

STOP PRESS: Project update

SEVERAL HUNDRED REPLIES have flooded in from all over the country in response to the 2007 Australian Organic Market Report survey, recently mailed to organic business throughout the supply chain. Phone calls from enthusiastic organic growers, input manufacturers and even a documentary maker have also come in, providing valuable feedback and encouragement.

One of the most striking trends to emerge so far from the survey is the widespread impact of the drought. Clearly this isn't a great time to be 'checking the pulse' of the organic sector and things are likely to get worse for many, particularly colleagues in irrigation industries such as fruit and vegetable production. Amidst the sad stories are many optimistic ones however, of steady growth in businesses, new businesses created, new markets found and strong demand for produce. There's also a sense of pride and

satisfaction in people's comments about an industry which puts concern for community and the environment above the pure profit motive.

The replies are still coming in following a recent reminder mailout to organic businesses. We don't wish to nag people (and waste paper), but we're hoping all organic business operators will complete the

survey in order to provide the most robust and comprehensive possible data set used to raise awareness of the scope and diversity of the organic sector in Australia. If you run an organic business and have not received a survey questionnaire, please contact me (paul.kristiansen@une.edu.au, 02 6773 2962) and I'll post or email one off to you straight away.

The R&D pages are collated by The Organic Research Group (ORG)

ORG is a network of researchers, teachers, students, farmers, retailers and consumers involved with organic agriculture. Based at the University of New England, participants in the ORG are:

- investigating a wide range of production, soil health and marketing issues
- collaborating on industry development projects with producers, businesses and government
- providing professional, organic-specific training for students and
- offering research support, technical expertise and policy advice to the organic industry.



Biodegradable Mulch Trial

SOME PROMISING RESULTS have come out of a trial of biodegradable mulch. The new trial is being undertaken by the Department of Primary Industries (DPI&F) to compare the standard black polyethylene mulch currently used by industry with a biodegradable mulch based on corn starch (biopolymer film).

Strip trials were planted on a light sandy alluvial loam at the Bowen Research Station.

The mulch handled well with conventional machinery for laying, planting and rotary hoeing. Yields of Zucchini and Capsicum showed that there were no major differences in marketable yields between the standard polyethylene mulch and the biodegradable mulch in both of these plant harvests.

The trial is one in a series of nationwide soil health initiatives known as The Vegetable Plant and Soil Health Project. Its


aim is to enhance production by improving soil management. The DPI&F Bowen-based horticulturist Sue Heisswolf is part of the team. She explained that the project is a two-year scoping study that aims to increase awareness in the industry of the importance of soil health in vegetable production.

"To do this, we are going to explore practical solutions for improving and measuring soil health with growers that have already made changes to the way they manage their soil," Sue said.

Further outcomes of the trial were that the biodegradable mulch seemed to lay well with conventional equipment although Sue says "it did look and feel less substantial initially than the standard mulch". There were no problems with punching planting holes for either the capsicum or zucchini by comparison with the standard mulch.

The outcomes of the trials look promising to date, however the product remains expensive. "This biopolymer film is based on cornstarch and until recently had been fully imported from Italy, making it too expensive for growers," Sue said

"However, our information is that, due to grower demand in southern Australia, a local company is now manufacturing the product." She says

The trial will continue until the end of the year and a cost comparison of the the mulches will be completed in December. Negotiations are underway to conduct a second mulch trial in autumn next year. 



Biopolymer mulch, much better than conventional plastics

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