

Organic systems provide fertile ground for environmental food-lovers

The benefits of organic food production are highlighted on World Desertification day (Tuesday the 17th June).

BFA Soil Scientist Owen Gwilliam says problems associated with desertification, over-cultivation and soil degradation are less likely to grow under organic systems, and give eco-aware shoppers several new reasons to give organic more ticks on their sustainable lists.

“Under organic management exhausted soils are replenished into a fertile ‘living soil’ through the accumulation of organic matter and increases in soil biology which may previously have been depleted by conventional farming methods. Erosion is countered through natural land protection techniques including planting (tree based) shelter belts, and maintaining land vegetative cover”, he says.

Soil erosion is a major threat to sustained agriculture capacity. Nearly one-third of the world’s arable land has been lost to erosion at a continuing rate of more than 10 million hectares per year (1).

Several certified organic and bio-dynamic farmers in Australia have taken internationally acclaimed steps in decreasing the damaging effects of erosion and other land degradation outcomes, primarily through effective management of water reserves.

Ron Watkins certified organic grower from *Payneham Vale* in Western Australia has been recognised twice by the United Nations for his role in best practise environmental management.

He says that water management in Australia is connected to everything from soil salinity levels to washed away topsoil. “Land degradation is not just one issue – it’s part of an interrelated, interdependent environmental system with water management at its core”.

Mr. Watkins says most effective use of water occurs where it falls. Under an organic system he has focused on enhancing natural water drainage and storage systems, using wildlife corridors and tree belts for land shelter.

Surface water control and subsequent land condition has improved.

“We rarely have run-off events now, where we initially saw 10% of rain drained away taking top soil with it, further along the creek. We’ve also cut down water logging to 3% of prior levels, and have land suitable for high-diversity production. We grow everything from cattle to vegetables and olives”.

Tony Coote, certified organic and bio-dynamic farmer from *Mulloon Creek Natural Farms* in NSW agrees land re-hydration is dominant in the Australian desertification issue.

His property is pioneering the first national Landcare demonstration of Peter Andrews’ *Natural Sequence Farming* techniques. Centred on better management of



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ABN 75 699 664 781

HEAD OFFICE · BRISBANE

PO Box 530 766 Gympie Rd
CHERMSIDE QLD 4032
Ph: +61 (0)7 3350 5716
Fax: +61 (0)7 3350 5996

info@bfa.com.au

SOUTHERN DIVISION OFFICE

PO Box 503
NURIOOTPA SA 5355
Ph: + 61 (0)8 8562 2769
Fax: +61 (0)8 8562 3034

info@bfa.com.au

www.bfa.com.au



water flows and riverbank reserves, the work is being monitored by an independent international hydrology reference panel.

“Australia has been farmed for the past century using European drainage systems that are un-suited to the Australian ecosystem. Using natural sequence farming (which adheres to organic principles) we have collected a chain of ponds of stored and flowing water which resembles the original natural flow of water in an Australian landscape”.

He says the methods have seen the farm retain water reserves in the middle of severe drought.

ENDS

For more information on how organic addresses desertification or to obtain contact details of organic growers, email BFA at marketing@bfa.com.au ph (07) 3350 5716 ext. 222.

* Data (1) Pimentel, D (1995) Environmental and economic costs of soil erosion and conservation benefits. Published in *Science* Vol. 267 pp. 1117 – 1123. Access online at <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/267/5201/1117>

The BFA has a vision for organic industry growth and education in Australia. Watch out for the Organic Industry Market Research Report due for release mid 2008 to see how the industry is achieving its goals! More information is available at http://www.bfa.com.au/index.asp?Sec_ID=260



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Fax: + 61 (0)8 8562 3034

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