



Serious about sustainability or terrified of not being trendy

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A colleague recently forwarded me an email entitled, "Ten reasons to go organic ... beyond being trendy". The article, from the Permaculture Research Institute of Australia, listed ten reasons to support organic agriculture including:

- "The average chemically grown apple has 20-30 artificial poisons on its skin even after rinsing.
- About 99% of non-organic farm animals in the UK are now fed GM soya. And there has never been a reported case of BSE in organic cattle in the UK. Common sense says that organic is safe food.
- Going organic is the only practical way to avoid eating genetically modified foods. And by buying organic, you register your mistrust of GMOs and are doing your bit to protect against them.
- If you eat meat or dairy products, going organic has never been more essential to safeguard you and your families' health. Intensively farmed dairy cows and farm animals are fed a dangerous cocktail of antibiotics, growth promoting drugs, anti-parasite drugs and many other medicines on a daily basis. These drugs are passed on directly to the consumers of their meat and dairy produce which must be a contributing factor to meat related diseases like coronaries and high blood pressure".

Having read the list, I certainly didn't need to turn to food to increase my blood pressure. The article was supported by a picture of a strip of Melbourne restaurants and concluded that while "organic doesn't really go far enough in terms of the true meaning of sustainability, still requiring external inputs and lots of diesel – nor is it a perfectly regulated system – it leaps and bounds ahead of conventional agriculture and shows respect for life".

I assume for the author, a respect for life does not include a respect for science, data or evidence. To unscrupulously infer that all non-organic food produced by agriculture and consumed for decades is unsafe is irresponsible.

Standards Australia recently created a new industry standard for the organic sector - Standard AS 6000-2009 *Organic and biodynamic products* which came into effect in October 2009 and sets minimum requirements that growers and manufacturers operating in the organic and biodynamic industry must meet. With seven different entities certifying organic produce, the issue of a national standard has been discussed for many years. A recent article in the *Law Society Journal* suggests however that the Standard may not be what it seems. The article notes that while the Australian Standard is similar to those operating in the US and the EU, the major difference is that, "Australian compliance with the new Standard is voluntary in respect to organic produce headed for the Australian domestic market. The certification provided ... is only compulsory in respect of organic products bound for export. Any similar products destined for the domestic market are not subject to those compulsory standards". The article goes on to discuss the voluntary nature of the predecessor to AS 6000-2009, how companies selling to the domestic market took advantage of this loophole, and provides an example of the failure of the self regulatory regime. Of course, all this raises the question as to why an industry, which claims to be so serious about the integrity of its products, would opt after all this work to implement a new Standard, with which compliance is voluntary.

Another interesting feature of the Standard is the definition of organic. It is defined, according to the *Law Society Journal* as, "The application of agricultural and processing practices that emphasise:

- The use of renewable resources;
- Conservation of energy, soil and water;
- Recognition of livestock welfare needs; and
- Environmental maintenance and enhancement".

One cannot help but think that this list matches the underlying aims of all agricultural production in Australia. So why is this definition unique to the organic sector, particularly when for many outside of it, these criteria are not voluntary?

Those in the organic sector continue to reject GM crops, yet under these criteria, one could claim that GM crops meet the organic definition. The uptake of GM canola this year by professional agriculturalists says it all. It was anticipated that around 30,000 hectares would be planted in Western Australia and we have witnessed almost 73,000 hectares go in the ground. In Victoria, GM canola plantings account for 14 per cent of the entire State's canola crop.

GM canola adoption in Australia

Year	State	Canola area	GM canola	% GM
2008	NSW	195,000	4,700	2.4
	Victoria	185,000	4,900	2.7
<i>Subtotal</i>		<i>380,000</i>	<i>9,600</i>	<i>2.5</i>
2009	NSW	234,000	13,600	5.8
	Victoria	227,000	27,600	12.2
<i>Subtotal</i>		<i>461,000</i>	<i>41,200</i>	<i>8.9</i>
2010	NSW	315,000*	24,000**	7.6
	Victoria	260,000*	36,500**	14
	WA	875,000*	72,800**	8.3
<i>Subtotal</i>		<i>1,450,000</i>	<i>133,300</i>	<i>9</i>
TOTAL		2,291,000	184,100	8

*AOF Industry estimates at 09/07/10 ** Monsanto planting figures at 22/06/10

Farmers are voting with their feet. They want better weed control. They want access to the latest plant varieties. They want to utilise the most environmentally friendly inputs and systems. They want to trial new plant science in their own farming systems. They want to deliver customers and consumers the best product in the most sustainable and profitable way.

There has been some media chatter recently over a supposed "price premium" for non-GM canola. In Western Australia there is currently a five dollar per tonne differential. Is this a price premium? At the end of the day, farmers are operating businesses. They do not simply make a decision based on an end price, but take into consideration the cost of seeds, weed control and inputs, harvest, transport and storage. A farmers' net cost of production is more important to him or her than the final price variation. Just reporting an end price paints a very simplistic and inaccurate view and fails to recognise the complexities of agricultural operations.

Speaking of simplifications, the Gene Ethics Network continued its "community service" activities last week by publishing a map naming Western Australian GM canola growers. The details have been taken from media reports and, while one could question the integrity of disclosing such information, two things are clear:

- The farms are a very long way from the trendy Melbourne cafe strip promoted by the Permaculture Institute.
- The farmers are serious about using proven science and technology to improve sustainability.

So what conclusion can be drawn from all this? There are many more than ten reasons for going GM - and science and evidence demonstrates that this option absolutely supports a sustainable future. We should be extremely comfortable with not being trendy. But for those who are, they might need to re-evaluate what it is they are actually trying to achieve.

Agrifood Awareness Australia Limited (AFAA) is an industry initiative, established to increase public awareness of, and encourage informed debate and decision-making about gene technology. AFAA is committed to providing quality, factual, science-based information on the use of gene technology in agriculture to allow for informed decisions. AFAA works broadly across the agriculture sector. The organisation has three founding members – [CropLife Australia](#), [Grains Research and Development Corporation](#) and the [National Farmers' Federation](#) – and our activities are also supported by the sugar industry, the [Grain Growers Association](#) and through a project partnership with the red meat industry.

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