



Viva democracy:

Two of Australia's largest organic certifiers unite

Two of Australia's largest organic certifying bodies have decided that they will unite, in a milestone achievement reached over four years of mutual co-operation.

The Organic Growers of Australia Certified Ltd. (OGA), one of the largest certifying bodies for organics in Australia, on Sunday, October 29, held its annual general meeting, where an almost unanimous majority of members voted 'YES' to the move into the Biological Farmers of Australia Co-op Ltd Group (BFA).

"The organic industry has now witnessed the strongest and most important coming together for the benefit of all. It was a pleasure to be involved in this great decision for BFA and OGA and particularly working with a group which bases its policies in the interests of the smaller growers," BFA chairman Doug Haas said.

Based on Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) 2005 data, the new group will certify over 1600 operations; or approximately 70% of the industry's organic operators.

The integration of OGA into the BFA group is expected to be completed over the next few months. At this present time the OGA standard will remain as a separate AQIS approved certification stream to ACO, managed under the umbrella of the BFA group.

Michael Blakeney, general manager for BFA explains "Once the consolidation is complete, the BFA/OGA small producers program will provide certification to those small growers who wish to trade at farmers' markets and direct with retailers. Producers from other certifiers who qualify and small producers who have been constrained by cost are encouraged to apply."

Following are opinions on the merger from key representatives of OGA, BFA and ACO as well as members of these groups.



**KENRICK RILEY, PRESIDENT,
ORGANIC GROWERS OF AUSTRALIA**

The merger of the Organic Growers of Australia (OGA) with BFA is an important step for small organic farmers and processors across the country. This move changes OGA from a volunteer body to a national business. At the same time, Australia's organic industry is maturing after nearly 30 years of ground-breaking work.

However, organics is still a small part of Australian farming overall. Too small to support too many small certification bodies all competing in spite of their common goals. Too small to promote

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themselves and gain national recognition for their members' endeavours to produce healthy food, re-bury carbon from the atmosphere, repair their environment, and rebuild their local communities.

This merger creates a significant body of organic operators which can promote the benefits of organics throughout society while

encouraging more farmers through the maze of conversion.

Importantly, OGA will continue as a certification scheme for small growers. As such, it will become a major point of entry for all those taking their first little steps towards organics.

No longer is organics just an important niche for purists. Australian farming generally is in trouble. It is in a structural mess, approaching a climatic crisis and creating an environmental disaster. It needs to adopt organics to reinvigorate our farm land and secure our food supply.

A combined OGA/BFA will, for the first time, have the strength of numbers to make a case for rethinking agricultural policy and pointing Australia in the right direction.

Our combined size should start to gain respect across agriculture generally. For me, that is the greatest justification for our two bodies to work together.



**PIERCE CODY, OWNER OF ORGANIC
RETAIL CHAIN MACRO WHOLEFOODS
MARKET**

As the largest independent retailer of certified organics within Australia, to me this is fantastic news. The joining of two of the largest certifiers in Australia is a significant milestone towards much needed rationalisation of our industry.

There are currently seven certification bodies in Australia which for a relatively small market causes considerable confusion and doubling up of resources and compliance costs, placing extra pressure on our fledgling industry.

It is pleasing to see that two certifiers have been able to work together to deliver some much needed rationalisation of industry. Of course we are very keen to see further of this rationalisation occur.

There has been all too much division in our industry and it is pleasing to see that two certifiers are able to work together to deliver this great result.

So my congratulations to the chairman of the BFA Group Doug Haas and the OGA director Howard Rubin for their ongoing persistence and cooperation to deliver this great outcome for Industry.



MARK UCICH, OGA AND ACO CERTIFIED PRODUCER, WA

The merge of OGA with BFA is a very proactive and creative move in the world of organic and biodynamic certification within Australia.

The merger has created a much needed small growers scheme that will provide increased ability for smaller producers to

take part in our industry and increase the flexibility in the marketing of their produce.

The fee structure will suit the small producers of the industry for whom inspection/audit costs have always been a "bone of contention".

Most of the small horticultural producers in Western Australia would benefit from taking up certification under this new and exiting program.

Both the boards and management of the BFA Group and OGA should be congratulated for their foresight on the merger and creation of the "BFA/OGA Small Producers Program".



ANDY MONK, BFA STANDARDS COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

Full points to the democratic processes of both the board of OGA and its membership, and in turn that of BFA's. This is in stark and regrettable contrast to the actions of a NASAA board two years earlier that prevented its own membership from either confirming or putting to rest a decade of

speculation to merge with BFA. Failure to enjoy savings noted of more than \$0.25M for such a small industry scarce of funds, let alone unity that all are urging, will remain an historic scandal.

There is no coincidence that tied closely to the healthy growth of our (and any) industry are the critical tenets of open democratic, membership owned processes which hold representative boards openly accountable for actions and lack of actions.

As industry membership now goes, the new group will stand close to 70% of all members that have certified businesses. Let us not forget that these organisations are not for profit, are set up by and for their membership, to serve the ideals of the organic movement and sector.

This latest process of democratic decision has clearly highlighted where the surge and growth is in our industry, and where the support lies (as opposed to the theories of a few) in relation to the best directions forward for our industry.

For too long a small group of people has held the organic industry to ransom and held it back. This merging has dashed any last hope of those that would stand in the way of our sector being anything other than brilliant, bold and successful in achieving its ideals and aims.

At the end of the day these organisations – BFA, ACO and OGA – are vehicles for members of industry to progress their ideals. The past months have been further confirmation of exactly that. Here's to more of this to come.

HOWARD RUBIN, DIRECTOR, OGA

At the AGM of the OGA on October 29, attending members, who were mainly growers, made possibly the most important decision in OGA's nearly 20 year history. Attendees voted almost



unanimously in favour of moving into the BFA/ACO Group.

At first some had been a little anxious about the proposal, and not everyone was sure that they approved of this very different plan.

However, after a lively question and answer session where especially Doug Haas was able to clearly explain his hopes and wishes for a partnership between OGA and

BFA, the worries of our members were laid to rest. When the hands were counted all but two people were in favour of the merger.

Congratulations! Not only to OGA growers but to all small organic growers in Australia, because this is who OGA will look after.

Small organic growers will no longer be subsidising the big growers/processors who only joined OGA because we have low fees and do not charge levies.

Those businesses with organic sales over a certain threshold will need to be certified with ACO. Those who are exporting will also have to join the ACO, regardless of their income from organic sales. ACO is accredited for export to the USA, Japan, Europe and other countries.

We thank the BFA for their co-operation and look forward to the next stages of this new partnership, which will preserve that great philosophy of the OGA and that is to serve the smaller producer and processor.

After all, the name stays and the logo stays, while fees will be reduced. What more could we ask for in the future?



EWAN COLQUHOUN, ACO BOARD DIRECTOR

The organic industry is at a crossroads. We can respond to the fast changing needs of our certified clients, or we can offer the same old one-size-fits-all certification approach.

Organic Growers of Australia and the BFA/ACO group have recently evidenced the

further consolidation of organic certification services. No-one should be surprised to see this. Nor should they believe there is not further change needed.

Across industry certification, delivery is less than professional in some areas, and some costs are still too high. ACO competes directly with OGA, but we also are strong advocates for efficient service delivery to our clients.

Like QANTAS we know that not everybody wants to travel first class. Backpackers prefer discount fares - you get there at the same time, but without the frills.

Airtravel started to focus on its customers in the 1980s when QANTAS created the world's first Business Class, 50 years after the airline was established. Now a differentiated business class is a global standard. Airline viability improves and customers get the services they value.

Let's not wait 50 years for the organic service providers to recognise that one-size does not fit all. Staying with our old approach will actually increase costs to our clients, and raise prices for our end consumers.

Supply chains are less efficient and industry growth is lowered. Certifiers must create and deliver cost effective and professional services to their targeted clients, or get out of the business.

At ACO we are going to continue to differentiate and improve our services to our clients. We will continue to compete against other certifiers.

And I will take every opportunity to ensure certified clients are better serviced and industry growth is promoted.