

the organic advantage



welcome to the world of organics

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ORGANIC NEWS HEADLINES

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INDUSTRY NEWS: "Everything small is getting big" - how retailers are adapting to a whole new world

The decision of retail giant Coles to increase the nutritional value of its house brand foods is one more sign that better health through low chemical eating is in high demand.

Cole's has announced its new house brand 'Quality Brand Standards' which will target areas like salt, fat and artificial colours and flavours.

"In new house brand products, we will minimise the use of added salt by 25 percent over five years and aim to be lower than the leading market brand equivalent," said Jackie Healing, Quality Manager.

Coles has also committed to using natural colours and flavours in their house brand products where possible and "will not permit the use of added flavour enhancers such as MSG and glutamates".

It's one more step forward for retailers into a world where people are asking more of their food – with consumers already able to avoid dangerous food add-ins by selecting from Coles organic range.

Coles became the first major retailer in Australia to introduce home brand organic food in 2004, due to “growing consumer demand for organic” and all product sold in their “You’ll love Coles Organic” range now displays the Australian Certified Organic (ACO) ‘organic bud’ logo.

This latest news provides further evidence of the opportunities available for ‘ready-to-go’ organic processed food as consumers demand more additive and preservative free foods.

One prime area of opportunity is in children’s foods.

“The organic standard eliminates 50 additives which have been associated with children’s behavioural problems originating from foods,” says Sue Dengate, founder of the Food Intolerance Network.

“Theoretically, if organic standards were adopted as mandatory tomorrow, all the current troubles we’re experiencing from preservatives and additives would vanish.”

She says it is essential there is more commitment to getting rid of foods with ‘added nasties’ by retailers in Australia.

“There are in particular six artificial food colours which have been banned in the UK after being connected to hyperactivity in children, which are still commonly found on shelves where children’s food is found in Australia – but are banned in organics.” (colours are: sunset yellow (E110), tartrazine (E102), carmoisine (E122), ponceau 4R (E124), quinoline yellow (E104), and allura red (E129)).

Ms. Dengate pinpoints Nestle’s renowned Smarties confectionary as one high profile case of ‘different country, different colours’.

In the UK Smarties no longer contain any artificial colours – they were removed amid consumer concern after the Liverpool University identified a possible harmful cocktail effect on the nervous system from artificial colours and chemicals.

More than two years later, Smarties found on Australian shelves still contain five out of the six artificial colours banned in the UK.

The need for fresh produce as well as processed items to keep ahead in health and high quality claims has also been highlighted by Bryan Silberman, from the Produce Marketing Association in the USA.

But he adds flavour into the equation.

“The term ‘stealth health’ is a term bandied around, where food that is healthy has to be combined with flavours - fresh produce needs to be aware of this, as do other food manufacturers,” he said (source: Food & Drink Magazine, October).

And he says while there are moves towards ‘ready to eat’ solutions, the trend to look out for in all foods in the future is that of the ‘locavore’ – or eating food which has been locally grown and developed.

Mr. Silberman says young mothers – also typically large purchasers of organic – especially want to be connected to their food and where it is grown.

“This is something the large supermarkets cannot provide that the local retailer can.

He says right now at the retail front - “everything small is getting big, and green is definitely in.”

AGRIBUSINESS: European leaders 'pro-GM' concern

Documents leaked to media and reported by British newspaper ‘The Independent’ last month revealed European leaders could be looking to speed up the introduction of GM crops and foods.

Records of a series of private meetings reportedly stated government representatives from 27 countries believed “something had to be done to ‘deal with’ public resistance to GM” and allow its more rapid uptake.

Currently, public opposition has halted modified crops from being grown in Britain.

The meetings were convened by Jose Manuel Barroso, the pro-GM President of the European Commission, and chaired by his head of cabinet, Joao Vale de Almeida.

The membership of the group, its objectives and its outcomes, have not been made public.

According to ‘The Independent’ interest in GM has been fuelled by claims from the Biotech industry that GM will be necessary to feed the world.

Discussion reportedly focused on how to speed up the introduction of GM crops and food, and how to persuade the public to accept them.

The GM debate continues

The news comes as the GM debate continues to gain momentum.

Proponents of genetic modification applied to food plants say GM could decrease poverty in developing countries by getting crops to grow in arid or harsh agricultural conditions.

They say health benefits are possible, with those involved in projects like ‘golden rice’ - a rice variety containing GM modified elevated vitamin A levels – claiming it could reduce blindness and childhood mortality worldwide.

But if the arguments for GM can start to sound convincing, the arguments against it are chilling.

“Genetically modified crops fail to deliver benefits,” announced ‘Friends of the Earth’ (FOE) International Chairs from Malaysia and Nigeria in the last year.

“Despite GM being touted as a ‘magic bullet’ in the past decade, our research has shown GM crops commercialized in the last decade have done nothing to tackle hunger (they are predominantly grown to feed animals rather than humans) and have not improved the livelihoods of the small-scale farmers, or reduced pesticide use,” the organisation stated.

“GM crops have often performed worse than conventional varieties in countries including India, Indonesia, Brazil and Paraguay.

“In recent years, small farmers in China have earned more planting conventional cotton than the Bt variety, and in India and Indonesia many small farmers have suffered from the agronomic failure of Bt cotton.”

FOE say contrary to reports by associations like the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), small growers’ experiences with GM have not been positive.

In 2005, ISAAA claimed 6.4 million Chinese farmers benefited from Bt cotton. According to FOE research (by the Cornell University), far from improving farmers lives, those using Bt cotton could expect to witness the slow emergence of secondary pests.

“Bt technology indirectly creates a safer environment for the growth of non-bollworm pests. Entomologists have suggested that it takes between five to ten years for such a secondary pest population to grow to a level at which it poses a significant economic threat.

“If secondary pests are not adequately taken into consideration, new technologies like Bt cotton will only serve to exacerbate problems associated with poverty and scarcity.”

They say monoculture is also an issue – with GM soybean expansion in South America one example.

“It will increase deforestation in areas such as the Amazon, displace poor rural families and reduce food security as crops for domestic consumption are replaced by export-oriented soybean monocultures.”

Currently a limited number of large corporations dominate the GM market, producing a narrow range of GM crops that only a few countries traditionally cultivated.

Soybeans, maize, cotton and canola now represent almost all of the world’s GM crop acreage, most engineered for herbicide tolerance or insect resistance.

“In short,” FOE concludes, “GM has not proven superior to existing conventional crops”.

Why organic can help

When it comes to developing nations it seems organic can drive poverty reduction faster.

The United Nations last month presented a study which found organic farming offered Africa the “best chance” of breaking out of decades-old cycles of poverty and malnutrition.

The research conducted by the UN Environment Programme suggested organic, small-scale farming could deliver increased yields once thought only industrial farming could deliver, and reverse environmental and social damage.

An analysis of 114 projects in 24 African countries found that yields had more than doubled where organic, or near-organic practices had been used. That increase in yield jumped to 128 per cent in East Africa.

The study found that organic practices returned strong environmental benefits.

“90 per cent of studies showed that organic or near organic agriculture had benefits for soil fertility; water control; improved water tables, carbon sequestration and biodiversity - this allowed farmers to extend the growing season in marginal areas,” said UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme).

And the research highlighted the role organic learning could play in educating and empowering African growers.

“Because organic agriculture is more knowledge intensive it has led to improvements in education, community bonds and cooperation for market access.”

And perhaps most importantly – it found organic returns were available to everyone.

“Higher incomes back to small farmers occurred as a result of not having to buy fertilizers and pesticides; and higher prices were paid back to growers through certification schemes for both export and domestic markets.

“Close to 90 per cent of cases showed increase in farm and household incomes.”

UNEP said essentially, organic or near-organic agriculture is ideally suited for marginalized smallholder farmers.

“It moves toward a whole systems approach to farming that is more diverse and resistant to stress.”

For more visit original press release UNEP:

<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=548&ArticleID=5957&I=en>

Read FOE's full report 'Who Benefits from GM?' at : <http://www.foei.org/en/publications/>

ENVIRONMENT: Barack Obama 'encourages organic' as sustainable alternative

Recognising the benefits of an environmentally sustainable food production system, newly elected

US leader Barack Obama has outlined the need to “encourage organic and sustainable agriculture” in his Rural Plan.

To support the continued growth of sustainable alternative agriculture, the plan included Barack Obama’s intention to increasing funding for the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program - “to help farmers afford the costs of compliance with national organic certification standards.”

The plan also stated Obama would aim to reform the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Risk Management Agency’s crop insurance rates so that they did not penalize organic farmers.

The Rural Plan also covered the market potential for organic.

‘Organic food is the fastest growing sector of the American food marketplace and demand for sustainable, locally grown, grass-finished and heritage foods is growing quickly,’ it stated, adding that the new President will also help farmers realise improving their bottom line is connected with increasing environmental benefits.

The Plan suggested looking at alternative inputs, all round.

“By using more wind and solar in power production systems and sharing energy with other users; by using new irrigation practices to conserve energy and water; by using no till and other agricultural practices that reduce energy input and keep the health of our soil sustainable.”

It reported Obama will also be likely to encourage the use of methane digesters that are being used to produce power from animal wastes, and has a strong interest in the next generation of advanced biofuels, including cellulosic ethanol (produced from a naturally occurring carbohydrate polymer commonly found in plant cell walls).

Cellulosic ethanol is chemically identical to ethanol from other sources like corn and sugar but is available in a great diversity of biomass including waste from urban, agriculture and forestry sources.

Currently, in Australia the potential of some similar ideas is being investigated.

A report by RIRDC looking at second generation lignocellulosics (including cellulosic ethanol) stated their development in Australia could be a potential solution the limited supply of ‘first generation’ biofuels, derived mostly from commodity crops.

“In a scenario where all the Australian domestic crops of sugar, molasses, wheat and coarse grains were converted into ethanol using first generation technologies, and all biodiesel inputs were used to make biodiesel, we would still not replace all of Australia’s transport fuel requirements (by a long margin for diesel),” it stated.

“However the development of second generation biofuels that utilise non-food plant materials, such as sugar cane bagasse, native grasses, native perennials, forestry waste, farm forestry, wheat straw, newsprint and cotton trash... could help reduce our carbon dioxide emissions, as well as providing unique opportunities for new agricultural industries.

Such industries may be aligned with sustainable production systems similar to organic in principle.

The report stated opportunities could occur “particularly in less productive agricultural lands where woody shrubs and perennial grasses can grow with few inputs.”

It stated low-input high diversity mixtures of grassland perennials for production of biofuels could have many positives in comparison to corn or soybean, with mixed grasslands producing 238 % more bioenergy from cellulose than mono-cultured crops like corn after ten years, with less inputs.

“These mixed grasslands can be grown productively on degraded lands and therefore would not require further land clearing nor compete with viable farming land to make a substantial impact.”

How does Australia measure up?

The Australian Government is also on the same track as Obama’s, expressing specific support for organic in their 2007 national platform.

“Labour will support the ongoing development of organic farming and sustainable agricultural practices,” it stated, as well as outlining their support for “the further development of the increasingly important role being played by farmers in the development and production of alternative fuels, including biofuels produced on farms” (visit http://www.alp.org.au/download/now/2007_national_platform.pdf).

Dr. Andrew Monk, BFA Standards Chair, says while the Government’s sentiments toward organic were strongly applauded, action was now needed.

“While the recognition of the benefits of organic in the context of sustainable agriculture is welcome, the BFA now looks forward to this being meaningfully translated,” he says.

“Agricultural R&D and policy that actively supports the uptake of more biologically orientated and organic agriculture options is the next step.

He says these outcomes would do more for the Australian organic industry than subsidies for organic certification as outlined in Barack Obama’s plans.

“The Australian culture is not one of subsidising agriculture – the fundamentally important challenge for Australia is to see a transition from organic support to actions that will enable organic farmers to flourish.

“Currently there remains an agricultural environment still orientated towards non-biological approaches, and the first step is the beginning of a journey of culture change - that is unlikely to happen overnight.”

HEALTH: GM 'Super-food' claims a farce, says Australian scientist

GM foods are launching into a new realm – human health.

Two new so-called 'super-foods' are the latest in a total list of just three GM food products claiming to improve health which have passed preliminary research stages.

A purple tomato has been crossed with snapdragon genes to reportedly boost levels of the anthocyanins antioxidants in mice.

And a GM soya bean has been found high in long chain omega3 acids (chiefly found in oily fish) which proponents claim may stop heart attacks.

The two join 'Golden rice' - a genetically-modified rice variety for elevated vitamin A levels - in the engineered 'high health' line-up.

Still in earlier stages of investigation are edible vaccines in GM bananas, and anti-clotting in GM goat's milk.

What's going wrong with GM health claims?

Dr. Maarten Stapper, former scientist with the CSIRO, says there is a reason so few 'super-foods' have reached this preliminary stage with none released for public use.

"The GM industry has been making promises for thirty years on better food but at the moment GM food released is still modified only at a production level for herbicide tolerance, and insect and disease resistance.

"Essentially, it's because with so many genes interacting with outside factors it is incredibly difficult to produce something that will stand up under vigorous testing with regards to health.

He says consumers have every right to be wary about ingesting GM food.

"In the peer-reviewed science literature there is yet to be a long-term animal feeding study on GM food products that spans several generations.

"That is incredibly important – we need to see the impact of GM on embryos and in young and developing bodies. Those aspects have not been checked.

Dr. Stapper says we can get better quality food by going back to the basics – decreasing chemical use and restoring nutrient density and quality – with more research than ever arriving to prove it.

This year, a review which looked at forty studies from the past six years comparing organic and non-organic foods found organic did indeed deliver more essential nutrients per calories consumed.

Organic plant based foods were on average 25% more nutrient dense, containing more of the health inducing polyphenols, flavonoids and antioxidants, linked to the prevention of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and osteoporosis.

"Plants grown in biologically active, healthy soil, have more roots, grow better, extract more minerals and build up better nutrition than plants supported by artificial fertilisers or genetic engineering," says Dr. Stapper.

He says despite all hypothetical claims, the GM industry hasn't come up with the goods yet.

"GM claims of better human health, improved fruit quality, GM grass for better digestibility for animals and so on are all nonsense – we can get that already.

"Change to a healthy soil and biological management alters the expression of genes in current varieties in amazing ways.

"Organic farmers see their cattle grazing for half the time they used to because they have higher minerals in the grass and organic cows produce high quality, highly nutritious milk.

"Animals become healthier when feeding on healthy plants from healthy soils.

"And healthy plants are more than capable right now of providing all the antioxidants and flavonoids we need.

He says isolating genes away from the bigger 'whole plant' picture is dangerous.

"GM puts a certain gene from a different species into a host and creates new proteins that have never been in existence before.

"The molecular structures of these proteins are then compared with the molecular structures of known allergens and the safety of the GM food is worked out on that basis.

"But these techniques do not take into account the way the protein is structured in the produce.

"For example, a GM pea which originally was pronounced non-allergenic and 'substantially equivalent' with non-GM peas, was found to be allergenic for mice when actually tested with a new experimental technique.

"Scientists found when testing the structure of the molecule taking into account the sugars in the product around it, that it was the combination of a sugar and the new protein that made it allergenic.

He says theoretic 'GM safety' is not based on real life.

"By far the easiest way forward is to work with what we already have available to us in nature."

He says that does not involve "going back to the dark ages - as many scientists want us to believe".

"With our incredible current knowledge we can improve on the food production of the past without relying on synthetic fertilisers, chemicals and GM, but recognising and learning to use the powers of nature.

"Such systems have already proven productive and healthy by innovative farmers."

GOOD TASTE: Organic interest ignites in Armidale and Coffs Harbour - BFA 'Organic Roadshows' arrive

Two organic roadshows in Armidale and Coffs Harbour this month show an escalating interest from northern NSW in growing and eating chemical free.

Organics in Armidale

A hunger for sustainable alternatives to fertilisers, herbicide and pesticides is being driven by price and a national emphasis on the environment, says Dr. Paul Kristiansen, agricultural lecturer at the New England University in Armidale.

“Currently it’s a difficult climate for agriculture, but right now there is undoubtedly a drive, even amongst big commercial producers to brush up on their biological basics,” he says.

He says the number of producers looking at going organic around Armidale is rising – “particularly in meat - organic wool, prime lambs and beef” – but that a high level of farmer support will be needed in the future to keep converting farmers on track.

“Consistent demonstration plots, awareness raising events like road shows and places where farmers can come to interact and discuss their concerns and successes are critical,” he says.

“I remain convinced the limitations of organic remain at this point on the supply side.”

He says even in Armidale, organic appears to be pushed by consumer demand.

“There’s a very popular interest in lifestyle, food quality and sustainability”.

He says the Armidale region may attract organic wine producers in the future.

“There’s a small – but very strong amount of interest growing in organic viticulture locally.

“The Armidale region has a great climate for very high quality organic grape production.

“We’ve just received a specific wine indication for the New England region – we don’t get big grapes, but they’ve got fantastic flavour.”

Organics in Coffs Harbour

An appetite for environmentally sustainable products from consumers, and high diversity in available organic produce is the recipe driving organic demand in Coffs, according to Kevin Doyle, owner of organic retail outlet Kombu Wholefoods in Bellingen.

“From the steamy hinterlands, to the coast, to the Dorrigo Plateau - we are incredibly blessed to live in an area with such climatic range, which can produce mangoes at one end and orchard fruit on the other – without relying on chemicals,” he says.

“We have access to a large variety of product from a relatively small region – and the local organic growers do a fantastic job of exploiting that!”

He says the popularity of organics in Coffs is growing rapidly.

“The local community is very passionate about working towards a more sustainable future for the region and has been quick to embrace locally produced organic food as a part of that.”

He says with the Coffs region working hard to establish a reliable organic food base, going organic in the area has the double benefit of low ‘food miles’.

“The viability of farming and eating chemical free will increase alongside the rising cost of oil, petrochemicals and transport”.

He says less distance travelled also cuts the expense of organic for local buyers, compared to food that has been trucked from interstate.

But he says it is health concerns that bring most people to the door.

“There’s been a much wider range of people buying organic in the past four and a half years, with a steady stream of people unhappy with their health who want to reduce the chemicals they consume.

“Nothing gives me more pleasure than seeing beautiful food come into the store fresh from the fields, in the arms of the people who’ve grown it.

“And there’s no doubt the consumer responds to that kind of quality – produce walks off the shelf an hour or two after arriving!”

Hear more on organic farming at the Armidale/ Coffs Harbour BFA Organic Roadshows!

When? *Armidale:* Friday 28th November 8.30am – 3.30pm

Coffs Harbour: Saturday 29th November, 8.30am – 3.30pm

Where? *Armidale:* New England Regional Art Museum, Kentucky St, Armidale, NSW

Coffs Harbour: Coffs Harbour Racing Club, Howard St, Coffs Harbour

RSVP: Contact BFA on (07) 3350 5716 email info@bfa.com.au to register interest

Visit http://www.bfa.com.au/index.asp?Sec_ID=150 for more information.

To complete your organic advantage!

Craving something stronger?...

Those seeking as natural a tippie as they can get can now head to New York, where America’s first certified organic cocktail bar will serve your cold one chemical, hormone, antibiotic, artificial flavour and preservative free.

"These concoctions are as good for you... as alcohol can be. We're offering all organic drinks at 2 for 1 on Saturday nights to promote sustainable drinking," says Alberto Gonzalez, bar owner.

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Your Organic Advantage

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