

Making the most of your organic management plan

AN ORGANIC MANAGEMENT plan (OMP – consisting also of an organic farm plan, organic livestock plan and organic handling plan) is an essential part of becoming certified organic.

Required in the initial stages of a new application in order to become certified organic, the plan is an outline of how a producer will tackle their operation in the years ahead in compliance with the organic standard. OMPs cover everything from techniques farmers intend to use to protect biodiversity to addressing soil deficiencies or outlining soil fertility management programs.

At 22 pages long, it can seem a daunting task for the un-prepared producer – a fact often confirmed by OMPs submitted that substitute bare-skeleton details where important information is required.



Greg Paynter (pictured), BFA soil health advisor, says producers should focus on treating OMPs as a plan “which will help develop and direct the farm in the future, not as a chore”.

He says an OMP is not just a tool used by farmers in passing through the certification system.

“It is a document that – when well done – will be critically important to an operator’s approach to farm management. An OMP is the opportunity for a producer to outline how problems will be dealt with on an organic farm and forces farmers to identify

challenges at an early stage.”

He says because organic farms are about being proactive above reactive – “organic operators can’t go out and apply an insecticide or herbicide when things go wrong, for instance” – it pays in organic farming to have a clear outline of goals and systems.

He says a strong OMP will also stand producers in good stead when it comes to their yearly audit – “OMP’s are a key component and point of reference for auditors, certifiers and reviewers. If done properly at the start, an OMP can save the reviewer and producer time in chasing up further information and may decrease the chance of a CAR (Corrective Action Request) being issued”.

Keeping a documented record of how a sustainable system is maintained may also prove beneficial for farmers who are applying for related land management grants and funding.

Approaching the OMP

Research and read the Organic Standard – first:

Mr Paynter says reading organic standards is a good place for producers to start – before trying to create an OMP.

“For example, in the Australian Organic Standard (AOS), the producer will find tips and hints on biological techniques allowed for use in organic systems, including crop rotation, subsoiling, off-farm manure, green manure, cover crops, inter-planting and compost.

“From there, producers should research more on each technique to gauge what might work for them. They can talk to neighbours, other organic farmers, local farming groups and the department of primary industries (DPI).”

He says reading and the Internet are also likely to help.

“However, farmers do need to be aware that information found online is international and may not always suit Australian conditions.”

He says there are some good references for organic farmers from the DPI, including a series from the NSW DPI which covers organic farming (*Organic Farming: a General Introduction*, *Organic Farming for Crops, Fruits and Vegetables*, and *Organic Farming for Livestock*).

It’s all in the details:

An OMP needs to be more than a ‘tick and flick’ process. “More details are always best,” says Mr Paynter. Very often producers will



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refer to a certain technique but they won't explain how or why they use it.

"Answers that take a more narrative approach add to the certifier's understanding of how the farm works as a whole and guard against CARs which may arise from miscommunication."

He says even dot points will work – "anything that helps explains the reasoning behind a farmer's decision. It is not enough, for example, to state that you 'turn stubble in' as part of a soil fertility program. Information on how you will continue to build on soil fertility is also required".

Keep records:

Record-keeping is a trouble field for many farmers.

"Unfortunately, to remain certified a producer must provide evidence they have been operating in compliance with organic standards – and records are how that's achieved," Mr Paynter says.

He says records also reduce risk.

"For example, if there was suspected contamination of one area of a farmer's grain but the farmer had clear records of where that grain was stored, it could result in just one silo of product being de-certified; as opposed to the whole crop."



Seek help, where required:

"There are consultants who can help farmers develop an OMP or courses producers can take to learn how to create their own successfully," says Mr Paynter. He says one good example is the Riverina TAFE in Albury, NSW. Producers receive assistance to create an OMP as part of their Diploma of Organic Farming, which can be studied externally.

Mr Paynter says ultimately a good OMP is an investment in an organic farm's future. "It allows farmers to articulate the wealth of knowledge they amass over time into a comprehensive farm regime."

Need a consultant?

Contact the BFA for more information on private consultants who specialise in the organic industry, phone (07) 3350 5716 (extension 222).

Those interested in the Riverina TAFE Diploma of Organic Farming can contact Albury TAFE on (02) 6043 6700 or visit www.rit.tafensw.edu.au

To read the Australian Organic Standard and other international standards, visit Australian Certified Organic at www.aco.net.au under 'Forms and Information'. ☺



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