

» By Dr Andrew Monk

# Protecting consumer interests through the certified organic industry

**H**ow do I know it is organic?" is the regular and understandable consumer query.

If there is an organic logo on the label, consumers have the full weight of the Law behind them, including the companies that certify the product and the ACCC, to achieve prosecution of any business that is proven to flout requirements spelt out in documents such as the Australian Certified Organic Standard and industry base standards.

The mandate of certification (and therefore independent auditing and market testing) of products bearing such a logo provides our industry with a strong and reliable basis for maintaining consumer confidence in organic.

The bottom line is that without a logo on the product denoting such certification, consumers are, and will continue to be, exposed to the vagaries of misleading claims by some, luckily now limited, unscrupulous traders.

The good news is that most areas of the Australian market place are now covered by certified products and the intent of retailers to sell only that. But there remain gaps and loose ends given the nature of some markets. The original village market square where everyone knew what everyone else was doing rarely applies in our modern food production and distribution system.

Our industry is also supported by the main retailers now demanding certified product, which is a benefit many other market segments still don't enjoy (consider

## Transparency in dealing with market fraud

In the first week of BFA opening its new head office in a capital city earlier this decade, Current Affair reporters burst through the doors demanding a scoop on the fact that there were "dodgy organic products" in the market place, and proposing that consumers should be concerned. BFA's response was to agree! and to show how consumers CAN be assured, while directing ACA to legitimate farmers and showing them what real organic products should look like, with the Bud guarantee of integrity.

In most respects nothing has changed since then and this challenge, of business and consumer education, remains.

and compare free range, natural, green claims). However areas as farmers markets, local butchers and uncertified retailers selling unlabelled and unpackaged organic goods remain "leaky" areas of the marketplace that will remain a challenge, but not impossible, for the industry regulatory eyes and arms to reach. It will come down to consumer vigilance in concert with organisations like BFA in educating consumers and marketers alike, to keep these potential gaps closed.

There are some claims that a new base standard published by Standards Australia will bring this to rest once and for all. For sure there are some overtly non organic products in the marketplace that will now risk attack in the courts for claiming organic status when some of the ingredients are overtly not. Orange juice with non permitted preservatives is one blatant example that we look forward to saying goodbye to from every market outlet this coming year. Such businesses selling these products have risked, and now face definite commercial risk of not just reputational but also financial damage in flaunting such standards.

The BFA has a new consumer website now launched which includes a "dobber line" for consumers or others to send information to. (See information about the 'Organic Crusader' accompanying this article.) In recent months ACO has dealt with a range of complaints, from queries in relation to water being called organic under other certification logos, through to the importation of products and also questionable food additives and ingredients – in both certified or non certified products.

Are there gaps in the marketplace? Clearly there are, though relative to most other regulated sectors of the food industry it would appear that the organic industry is a country mile ahead, and that is without regulation backing us. Possibly because we are so open and transparent about the occasional abuses in our industry we fall victim to sensationalizing media attention. We should also not see the occasional uncovering of fraud or misleading labelling as a terrible thing but in fact as examples of how our industry transparently and with integrity deals with challenges to its principles and standards. These threats will not go away.



Stephen Povey, The Meat-ting Place, an ACO-certified butcher.

## Actions protecting the rights of consumers

1. Buy products clearly labeled with certification logos like the Bud logo;
2. If buying bulk or loose items expect and demand that the retailer is certified to carry such products (or go elsewhere) or ask for certification evidence;
3. Send in clear and specific evidence of information via the BFA dobber line for products or practices you believe are untoward or questionable;
4. Support the BFA in its work to continue to expand consumer and market awareness of certified organic in Australia by networking in your own business or community sector - be that education, health, retailing or other areas. BFA has promotional and educational material to assist with this. Please contact the BFA office to find out more. <<◆

## About the Author

Dr Monk is convenor of the BFA's Standards Advisory Group and is a Director on the BFA Board. Andrew has a PhD and BSc with a focus on organic production systems and sustainability and has been involved in organic standards management for industry since the early 1990s.