

## Launch of Organic and Bio-Dynamic Products Standard 9 October 2009

Speech notes – Craig Sahlin

Friends, it has been my very great pleasure over the past 2 \_ years to lead the process culminating in today's publication and launch of the Australian Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Products. I thank the organisers and yourselves for the opportunity to tell you a bit about that process and what we hope it will achieve.

When I was asked to take on this role in May 2007, it seemed straightforward enough – take the AQIS National Export Standard that has been in place since 1992, customise it to the form of a Standards Australia domestic standard, release a draft for public comment, and then finalise it for publication. Not too hard – and the troops will be home by Christmas...

Well in fact the third Christmas is about to come up! But I'm here to tell you that there are several very good reasons for this and the 22-person Committee and Standards Australia are entitled to be proud of the work they have done.

We have added value to the AQIS Standard that we took as our base, in three main areas.

Firstly, we drafted new parts to cover issues not required for an Export Standard, such as Sales, Marketing, and Retail Labelling. We also drafted a new part on Biodiversity and Landscape Management and an

appendix setting out our criteria and process to evaluate future proposals to amend the Standard.

Secondly, we tackled a number of “hotspot issues” that Committee members and stakeholders told us needed to be addressed as a priority. Significant changes have been made to the provisions covering synthetic feed supplements, biodynamic production, and processing aids for wine-making.

Thirdly, we drafted a companion document – known as the Miscellaneous Publication – on procedures for certification of organic and bio-dynamic products. While this mostly reproduces the certification procedures in the AQIS Standard, we also developed a framework for the recognition of equivalent international standards.

This is crucial for the integrity of the domestic market because something like 70% of this market includes composite products containing some ingredients, such as organic chocolate, that cannot be sourced locally in sufficient quantities or at all.

That work took us past the first Christmas and well into the following year. In July 2008 we completed the Draft Standard and the Miscellaneous Publication and released them for a nine-week public comment period. The response demonstrated an extraordinary level of industry and consumer interest – I am told that the 900 submissions received set the Standards Australia record for a single standards development process.

It took the hard-working Standards Australia support team 6 weeks to analyse the submissions and prepare summaries in table form to enable the Committee to work systematically through the issues raised. The table that summarised public submissions on the Draft Standard ran to some 279 pages and there was a separate 17 page table summarising comments on the certification procedures.

We reconvened in October 2008 and our consideration of the submissions took us past the second Christmas. We finalised our decisions at a two-day meeting in February this year.

To sum up on the scale of this undertaking, the entire Committee met for 15 full days between May 2007 and February 2009. There was also a separate sub-committee comprising all eight organic or bio-dynamic certifiers that met on many occasions and provided invaluable technical input.

We also set up specialist groups, sometimes with experts from outside the Committee, that worked out-of-session on issues including synthetic feed supplements, cosmetics, additives and processing aids, retail and marketing, bio-dynamic production, and equivalence recognition.

I would now to share briefly with you some personal reflections. While I have been a food regulator for 10 years, I had little knowledge or experience of the organic industry when we began the process.

I was immediately struck by the passion and commitment of the men and women who make up this industry. The values and philosophy of the organic and bio-dynamic movement are about so much more than the

food – it's about the planet, about sustainability, about animal welfare and about nutrition.

We had countless debates – sometimes heated debates – about the words on almost every page of our draft standard. People cared deeply about the fundamental issues and these fundamentals drove most of the debates.

Several of the Committee members are among the pioneers who built this industry over the past 30-40 years from a niche movement to its significant and growing market share today. It has been a privilege to come to know them and learn some of the history. Their passion is still evident, although it is tempered now by a commercial nous and an understanding that the industry needs to mature in a number of ways if it is to continue to develop.

The move from private standards controlled by the industry to standards made and maintained by a transparent, objective and public process, with broadly-based stakeholder input, is one element of this maturity. We need to recognise that this transition has been difficult for some in the industry and acknowledge the contribution of the progressive leaders who keep driving it forward.

Publication of the Australian Standard is a significant milestone but the next 12 months will be critical to achieving the ultimate outcomes. There are three important tasks in the year ahead.

Firstly, the industry needs to agree on a structure and process whereby an Accreditation Body such as, but not necessarily, JAS-ANZ is

appointed to accredit certifiers in accordance with the procedures in the Miscellaneous Publication. Until this is done, the Standard cannot be effectively implemented.

Secondly, the Committee needs to prioritise and begin work on the substantial set of issues that were deferred to what we call the Post-Publication Work Program. While in one sense any Standard is a living document always subject to change, there are a number of pent-up and difficult issues that will need to be resolved if the Standard is to provide a practical regulatory framework for the industry and also continue to meet consumer expectations.

I hope and expect that Standards Australia will continue to provide the excellent support it has provided to date so that the Committee can complete the job over the next 12 months.

Thirdly, the industry will need to develop its own process to further develop and maintain the preliminary work on recognition of equivalent international standards. Standards Australia cannot be expected to resource this work for a domestic standard but as I noted previously it is a practical requirement for the integrity of the domestic market.

In closing, I would like to summarise what I hope the Standard can ultimately deliver. First and foremost, I hope it will establish integrity in the domestic organic and bio-dynamic market that reflects the principles held by the pioneers of the industry with such passion and commitment. That will be the key to the consumer confidence the industry needs if it is to continue to prosper and grow.

I also hope that the Standard will continue to develop in a way that acknowledges the practical realities of production on a mass commercial scale without compromising the principles upon which the industry is founded. That will be the key to the sustainability of the industry.

These are great challenges.

Thank you.

ENDS