

Important update:

The future of standards and regulation in Australia



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Board Director**

By Scott Kinnear

Since the release of our discussion paper in August and our concept proposal for regulation of organic through the Food Standards Code administered by FSANZ (Food Standards Australia New Zealand) released in September, the BFA has received a steady flow of feedback from our membership. To date, feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and in particular when we clarify our underlying concerns with

Standards Australia. We have only received one written response from one of the seven certification organisations indicating that they believe the development of a standard with Standards Australia is still the best way to go. The Organic Federation of Australia has not responded other than to indicate on their website that they continue to advocate the Standards Australia path.

The BFA continues to discuss this actively at board and administrative levels, and in addition we have discussed our proposal for regulation informally with one large state government at a senior level and have received an excellent response. Since writing our proposal for regulation, the Canadian Government has put out for comment its proposal for regulation of the organic food sector, which bears a remarkable similarity to that which we are proposing for Australia and New Zealand. In order to progress discussions further with the organic sector in Australia, the BFA board will hold an initial forum for our members and any other participants in the organic sector, in Brisbane the day before our AGM on November 24, from 2 to 5pm.

The BFA intends to hold further forums in other parts of Australia beginning early next year and will continue to seek feedback from the organic sector. We anticipate gaining sufficient momentum to move forward with our regulatory proposal around the middle of next year and then we will formally seek meetings with state and territory governments around Australia. We will ask them to support this proposal at the Ministerial Council that sits in charge of FSANZ. It is through this mechanism of involvement with the state and territory governments that BFA believes we are most likely to achieve success with our regulatory proposal. We do not expect the Commonwealth and FSANZ to support our proposal at present, and middle level staff within FSANZ have already made comments to this effect. However, as with the labelling of genetically engineered foods and country of origin labelling, the Ministerial Council has the authority to direct FSANZ to implement labeling rules in the Food Standards Code.

Standards Australia in the meantime has conducted a survey of organic sector organisations to determine what views exist in respect to the OFA application submitted to them to develop an organic standard. BFA wrote widely to organic sector organisations urging them not to support this proposal and we are confident that the decision that Standards Australia make on November 24 will be a sensible one, to discontinue altogether or, at the very least, continue to put the OFA application on hold due to insufficient organic sector support. On the same day that Standards Australia is meeting to decide whether they will proceed or not, we will be holding the first significant organic sector forum to discuss these issues. We hope to hear via telephone during the afternoon of November 24 what their decision yields.

Should Standards Australia decide to proceed to develop an organic standard we would make a case to them that this is a poor decision, given that they must be able to demonstrate significant majority sector support before proceeding. If necessary, we will elevate our concern to the Standards Australia board level and leave open the option to take our concerns to the broader media and initiate a grassroots organic sector campaign to ask them to cease the development of such a standard.

In addition we will pursue the regulation of organic and biodynamic foods through the Food Standards Code with some urgency, on the basis that if Standards Australia was to release an organic standard for licensed use, without a requirement for mandatory certification and inspection, we believe this would be deleterious to the existing organic sector certification and regulatory system in place since 1992.

With regard to AQIS and its suggested possible withdrawal from its competent authority role, the next Organic Industry Export Consultative Committee meeting is on November 29 in Canberra. We hope that this meeting with AQIS representatives will reveal clearly whether they are still hoping to cease their regulatory role at some specified time in the future, or whether they have now decided to maintain this role. One very compelling reason why we believe they should decide to retain their regulatory role, is that the United States is now proceeding with applications for equivalency that have, in effect, been on hold since 2002. This is a huge step forward and would make the export of organic products from Australia to the United States far simpler. A key requirement of the equivalency program is government to government competent authorities being in place to make the application and to maintain the equivalency arrangements.

In summary, it is essential that members of the organic sector get involved in our campaign to regulate the words organic and biodynamic in Australia and New Zealand. Please attend our organic sector forums during the first six months of 2007 and keep a close eye on reports through *The Organic Advantage* e-newsletter and the *Australian Organic Journal*. ■