

Regulation of organic

Joining the debate to steer an industry at the crossroads

The Biological Farmers of Australia Board director, Scott Kinnear, reports on upcoming changes to organic standards and accreditation.

There has been much discussion and debate recently on how best to move forward with an organic standard in Australia. You may ask, "Why is this an issue, given the fact we already have an organic standard?"

The answer is that the long-standing arrangement with the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) and the organic sector is likely to change significantly sometime next year. This is a decision of AQIS, and we — the organic sector — need to respond urgently.

There are two parts to the arrangement:

- The first part is the support role AQIS has given to the standards setting process from inception in the early 1990s to now. It provides the secretariat role and convenes, at its offices in Canberra, the twice-yearly meeting of the Organic Industry Export Consultation Committee (OIECC);
- The second part is the role of competent authority that AQIS fills in relation to accreditation of organisations that certify products for export. This is needed because of export control orders making it illegal to export organic or biodynamic products from Australia unless they are certified. Behind these orders sits the government-to-government recognition by the European Union (EU) of the AQIS system of accreditation within Australia.

AQIS would like to give up both its standards support role and the competent authority role sometime next year. This is because the European Union will no longer insist on government-to-government recognition of organic export systems.

The EU is going to allow for direct accreditation to organisations that offer organic certification. This is not a world first and follows similar moves by the US and Japan. Already, Australian Certified Organic has direct recognition with the US and Japan for its system of certification.

The move by AQIS has substantial implications for the organic sector. In the immediate short term, the organic sector must, firstly, decide if it agrees with AQIS relinquishing the competent authority role.

Secondly, we must consider the position where AQIS does not give us a choice on the matter and then we have only two options: 1) Replace AQIS as competent authority; 2) Go direct to the EU. It may be more cost-effective to replace AQIS as competent authority for a group of organisations than for each organisation to go direct to the EU.

If we decide to replace AQIS, there are two options: 1) Firstly, it is pos-

sible for an organic sector group to take over the competent authority role, for example the Organic Certifiers of Australia¹ could develop that role. 2) Secondly, we could outsource the task to a group like the Joint Australia New Zealand Accreditation Service (JAS-ANZ).

On housing and maintenance of the National Organic Standard, the Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA) has thoroughly investigated the Organic Federation of Australia's proposal to develop a standard with Standards Australia.

Our investigations uncovered a serious flaw in the proposal, namely that Standards Australia would not allow any standard developed with them to contain the current Section 5 that mandates inspection and certification.

This is unacceptable to the BFA Board as the existing system delivers world-class certification and inspection of organic produce for most production in Australia.

The BFA believes we should continue to maintain complete organic sector control of the standard. We support the need to broaden input into the standard but also believe it is essential to maintain grassroots organic farmer control over the standard.

Overseas standards in the US have altered to allow corporate organic factory farming, and this is something that will almost certainly be pushed for in Australia.

Additionally, the BFA believes Food Standards Australia NZ (FSANZ) should include an organic labelling rule in the Food Standards Code to finally regulate the word "organic".

The BFA does not believe fair trading authorities calling up organic standards (especially a standard without mandatory inspection and certification) will solve the issues of fraud and deception that are sure to increasingly plague and hinder the growth of our sector.

It has developed a concept proposal to regulate the word "organic" and address the AQIS competent authority and standards development issues.

Please be involved in this debate, which will affect all of you as stakeholders. These documents can be downloaded from the BFA website <www.bfa.com.au>. ■

¹ Organic Certifiers of Australia currently has membership from Australian Certified Organic, Biodynamic Research Institute, Tasmanian Organic-Dynamic Producers and Organic Growers of Australia.

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