

THE ORGANIC INDUSTRY. THE NEED FOR CLEAR GOALS AND CRITERIA FOR DECISION MAKING A PERSPECTIVE OF TWO PRODUCERS

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ABSTRACT

One of the original concerns of organic pioneers was the effect petrochemical based agriculture had on human health, the land and the ecology of the planet. There is an increasing public awareness and official recognition of ecological issues and the organic movement is now a very large organisation with many official bodies.

The authors are concerned that the organic governing bodies are increasing regulation and bureaucracy to guarantee the integrity of organic produce and that organics has become a niche market. This is likely to restrict rather than increase the amount of land under organic systems.

The authors suggest a description of the movement. "The organic movement is a partnership of the environment, consumer and producer" and a mission statement, "To facilitate the change of agricultural and associated industries to the principles and practices of organic management". This gives a holistic concept of the movement indicating that all concerned parties are 'in the same boat' and have a common goal. These two concepts then form a foundation for making relevant decisions for the movement.

PAPER

The "organic movement" surfaced around about the 1940's with the creation of the first societies and experiments into organics. Though there were many people and organisations involved the movement was more of a ground swell of opinion rather than an ordered society with a clear origin. Many of the pioneers had been around since the turn of the century or even earlier. This informal structure and collaboration between many different people allowed flexibility and adaptability as the people involved tackled issues they felt were important. The 1940's saw the establishment of the Haughley experiment to analyse the effects of organic methods and the forming of the Soil Association one of the first official organic organisations.

The main concerns of the early pioneers for example Dr W. Albrecht, Lady Eve Balfour, Sir Albert Howard and Rachel Carson were the effects on the health of humans and the whole bio-sphere of 'petrochemically' based farming. Much early research looked at health, the differences between organic and conventional food and the sustainability of farming practices. It was even suggested that agriculture become part of the United Kingdoms National Health Service (Balfour, E.B., 1943) such was the concern for the health of the nation. The original issues were very broad based, they dealt with big issues and suggested ways of addressing these problems.

Today organics has grown into a world wide movement with official bodies in many countries and an international governing body IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements). There is also a considerable increase in awareness of ecological problems and groups (eg Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund). Human health issues are being discussed more and more, and there is an increasing awareness of the problems associated with conventional farming. (eg off farm pollution from fertilisers and pesticides, increasing resistance of pests and diseases to biocides); The recent New Zealand MAF position paper on organic farming is a good example of official recognition of these problems. (Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries. 1994)

These are exciting times with increasing interest in organic production and public concern over food and health. However in our opinion we may be losing sight of our original aims by allowing certification to dominate the agenda. An example from our own farming situation can help illustrate this:

We run a 1000 ewes on our farm and the lambs left after weaning are subject to worm burdens causing ill thrift and much reduced profits. If drenched the Biological Producers Council (BPC) require those lambs to have a mandatory period of twice the conventional withholding period for meat production to be spent on quarantine areas. Conventional drench withholding periods are between 10 and 30 days. One thousand lambs need 2 kg dry matter a head per day and need to be grazing pasture with 2500 kg per hectare available. Thus 1000 lambs need 1 hectare a day, meaning between 20 and 60 hectares of

quarantine land. To satisfy BPC requirements between a third and over half my organic area that has taken eight years to develop could be in quarantine. Land costs about \$10,000 a hectare here at the moment. Thus between \$200,000 and \$400,000 of producer's capital could be tied up in uncertified quarantine paddocks. Other examples include: requiring seaweed collected at the beach to be residue tested, making certain management practices a requirement to receiving certification without actually justifying the management requirements; attempting to allow only transitional certification on properties until the whole area is under total organic management.

The criteria used for all of these decisions is purity of the certification rules rather than the good of the organic movement. The result is to only marginally increase the integrity of the organic product while making it considerably less appealing to be an organic producer. Increasing amounts of time and energy are spent on regulating the existing industry to guarantee the integrity of organic produce, rather than helping increase the amount of land under organic management. This has created the current situation where organic produce rather than being widely available (to improve world health) finds itself in a niche market where the main consumers are middle income, ecologically orientated families. (Lamb, C. Lincoln College. Personal communication) (Morris, J., Wye College University of London. Personal communication). The aims of the pioneers of organics was to improve the health of the nation and create sustainable farming but the current aims seem to be regulation and niche marketing.

A random telephone survey of 30 Biogro licence holders in New Zealand was carried out to ascertain whether in their opinions certification was a barrier to production; the purpose of the organic movement and; areas they would like changed.

The questions were.

1. The purpose of the organic movement:
 - a) What do you believe it is at the moment?
 - b) What do you believe it should be?
2. In your opinion is the current certification process a barrier or assistance in becoming involved in the industry?
3. If there are two things you could change in the movement what would they be?

Question 1 a) (approximately) 25% replied that the purpose was sustainable and or ecological production. 21% said it was to increase organic production. 17% had difficulty answering. 17% linked the purpose with health. 12% reduction or freedom from pesticides. 8% said there was no clear purpose. Question 1 b) Some respondents suggested more than one answer. 58% believed it should be to increase the amount of organic production. 17% were unsure or not clear on the question. 17% said it was public education, 17% said it was sustainability. 4% said it was assisting producers. Some replies indicated that some respondents confused the 'organic movement' and certification bodies, in this case the New Zealand Biological Producers Council (BPC).

Question 2 at least 80% of those questioned believed current certification rules were barrier to involvement in the industry.

Question 3 produced a wide range of replies, several were more frequent. The following were the most common replies in descending order. More efficient and professional certification council, reduced bureaucracy, access to advice and information, reduced fees, more public education, and increased marketing. Question 3) The first three answers listed above accounted for about 45% of replies, and were mostly aimed at the BPC.

While this is not conclusive data it shows a wide range of opinions exist amongst producers. There may well exist an even wider range if other interested parties, (eg consumers, and academics) were questioned. This survey shows that a considerable majority of certified producers consider the current certification rules a barrier to becoming involved in the industry, and many expressed dissatisfaction with the BPC. From personal communications with other countries they would appear to be suffering similar problems. There are various reasons for this situation and many solutions. As producers we would like to propose the following analysis and solution.

There are three main areas we have identified as central to these problems.

- The organic movement lacks a clear identity.
- The organic movements currently lacks a clear common goal.
- The organic movement needs criteria for relevant decision making.

Our first concern is that the movement lacks a clear identity. Many people in the past have suggested what the organic movement is. We are not proposing a definition of the organic movement but rather a

description that indicates who or what is involved. We would like to put forward the following concept as one which includes all of the various people and ideas in the organic movement.

The organic movement is a partnership of the environment, consumer and producer.

These three partners are intrinsically linked, any changes that affect one or more of the partners will effect the other members. This provides a holistic concept of the movement, shows that we are all 'in the same boat' and should be working together for a common goal. As producers we are aware of a growing 'them and us' feeling particularly between certification agencies and producers.

Our second concern is that without a clearly stated common goal or mission statement the movement is unlikely to have a common direction. There is a wide range of views held by people in the organics movement, as indicated by the above survey. At one extreme there are fundamentalist types who believe current organic farming should be fulfilling the principles of organic production to the letter. At the other extreme there are purest marketing types who view organics as a way of increasing the size of their income. The middle ground is populated by the majority of people involved in organics with more moderate views. This wide range of people with diverse personal agendas and conflicting goals for the movement produces an internal tug of war pulling it in many directions at once. This only serves to gratify personal agendas which is very rarely constructive for the movement. Businesses use their mission statements as a yard stick to check they are achieving their stated goal. While many people suggest what the movement and the various organic organisations should be doing we have yet to see anyone make a mission statement for the whole movement. We would like to suggest the following as a mission statement for the whole organic movement.

To facilitate the change of agricultural and associated industries to the principles and practices of organic management.

This broad statement does not seek to define the principles of production nor the method of achieving the goal. Part of the current problem is that the principles of organic production have been confused with the goal of the movement. For example some people believe that the goal of organics is to stop using petrochemical sprays. This is a principle not a goal; the goal is to get more land under organic systems. It is essential this confusion is cleared up. Hear is a example of methods as opposed to goals. In her speech to the 1977 IFOAM conference Lady Eve Balfour ended by stating in her view the way to stem increasing environmental destruction was education. Teachers and children should be taught to respect the environment and all its species not because our survival depends on it but because the biota is a whole and all species have the same right to life as we do (Besson, Jean-Marc, 1977). In this case the method is education to achieve the goal of stopping environmental destruction. The current goal of organics appears to be certification, we believe this is misguided. Certification is a tool for defining organic products in the marketplace. The principals of production define what organic production is. Our goal should tell us what we are trying to achieve. (ie To facilitate the change of agricultural and associated industries to the principles and practices of organic management.)

In the future we would like to see a business management type approach taken by certification councils and other organic governing bodies, with clear mission statements and objectives. This will provide a focus for the wide range of views held by members. It will also reduce the influence of personal agendas which produce inconsistent decisions and allow pedantic issues to dominate. Personal agendas flourish where a clear common objective is lacking. Producers need a stable and predictable certification system so they can make long term plans for their enterprises. It is very difficult to plan ahead if there are regular rule changes that alter your production systems. The whole concept of certification could benefit from a reappraisal. The current situation has certification agencies as judge, jury, police and law maker all in one providing an ideal environment for dictatorial behaviour. Suitable consultative procedures with interested parties should exist for validating any suggested changes to certification procedures.

Clearly stated goals and a description of the movement will provide a foundation for effective decision making. Good decisions should help the partnership move towards the goal, bad ones will hinder its progress. Rather than treating consumers producers and the environment as separate entities decision makers should consider them an integrated whole ie the partnership. The same as an organic producer considers his whole farm, crops and animals as one system rather than isolated factors.

Our hope for this paper is that it will stimulate constructive discussion of this topic in all areas of the movement. It is not a definitive statement on these issues, but rather some food for thought. As a final note the BPC under its new Chief Executive Officer Ron Major is already addressing many of the is-

sues we have touched on and more we have not. We would like to thank him and the BPC and offer our future support.

REFERENCES

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