

TALE OF TWO REALITIES: ALIGNING GROWTH WITH SUPPORT IN THE AUSTRALIAN ORGANIC MOVEMENT

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us”. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

The first reality is a very positive one. Commercial growth and public interest in the organic movement are increasing day-by-day nationally in Australia and internationally. One only has to go to the supermarkets to see what is happening. There, we can see more organic lines across a wide variety of food products, more in-house organic branding, absorbing smaller organic companies into their product range (Mitchell *et al.* 2010) and some light-hearted television ads with ‘mainstream’ people buying organic goods alongside the clichéd image of a flute-playing, organic consuming hippy. Beyond the big end of the food market, the strong growth of organic and other ethically produced food, we can see the continuing increase in the number of farmers markets and market visitors throughout urban and rural centres (Adams 2006). A recent article in the business section of *The Australian* newspaper reported on research by IbisWorld that “organic farming is expected to be one of the fastest growing industries this year, thanks to higher disposable incomes and increasing demand for organic food”. The organic sector ranks high in growth predictions, at about 14% per annum (Ooi 2011).

Underpinning these observations are national and international trends that confirm the continuing strong growth in the organic world. In 2009, organic food and drink sales expanded by roughly 5% to USD 54.9 billion, with some slowing due to the global financial crisis. As consumer spending power increases and more countries emerge from the effects of the economic recession, the healthy growth rates reported above are envisaged to restart (Willer and Kilcher 2011). In Australia, the retail value was expected to reach AUD 1 billion by the end of 2010, up from about AUD 0.6 billion in 2007-2008 (Mitchell *et al.* 2010).

The second reality, however, is not so positive since 1997. In Australia, the only ongoing Federal funding for organic agriculture research has been the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation’s (RIRDC) Organic Produce Program. Over a period of 13 years, the program allocated an average of just under AUD 250,000 per year to organic research and extension (Figure 1) in the areas of production, marketing and industry development. However, after meetings in 2010 with other funding agencies in Canberra, it appears that that the Organic Produce Program has been discontinued (Wynen *et al.* 2011).

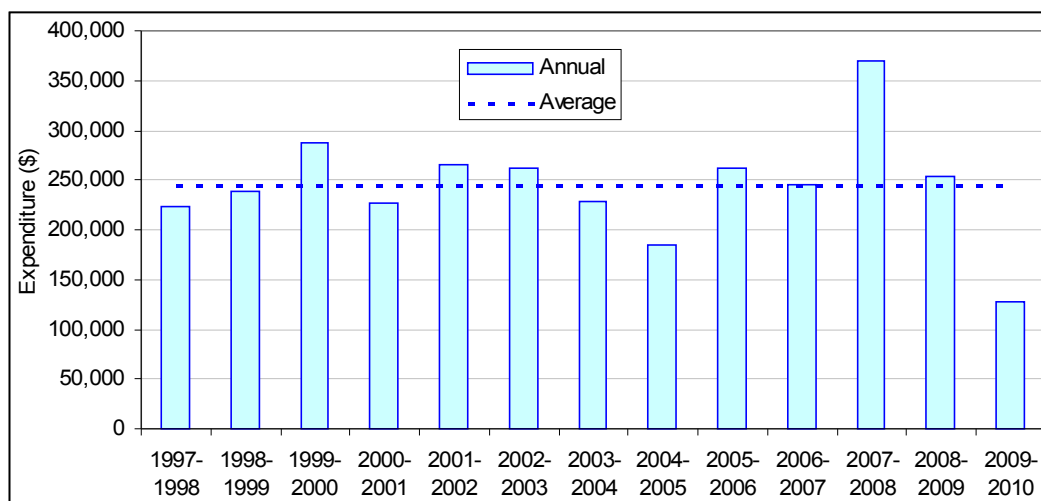


Figure 1. Annual spending by the RIRDC Organic Produce Program (RIRDC data)

Issues of concern that are thought to be hampering formal organic research include the difficulties of coordinating cross-sectoral R&D, using levies to raise initial sources of funds that the government can match, and perceptions that the organic industry is small (or, ironically, no longer an emerging industry) and not unified (Prof Peter Cornish, personal communication 2010). Regardless of the causes, and there are likely to be several reasons for this ‘market failure’, the organic movement has not been effectively communicating its

clear message of growth to the government sector. This is despite regular lobbying by leaders of the organic movement in Australia in various forums and with various decision-makers and bureaucrats. We could complain about the negative counter-claims by other agriculture and food sectors that seek to undermine the public and environmental benefits of organic production, but in a democracy, that is probably just a game that we must always play.

It is important that the various stakeholders in the organic movement work together. The organic sector in Australia is still only about 1% of the total agricultural sector, so dividing the energy and ideas of participants in the industry is likely to weaken the message for government and other potential investors in organic research, development and education. More and more of the market demand in Australia is being met by imported supplies. Although this may not be a big issue in a globalised economy, the potential for local businesses and jobs remains important for many regional government departments.

How can we move forward to unite these two realities? One contrary example is the current Victorian Organic Industry Committee (VOICe) which is made up of industry representatives from organic farms, producer groups and certifiers (Business Victoria 2011). VOICe acts as a point of contact for government and oversees the implementation of an organic sector action plan for industry development and coordination in Victoria. The aim is to increase community awareness about the multiple benefits of organic agriculture in relation to the environment, health, regional development and, importantly from an R&D perspective, to mainstream agriculture practices. The point about organics being potentially useful for mainstream agriculture is important because it underlines the appreciation that many of the skills, knowledge and practices that are used in organic production systems can be readily transferred to conventional systems with the advantage of reducing external inputs such as fertilisers and biocides – and costs – in those mainstream farming systems.

Industry organisations are also taking the initiative. The Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA) is supporting a range of research projects such as VOICe, a PhD project on data collection and organic policy development at the University of New England, and investigations into allowable inputs for the organic chicken feed industry. The national umbrella group, the Organic Federation of Australia (OFA), recently established the Environmental Research and Education Trust (<http://organictrust.ofa.org.au>) to invest in scientific research and education in areas relevant to organic agriculture. A similar venture may be emerging in New Zealand with the Biological Husbandry Unit Organic Trust (<http://www.bhu.co.nz>).

Seasons come and go, and although the current time may feel somewhat like “the winter of despair, with time and effort we can return to “the spring of hope”. As long as the commercial and public perceptions are buoyant, the organic movement will continue to grow. However, the organic sector needs to translate this buoyancy into more public support through the political processes in order to ensure that this growth is sustained and enhanced.

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