

Through the organic farmgate

Farmers join forces to increase market impact

By JAN NARY

LIMITS ON PRODUCTION CAN BE a problem for organic growers. Major retailers are often loath to commit shelf space and promotional energy and dollars to smaller scale produce that could be obliterated by one bad season. Drought, hail, fire and flood can wipe out a whole season's crop and if there is no backup plan, the supply chain could be broken.

Such marketing pressures have led a group of farmers in southeast Queensland to form the Organic Farm Gate, a marketing network for farms in the Gatton, Brisbane and Sunshine Coast hinterlands region. The network gives four large organic farms and several smaller ones in the area the advantages of co-ordinating supply, pooling resources, combining marketing efforts and offering advice to smaller growers.

Bauer's Organic Farms and Googa Farms initiated the concept and Bauer's Farm's national sales manager Nick Miall is director. Planning is a shared responsibility between the group members, but the tasks of agent liaison, marketing and administration responsibilities fall on Nick's shoulders.

"With increased competition in the marketplace, our focus has to be on consistency and quality," Nick says. "Operating through centralised liaison and administration leaves farmers free to work where their strength is, working at what they love and do best. There will always be room for improvement in a new venture like this but things are ticking along well."

Variety and occasional duplication of produce both offer real advantages.

"The affiliated farms remain individual entities, supplying a range of products but overlapping in some cases," Nick says.

"Even a little thing like a shower of rain can



Rob Bauer, Bauers Organic Farm, Lockyer Valley, Qld.

interrupt a farm schedule, so it's good to have several farms involved. Last year we had three farms supplying organic broccoli and there were occasions when one or another farm couldn't supply, so someone else in the network dropped into the slot."

Nick says that the benefits go beyond the pragmatic dollars and cents issues, bringing like-minded farmers into closer contact with each other to share information.

"Most organic farmers work in a bit of a vacuum," he says, "Their neighbours may be conventional farmers who aren't really interested in problems or developments in organic farming or may be hostile to the concept of organic growing. Through the

Organic Farm Gate I've seen organic farmers getting together for a bit of a chat, sharing experiences or tips, even sharing equipment – those are real positives for organic farming and farmers."

Anthony Beutel, director of Googa Farms in Blackbutt, says that the initiative should help move more organic produce into shops.

"Supermarkets and wholesale agents want consistency in supply; we want to get as much good quality organic produce as possible into shops," he says. "Operating this way, if one of us loses a crop, hopefully one of the others will still be operating so the supply is maintained. Consumers don't

mind paying a bit extra for organic but it has to be available.

“With Nick Miall doing the co-ordinating and marketing, the rest of us are freed up to do the farming. It also means that we don’t get into a situation of oversupply.”

United Organics’ Ross Cowling has been an organic produce wholesale merchant for 15 years, a link between suppliers and retailers.

“Certainly the big supermarkets are looking favourably at the formation of such groups,” he says.

“It gives them the double advantage of year-round supply and being able to source several products with just one phone call. This is also a plus factor for smaller wholesalers dealing with these groups however the personal contact and loyalty that wholesalers enjoyed with their individual suppliers has largely been eliminated, making communication somewhat convoluted.”

Ross also has concerns about shifts in the market place that may blur lines of supply. “Some grower groups are also acting as

suppliers, sourcing produce from other farms, and in addition to this, interstate supply groups have sprung up who don’t grow any of their own produce,” he says.

“There is a danger in the changed marketplace that inexperienced suppliers and growers will be more susceptible to market pressure when produce is in short supply. In times of shortages, will it be the traditional small wholesaler or the larger players (who are able to exert more pressure on supplier groups), who will win out?”

That there is consumer interest in organic food is undeniable; recent surveys show that nearly 60% of shoppers have bought at least some organic produce in the past year and demand is tipped to rise for several years. The recent acquisition of the organic retail outlet Macro Wholefoods by major supermarket chain Woolworths is a sign the organic industry is gathering momentum. A central consideration for the organic industry in a changing marketplace will be to keep a firm hand on the reins, ensuring the industry’s autonomy and continued growth. ☺



David and Anthony Beutel, Googa Farms, Blackbutt, Qld.



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