

Organic foods

Descriptions like organic, biodynamic, biological, ecological or similar words can be used on any food destined for the domestic market.

Generally they refer to food that has been grown or produced without any contact with artificial fertilisers and chemicals.

The export situation is different. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS - www.aqis.gov.au) has, together with the Organic Industry Export Consultative Committee, developed a *National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce*. The standard requires organic food to be produced using:

- renewable resources,
- the conservation of energy, soil and water,
- recognition of livestock welfare needs, and
- environmental maintenance and enhancement.

All organic produce exported from Australia has to be certified, by an approved certifying organisation, as having been produced in accordance with the above standard.

The same certifying outline, although voluntary, is often used for the domestic market. Such foods would be marked *certified organic* with the certifying organisation clearly marked.

Organic or biodynamic

Biodynamic is closely associated with organic — biodynamic usually refers to an agricultural system that produces organic food, but focuses more on the holistic and philosophical farming processes, rather than just meeting the requirements of organic standards.

Food safety and labelling of organics

Organic foods are proving increasingly popular — the industry in NSW grew from an estimated market value of \$250 million in 2003 to \$400 million in 2005.¹

Organic products must still comply with health and safety standards that apply to all food. Therefore they do not raise any particular or significant public health and safety risks.

But because organics cannot be distinguished from conventionally produced products, they could be incorrectly or even fraudulently labelled.

When purchasing organic products, consumers should look for those which display certification labels of the seven Certification Organisations listed below. This will ensure they have been produced and/or certified to recognised organic standards.

Role of the NSW Food Authority

The Food Authority is monitoring organic foods as part of its general overview of food products to make sure that the food is safe and correctly labelled.

The Food Authority, jointly with fair trading agencies, makes sure no one misleads consumers about the food they buy. Harsh penalties exist under the *Food Act 2003* and the Food Authority can prosecute businesses that fail to comply with the law.

Certification of organic producers

All food businesses in NSW must comply with the *Food Act 2003* and it is the Authority's role to check for such compliance, but the Authority does not certify organic producers as this is not part of domestic legislation.

Voluntary domestic certification is available from seven organisations accredited and audited by AQIS for export certification. They audit certified producers at least annually for compliance using the same system for both domestic and export foods.

The seven certification organisations are:

- Australian Certified Organic (ACO) www.australianorganic.com.au
- National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA) www.nasaa.com.au
- Bio-Dynamic Research Institute (BDRI)
- Organic Growers of Australia (OGA) www.organicgrowers.org.au
- Organic Food Chain (OFC) www.organicfoodchain.com.au
- Safe Food Production Queensland (SFPQ) www.safefood.qld.gov.au
- Tasmanian Organic-Dynamic Producers (TOP) email: tas_organicdynamic@yahoo.com

Some certification organisations may be more stringent than others, so consumers should check to ensure they are satisfied with a company's certification requirements. All these agencies use the *National*

¹ The Bulletin December 1, 2006 Margaret Merten

Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce as the base standard for certification, and many apply their own additional certification requirements which operators must also meet to have products certified organic.

There are no similar requirements for the labelling of imported organic foods, but reputable national bodies often certify such product in the country of origin.

Enquiries related to standards or legislation for organic food on the domestic market should be directed to the national standard setting body for foods, Food Standards Australia New Zealand, on 02 6271 2222 or www.foodstandards.gov.au

About the NSW Food Authority

The NSW Food Authority is the government organisation that helps ensure NSW food is safe and correctly labelled.

It works with consumers, industry and other government organisations to minimise food poisoning by providing information about regulating the safe production, storage, transport, promotion and preparation of food.

More information

- visit the NSW Food Authority's website at www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au
- phone the helpline on 1300 552 406