

Organic farming's advantages

AS PART OF my work with *Australian Farm Journal* I have the privilege to visit farmers who have made the switch to organic and other regenerative management systems. What they have in common is the use of practices that contribute to environmental improvement, family wellbeing, animal welfare and resilience in the face of climate change. However, irrespective of the regenerative system adopted, most of the farmers are missing an opportunity to demonstrate the wide range of ecosystem services they are making available to the community.

Amongst all the advantages of organic farming and food production, what are the environmental repercussions of adopting the management required for certification? For instance: What is the farm's greenhouse gas balance? How are soil organic carbon levels changing? What is happening to farm rainfall runoff and water quality? What levels of production are being achieved, such as grain yield per millimetre of rainfall or paddock carrying capacity per 100 mm of rainfall? Ecosystem services data is likely to become an increasingly important part of the story behind branded foods and fibres. The productivity data is important to know when finetuning crop and pasture management in the new era of climate change.

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More focus on distribution needed

ON BEHALF OF my co-authors and myself, I would like to thank you for your review of our recent book *Going organic: mobilising networks for environmentally responsible food production*. Researching this book highlighted a lot of things we didn't necessarily expect to find when we started, including the major role that poorly developed distribution channels have played in limiting the growth of the organic sector in Australia. Of course, there are exceptions to this generalisation. But the fact that over a third of the certified organic food grown in Australia is sold on the conventional market suggests plenty of room for improvement. Greater supply chain efficiency will not only see less diversion of organic produce to the conventional market, it will stimulate demand by reducing costs and increasing the reliability of supply. When it comes to shopping, most of us are creatures of habit; if a product isn't in front of us every week we stop looking for it! The questions are: how to increase the efficiency of organic supply chains without shutting out small producers and retailers? How to capitalise on processing and export opportunities without denying consumers access to local seasonal produce? How to maintain farm incomes

while making organic foods more accessible to all Australian consumers? Part of the answer, I believe, lies in diversity: getting certified organic foods into the supply chains of mainstream retail outlets and continuing to develop those alternative chains that supply specialised organic retailers, farmers' markets, consumer cooperatives and so on. Many people are understandably concerned that increasing economies of scale in the organic supply chain might undermine the values on which organics was built. Our research, however, suggested that different types of distribution channels cater to different needs and may support each other's growth at a sectoral level by boosting aggregate demand, educating consumers, stimulating interest in alternatives and so on. The key is to maintain robust standards. From the small farmer to the multinational retailer, no one will benefit from a perception among consumers that the organic label lacks integrity.

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