



Conversation at *The Joinery*

Export Growth and Food Production

A Conversation held on 6 August 2015, and facilitated by *Dr Sandra Grimes*.

Otopia's future in an export driven world? What then of the small, ethical, organic alternative?

The conversation featured certified organic farmer Liz Clay (*Baw Baw Organics*) and social scientist Dr John Paull (*School of Land & Food, University of Tasmania*) exploring the potential impacts of farm export growth on food production, particularly for small organic farming systems.

Discussion was moderated by philosopher and historian of science *Dr Alan Chalmers (University of Sydney)*.

Conversation hosted at *The Joinery (Conservation SA)*.

The Joinery, Franklin Street, ADELAIDE SA 5000

Thought Provoking

Australia has experienced an impressive economic boom in recent years on the back of selling natural resources ... to its Asian neighbours, and China accounts for more than a quarter of its exports. So weakness in the Chinese economy is bad news for Australia.

[Eight reasons why China's currency crisis matters to us all | The Guardian](#), Heather Stewart, 16 August 2015

This could mean that the China market, although still vast, may not be quite such a one-way bet as some analysts have previously suggested.

Summary Report

Introduction

As a starting point, this occasion sought to recognise and celebrate with some special reference to South Australia's past and present, the honourable and robust record that characterises organic practice and advocacy in various forms, including our home grown export practitioners.

As an outcome, perhaps a re-focus of attention as to how to sustain and protect our heartland, that strong, ethical basis underpinning existing bioorganic best practice, including what comes to us from certification and beyond.

Our speakers were invited to explore the impact of a predicted export growth on the organic sector and its underlying core values, addressing both opportunities and challenges.

The opening addresses of both speakers are summarised below. This somewhat obscures audience engagement characteristic of both Liz Clay's and John Paull's presentations.

John Paull

John Paull's published commentaries and histories of the organic agricultural movement (ten at last count) are the context for his presentation highlighting some facts and figures:

- A sorry tale indeed that organic agriculture makes up a mere 1% of the world's total agriculture. With his contemporary sketch based on available figures as background, John identified a quandary.
- Namely, given the claims of organic agriculture and a consuming public that purportedly purchases on grounds primarily relating to health, the organic game needs to be lifted in the direction of more effective marketing both in brand and language.
- In John's view, organic advocacy needs to highlight the values and avoid any erosion of them which may come from the pursuit of standardised rules, albeit designed to foster accountability and integrity (perhaps as an unintended consequence of Organic Certification and the Standards).

As ever John's presentation was enlightening and interactively humanising for his audience.

The slide presentation can be viewed or downloaded in its entirety here:

<http://www.coserve.com.au/C9-CommunityC.htm>

Liz Clay

Liz Clay 'impresario' and former Chair of the Victorian Organic Industry Committee (VOICE): industry plus environment plus community equals organic passion, localism and a common future.

- An amply informed and effective political voice reflecting a passion for the small local contours of organic practices and the pioneering heroes of alternative farming (one present in the person of Gavin Dunn as noted below).
- Liz recounted her experience of Gippsland-based organic practitioner workshops carrying forward the inspiration of the early pioneers and also attracting non-organic farmers into the scene such as the dairy industry.
- Liz identified as important occasions such as this event that bring the broader movement and its allies together to address a topic of contemporary importance. The values when shared in a 'common ground' can help solidify ethical practice at both ends of the spectrum (the local producer and the large-scale exporting enterprise) in concert with more formalised mechanisms such as Certification and the Standards on which certification is based.

More information about Liz Clay's organic activities can be found here:

<https://bawbawfoodhub.org.au/producers/piedmont-organic-farm>

Discussion Session Highlights

General discussion was moderated by the Chair, Alan Chalmers.

- Powerfully expressed correspondence promoting the values of small and local organic practices versus large-scale commercial and exporting enterprises was received from certified organic apple growers C and M McColl. They suggested that if large-scale commercial and exporting enterprises achieved market dominance in this sector, it could weaken organic standards and the associated values. They also cited the US experience as an example for Australia *not* to follow.
- It was left to Tim Marshall to voice a case for both small and large-scale organic operations as not indicative of a "tension in values" but rather that there is legitimate space for both within the world of ethical organic practice. If certified, both ends of the scale are subject to meticulously formulated organic standards. The Standards that underpin certification were conceived and written with a high degree of sophistication and complexity which often is not adequately recognised.

The McColl correspondence, received via Jenny Paterson, was read to the Conversation audience by the Chair and is appended below.

Facilitator Comment

One “side of the coin” under-represented in the Conversation itself was the practitioner voice speaking out on behalf of their own ethical export practices. With several organic exporting enterprises sending apologies and expressions of goodwill, this space in the Conversation has been hard to fill but, given its importance, it is one that I have endeavoured to address in my commentary.

The McColl correspondence was valuable in presenting another “side of the coin”. However, as the event was conceived as a “conversation” among a “broad church” of the organic movement, it was not an occasion for formally endorsing particular points of view.

Congratulations to Gavin Dunn and family of [Four Leaf Milling](#), Winner of the Organic Hall of Fame Award, Australian Organic Awards November 2014. Congratulations also due to [Monika Fiebig](#) for the Chairman’s Award for Organic Industry Integrity.

Background Information

Publicity for this event included a link to an ABC Rural website item, following the recent [Western Australian court case](#) and featuring the General Manager of NASAA (National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Australia), Ben Copeman, making a case for retaining zero tolerance for GMOs.

NASAA believes another major threat to international trade in organic produce for Australian producers comes from calls to relax the zero tolerance for genetically modified organisms.

Organic certifiers received heavy criticism in the wake of the ruling, but Mr Copeman said altering the standard would be a bad move for the industry.

"NASAA has constantly reiterated its position that we do not see that there's any place in the organic food chain for GMOs," he said.

"I believe this is the attitude that we should take overseas to our export markets, and China has made it perfectly clear to us that if Australia waters down the GMO tolerance laws in any way shape or form, then that could have impacts on the importation of Australian organic products."

[Certifier says changes to organic standards could affect international trade | ABC Rural](#), Clint Jasper, 26 May 2015

The comments are particularly relevant to our theme of organic export and core values which is why they were flagged as important background material in the Event Flyer. However, as it was not specifically picked up in discussion during the Conversation, the basics are set out above.

Endnotes

No definitive conclusions have been drawn in the commentary above. However, these outcomes have been identified as stemming from the Conversation and the pre-event publicity:

- This Report is the “short version” of my complete Event Commentary. The full text is available on request to Sandra Grimes: sandra@coserve.com.au
- Support for kindred events such as the *Organic Festival of Ideas*.
- *Orgnetsa* an occasional e-newsletter rotating between and linking interested parties in South Australia into an informal communication network. Subject to interest and support, but if not, then what cements community and industry in SA?
- The importance of exporting knowledge for the organic agricultural and allied sectors through the further development of relevant strategies and packages. Proposed submission to OFA Organic Trust Australia – Research and Education.
- The significance of the “vital connection” underpinning best practice holistic organic systems and their contribution to addressing a suite of environmental challenges including climate change was explored in a Virtual Meeting held in 2010, facilitated by Sandra Grimes and featuring a keynote presentation by Dr Maarten Stapper.

Further information can be accessed at the Co Serve Consulting *Community Engagement* home page: <http://www.coserve.com.au/C6-CommunityProjects.htm>

Acknowledgements

Thank you for the wonderful catering provide by private donors and:

- B.-d. Farm Paris Creek
- Organic to Go
- The Organic Market

The speakers were each gifted a Temple Bruer Organic wine.

A big thank you to all who helped with their participation and contributions. It certainly made for an interesting Conversation if “a bit perplexing”.

Event Facilitator

Dr Sandra Grimes

Associate, Co Serve Consulting

Beef Producer, 1987-1998 (BFA Certified Conversion 1997)

Soil Association SA (SASA) Honorary Librarian – Research, 2004-2009

SASA Archivist, 2010-2015

University of Adelaide, Visiting Research Fellow (Participatory Social Researcher), 2002-2009

Appendix

McColl “Localization” correspondence submitted to the Chair, and read out at the event.

From: Michelle McColl

Sent: Thursday, 6 August 2015 10:32 AM

We believe the focus of the organic industry in Australia should be on small-scale, owner operated, certified organic farms, supplying local communities with local food.

The Australian organic industry should not be focussed on export, or supplying the major supermarkets with certified organic food. The argument that says “the organic industry must supply the two major supermarkets to grow the industry and to make more organic food available to more people”, will prove to be counter-productive in the end. The net result would be large scale corporate owned “organic” enterprises, that would seek to water down the organic standards to make it easier for them to operate. Consumers would justifiably lose confidence in the organic “brand”, and big corporations would end up controlling the organic industry. (This time last year we were visiting small scale organic farmers in New England (USA), where it was apparent the word “organic” had very bad connotations, because the principles of organic farming had been compromised by large-scale, corporate, so-called certified “organic” farms).

To make more organic food available to more people, the solution is to have lots of small owner-operated organic enterprises all over the country, supplying lots of small owner-operated retail outlets (eg. IGA/Foodland supermarkets, independent green grocers, etc.). It is vital the organic industry does not play into the hands of big business, by focussing on Coles/Woolworths/export.

Kalangadoo Organic is a small, certified-organic, family run business, that has been our sole source of income for the past 13 years. We never have and never will supply Coles or Woolworths, or export our products. We believe in small business, and the concept of “localization”.

Best wishes Chris and Michelle

Thanks to Jenny Paterson for her facilitation and to the authors for their contribution to the Conversation.

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