

Organic Farming in New Zealand

S. Mason

BIO-GRO, Wellington, New Zealand

Abstract : The organic farming movement in New Zealand began with the formation of the first organic organization, the Compost Society in 1941. This expanded to the development of pioneering certifying organizations, BIO-GRO and Demeter from the 1980's. Today there are many organizations, including the Organic Products Exporters Group (OPEG), which are very important in the organic farming scene in New Zealand. The present state of organic farming in New Zealand is healthy. The presentation identifies the current position, domestic and exports markets and political initiatives such as the development of a National Standard Minimum.

Introduction

All truth goes through three stages - "First it is ridiculed, Then it is opposed and then finally accepted as self evident." This a quote that we as promoters of organic farming like - as it states the obvious - we as organic farmers have experienced this phenomenon many times, and it can be expected that many of you have gone through the same experiences. This is true of the organic scene in New Zealand. It can even be quoted that in New Zealand, due to the growth of the organic industry the Agricultural Chemicals and Animal Remedies Manufactures Association felt threatened in the late 1980's and 1990's that promoted the development of two books - "Get the greenies out of our gum boots" which attracted ridicule to them and then a milder version named "Beyond organics". This organization also tried to discredit organics by funding a set of books into every school in New Zealand. However, with time, many organizations, including the Government accepted the fact that organics are useful. The facts were self-evident.

Historical Development of Organics in New Zealand

The oldest and longest serving organic organization in New Zealand is the Soil and Health Association, which started as the Compost Society. The Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association started in 1939 as the Rudolf Steiner Association. The Bio-Grow, which I represent, was formed in 1983 by the above organizations along with the Henry Doubleday Research Association. Its objectives were to foster and encourage companies in New Zealand as well to have organic production standards, by supplying a trustworthy certification service to producers and consumers.

The real progress in organics in New Zealand was when Heinz-Watties and Zespri started to export BIO-Grow certified products in the early 1990's - as canned and frozen vegetable and kiwi fruit. With the development of the export industry, an exporters group was formed in 1995 as OPEG, which is now called OPENZ.

Current Status of Organics in New Zealand

The organic sector has grown rapidly in the domestic market of New Zealand in the recent times. Most supermarkets now stock a wide range of organic lines and some are even differentiating themselves by specializing in organics, as these are selling on the strength of quality and other beneficial factors. In fact, most growers concentrated on the domestic market, which reduced the development of the export market of organics.

Due to the significant developments, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries provided 100,000 New Zealand dollars to develop a National Minimum Standard, which is being done by Standards New Zealand. This will provide a bench mark for organic production in New Zealand, and will provide protection to consumers while enhancing international credibility. The first draft of this document will be sent to the public this year for consultation and the plans are to complete the document by the end of 2002

Bio-Grow today has IFOAM accreditation; our auditing firm has ISO 65 accreditation. This is the cornerstone of our credibility, as such certifications reign supreme in the wholesale and retail scene. For example, supermarket chains such as Sainsbury's in the United Kingdom require IFOAM Accredited certification. However Bio-Grow has applied for the ISO 17020 accreditation, which is required by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries for the export program. as governments generally prefer government to government assurances of quality.

The development that BIO-Grow has achieved can largely be attributed to the political support received from the Green party of New Zealand. Their support has provided funds for initiatives in many spheres of activity.

Today, 10% of New Zealand farmers consider themselves to be organic, 20 - 30% are moving towards organics and most of New Zealand's public is supportive. Surveys have shown that 67% of New Zealanders prefer buying organic milk. Hence to coordinate these programs, the OFANZ was formed two years ago to represent the interests of organics at the political level.

**Success Stories of
Organics in
New Zealand**

The principal success in the organic sphere has been in horticulture - processed vegetables, kiwi and pip fruits. However it has today expanded into the pastoral sector due to the demand. However much more work is needed, for example the profits and gross margins - these need study.

The development in the meat and dairy industry has been less progressive. This was primarily because the large processors were not keen on changing their systems. However the strong demand of the markets both locally and overseas have forced them to rethink their strategies. Hence this sector will also grow rapidly in the near future.

**Organics in
New Zealand
- The Future**

The organics in New Zealand is in a strong position, apart from the threat of genetically engineered species, which could reduce the value of our products. However we do have a moratorium of two years before these genetically engineered species are released commercially. We have very skillful farmers producing high quality products in an ever-increasing range. We have strong political, farmer and market support.

The key now is research and information to encourage our farmers to further improve their systems and help new farmers understand the techniques and approaches. The research and information will also build the trust that New Zealanders have on the organic market. It has been forecasted that once organics get to the 10% mark in the agricultural sector of our nation, it will snowball. We have now come very close to that 10% mark. We have a bright future.