

It's your say:

Upholding our Standard

By Dr ANDREW MONK

THE ORGANIC movement has defining moments in its history where the movement and its associated industry stand up to the powers that be and fight their cause – resoundingly and successfully.

We are at such a juncture. While many are allies to this cause, there are also detractors, willing or otherwise.

There is the lure of being captured by government or quasi-government interests and the industrial food system, while there is the ever-present challenge of balancing this with practical means for organic farmers to continue to farm sustainably, and for consumers to have access to a growing and bountiful range of nutritious organic foods produced, certified and labelled just the way the organic movement always intended.

At the heart of this moment in history is the Organic Standard. Your involvement in it, and support for the processes and people who protect and uphold this Standard, is vital for us all to continue to be able to promote and protect the organic integrity which is at the heart of the ideals as well as crudely at the heart of the commercial success of the organic industry.

It is not either/or — practical or ideal, both must be in balance and harmony for us all to succeed.

Definition of 'Standard': The root of this word is 'banner', which was displayed in times of war in Medieval times. A Standard is a common set of principles or ideals, around which a group of humans rally or support.

The idea of a perfectly functioning organic standard is a bit like democracy. You should not notice it all that often, certainly when it functions well. It should fit your needs like a glove but also be constraining enough to allow others their freedom and to protect their interests.

It also, however, should brush up against established or assumed interests from time to time. It might not always be easy or simple to implement, and it certainly does not please everyone all the time.

It does require regular work. It does not exist in a vacuum, and certainly does not function very well for long if you hand it over to government. It requires us all to be involved, to be engaged and to ask questions. The success of the organic industry has been that it has an open, evolving, reactive and learning standard.

Unlike any other known industry standard, the organic standard is predicated on not just quality or environmental processes or outcomes but on a wide array of factors and interests – balancing the practicalities and hard realities of farming in this diverse land of Australia with the evolving technologies in the modern industrial food system (take nanotechnology as the latest) and overseas trends.

This will remain a challenge requiring ongoing vigilance by our movement, and regular dialogue and reaction as the industrial food system evolves.

It is about balancing and achieving as top priority sustainable farming systems with as practically as possible a light footprint on the environment, animal welfare, a focus on nutrition, preventive health and a holistic approach both to



“Most of my daylight hours are spent farming organically. While I don’t have a lot of time to be concerned about standards, at least I know my interests are being looked after as a member of the Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA).

“Organic standards must remain rigorous but practical for farmers to keep meeting the demand of organic consumers, like our family has been working to do for almost two decades now.”

– Troy Huggins

Why another version of Standard?

THE ORGANIC movement has been rallying around an evolving set of principles and stipulations outlined in organic standards since the 1970s, with roots going well back before then. Many people are often confused about why there are so many standards in the world.

This boils down to the inherent nature of the organic movement as well as the history of the industry. The good news is that the organic standards across the world are converging while they expand into more countries.

What is not converging are the regulatory arrangements that relate to the organic standards. Hence, the United States and Japan will have their own government-prescribed requirements whereby the certification agency that you

might be certified by must be directly assessed and recognised by them for you to get access to those regulated markets.

This is why we will continue to see a myriad of certification logos from overseas markets, even while in Australia the Bud now is appearing on most organically produced domestic products.

The BFA releases, on average, every second year a new, updated version of the Australian Organic Standard (AOS) – which most produce in Australia is regulated by. This standard is available on the web and is open for public comment. This standard is overseen by the standards subcommittee made up of a broad mix of technically skilled people while taking feedback from the other 12 BFA subcommittees, the BFA Board and directly from industry members and the public.

The BFA, which is owned by its members, owns the Australian Organic Standard, ensuring the Standard remains in industry members' hands – enabling them to debate, modify and uphold their Standard.

This latest round of industry input is about continuing that tradition – now decades-old and with many decades ahead of it.

livestock and general land management.

It irks some (mostly outside the industry) that organics remains staunchly anti-GMO (genetically modified organisms). For most consumers, of course, there is no hesitation in expecting and demanding non-GMO organic foods as a given.

Indeed, along with a ban on synthetic agrichemical use, intensive factory farming and an extreme restriction on use of non-natural ingredients in processed organic foods, these stands have been the pillars upon which the organic walls and roof have been constructed and remain resilient in the face of winds of change and pressures and interests to allow otherwise.

There are some, not without reason or right, who point out that organics condones the use of plastics and packaging generally, that large distances are still travelled in moving food to markets here and overseas, and even that organics has no restriction on the use of tractors and other fossil-fuel consuming systems.

The ideals of organics have been predicated on local, sustainable production and, indeed, the ideal aim after growing it all yourself is clearly trading within your eco-region. For the rest, the Australian Organic Standard (AOS) 2006 and its related (and mandatory) certification are there to guide and oversee the best of all possible worlds in what is a challenging world of trade and industrial development.

The AOS, overseen on behalf of the BFA Board by the Standards Sub-Committee, is now in its third decade of evolution. It has guided a growing number of farmers, processors, marketers and indeed consumers in their choices and practices. It is now standing behind the Bud logo, which is on most Australian organic produce, the guideposts for our movement and industry.

The other critical point is that we as Australian organic producers, marketers and consumers need to remain active to ensure our Australian story and context remain at the fore-

front of the evolution of our standard. This cuts both ways.

For instance, there remains incredible pressure to water down our standards to recognise adventitious contamination with GMOs – like now occurs in the United States and Canada. Pressure from Government and, surprisingly, some sources within the industry have continued to push for this.

To fold to this would be a classic folly we Australians regularly commit – not standing up for our own interests and protecting what we have that is unique and worth promoting.

On the flip side to this, there are allowances in the leading international standards (US, European Union, IFOAM and Japan) that make it more practical (and, in fact, in some cases realistically possible and sustained) for organic farmers to earn their living, where we in Australia, under the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) program, prevent this.

This is particularly so for livestock. The epitome of this is where an American farmer may import products that our farmers here are being prevented from producing, either sustainably or competitively.

Take, for instance, what the UK Soil Association is now debating: the concept of prohibiting air-freighted organic foods. Full stop. The Swiss implemented this years ago and,



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indeed, went further, disallowing their equivalent of the Bud logo on wine not within the broader 'bio-region', with the argument the region had sufficient.

Perhaps less spectacularly, but nonetheless with considerable outcomes, are the allowances by the Europeans for a considerable amount of livestock feeds coming from natural, but non-organic, sources. This has been argued as a practicality in relation to balancing livestock nutrition and thus welfare, with sustainable land practices.

This is something Australia should take note of in promoting the interests of some livestock sectors, which it has not to date done enough of. It is important to note here that the BFA policy line on the Standard is at all times to uphold the Standard, to keep it rigorous and beyond reproach while ensuring it remains practical and, above all, Australian.

From time to time, there are calls for us to have "one standard for the whole world", an honourable aim. Practicalities dictate this is regrettably never likely to happen (a bit like assuming trade barriers will end).

We will remain with a range of labels for imported products produced to other standards (albeit with a common organic backbone) until and/or if we ever achieve Australian legislation for organics – something BFA will continue to lobby for.

Hence no one standard will ever fit all. Australian Organic Standard is so popular and covers most organic product because it strikes a balance between ensuring it is Australian while being relatively seamless for those who wish to export to comply to the additional requirements of those markets.

This will always be the case and those who promise otherwise do not actually understand how international trade and the practicalities of the world organic market function.

The critical point is that Australia must remain insisting that the Organic Standard requires all organic products to be certified (this is mandatory where legislation is set in other countries) and they are compliant to our standard. Also we must insist the standard remains relevant for Australian conditions, without trying to comply with European or US standards that are just not appropriate for our country (indeed, some of these international requirements contradict each other anyway).

The BFA has always led industry in setting the standard and in showing strong leadership in ensuring we do not fall prey to this folly of not standing up for our own interests as Australians.

There remain, as we note, powers that be and interests swirling that would prevent us from having and maintaining a brilliant and proud Australian Organic Standard, upheld by the people who toil by it and who consume with it in their hearts and minds.

This is a call to all in the organic movement and industry to see through the double-speak and to vote and have input into your organic democracy. Otherwise, it might just go away.

The good news is that the Bud is here to stay and most importantly the Organic Standard is only powerful when in the hands of the very people who create it and live by it. It has no meaning, nor much use, in any other context.

So while we must never be complacent about the work involved in keeping our Standard powerful and vibrant, we should remain proud and loudly celebrate this Standard for its irreverent, popular and incredibly resilient powers – in the face of so much opposition for so many years.

That opposition will not stop but neither will the strength of this organic movement and the industry that provides us with the organic foods and fibres we love. *Viva organica.* ■

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BFA backs Standard protection

THE BIOLOGICAL Farmers of Australia (BFA) champions protection of the Standard for Australian consumers and producers:

Removal of Talc (known carcinogen) from the National Standard follows concern from a consumer who is a BFA member. It took BFA some lobbying to achieve this over 12 months. (Talc was 'inherited' from an initial European-type organic standard – a further example of how we need to keep perfecting an Australian-specific standard.)

And on the producer protection side (protecting livelihood of organic farmers while ensuring key principles such as animal welfare and standards integrity are maintained), the BFA has moved to ensure chicken farmers have access to sufficient protein sources through the drought period while also recognising that particularly in the European Union and United States, livestock farmers have a far easier standard than Australian producers.

Also, the BFA has lobbied to ensure there remains a practicality to the allowance for organic inputs to ensure farmers

can remain viable while producing foods with organic integrity and food safety that can become increasingly available in the marketplace for consumers.

Most importantly, BFA's segregation of export market requirements from the BFA's Australian Organic Standard – maintained on, and by, the majority of the organic industry members – ensures producers are treated equitably and fairly by Australian requirements – not requirements imposed by those in other countries or by those without a stake in, or a care of, Australian organic producers.

By way of starting this conversation for your involvement, we have some suggestions and/or topics that need industry feedback – from farmers, processors, marketers and consumers.

If you are a BFA member, you will find these in the autumn edition of *Australian Organic Business*. Otherwise you can find them by following the link at <www.bfa.com.au>. You can send your feedback to <standards@bfa.com.au>, or to PO Box 530, Cherside, Qld 4032.