy them.”

Gary's main concern, though, is food security.

“Checking 600 cartons from a massive shipload coming into the country leaves a hefty margin for error. There's already been one outbreak of Black Sigatoka in Australia; they threw everything at it and Australia's the only country that's ever beaten it. I'd just started organic farming and had to put it on hold until the outbreak was eradicated because of the hard chemicals used. If it ever gets into organic farms all we can use is mineral oil – and that won't stop Black Sigatoka. If Moko or Freckle or exotic insects get in nothing will stop them.”

Gary says that the ABGC checked recent Philippine banana imports into New Zealand, which has strict quarantine regulations, and discovered Black Sigatoka and alarming levels of insect incursions.

“We help feed this country and we're only asking our government to protect a \$350 million Australian industry – there are more bananas than bread and milk sold in supermarkets. The supply chain in this industry is enormous and employs thousands of workers – and they could wipe us all out with one stroke of the pen.”

BENDING OUR OWN BANANAS

A BIOSECURITY AUSTRALIA (BA) decision in early March recommending that Cavendish bananas from the Philippines be allowed to enter Australia drew a quick and concerned reaction from the Australian Banana Growers' Council (ABGC) and Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA).

Australian producers' certified organic status could be placed in jeopardy by the imports, should they introduce exotic diseases resistant to organic or biologically orientated methods, says Dr. Andrew Monk, BFA Organic Standards Committee Convenor.

The concern has mobilised many stakeholders. Banana industry farmers, workers and local business people held a demonstration in Cairns; the IGA chain of 1,270 supermarkets will lobby AQIS to refuse the import recommendation and will not stock Philippine bananas while local supplies are available; a legal challenge has been initiated by the ABGC and a Senate Inquiry has examined the specific

concerns of organic banana producers and the reasoning behind Biosecurity Australia's recommendation.

Despite claims from the Philippines that diseases such as Moko, Black Sigatoka and Freckle could be eradicated with proper phytosanitary procedures, Dr Monk says “the import recommendation jeopardises Australia's growing reputation as a provider of ‘clean and green’ foods – a claim which many organic and other farmers build upon.”

BFA is calling for reform of the current assessment methods used for scientific and market risk review to a format that embraces developing specific markets such as organic. Several government departments are relevant to such reviews, including the Department of Agriculture Fisheries & Forestry (DAFF); the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS); and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

(The Philippines produces 7.5 million metric tons of bananas annually, 120 million boxes of which are exported to Japan, USA, South Korea and the Middle East.)