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Organic standards and certification in Australia

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Organic certification is a regulatory and audit system aimed at providing guidelines and rules (known as Standards) for those wishing to become producers, processors or retailers/wholesalers/exporters of organic products.

Certification provides a system of traceability ensuring the integrity of the organic product from 'paddock to plate'. Organic certification helps to protect both consumers and producers of organic food from false claims and misleading labelling of organic products.

The *Trade Practices Act 1974* can help to ensure that products being sold as 'organic' are in fact organic. Severe penalties can apply for selling non-organic produce as organic. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is a national agency responsible for enforcing the TPA. See Organic claims and the Trade Practices Act:

www.accc.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/906982?pageDefinitionItemId=86167#h2_25

Currently there are two key Standards which govern the production, processing and labelling of organic food in Australia:

- The National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce, (export standard).
- The Australian Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Products – AS 6000-2009 (domestic and import standard).

Export standard

Organic certification in Australia originated almost 20 years ago when pioneers of the organic industry asked the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) for assistance in developing an

export program and a national standard for organic production.

In 1992 AQIS, in conjunction with the Organic Produce Advisory Committee released the National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce. The National Standard

'stipulates minimum requirements for products placed on the market with labelling which states or implies they have been produced under organic or bio-dynamic systems... The Standard provides a framework for the organic industry covering production, processing, transportation, labelling and importation.'

– National Standard. Ed. 3.4, 2009.

The organic export program is governed by the Export Control Orders. These Orders give 'prescribed goods' status to organic produce under the *Export Control Act 1982*. Any person producing organic goods for export is required to have a quality management system that is audited by AQIS as part of a third-party arrangement with certifying organisations.

All product leaving Australia that is identified by the trade description 'organic' or 'biodynamic', or with words of similar intent, such as 'biological', must be accompanied by an Organic Produce Certificate.

The Orders provide the necessary authority for AQIS to delegate the issue of certificates to accredited organisations. Certifiers issue export certificates to the exporter of the organic product.

Whilst the National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce is the national organic export standard, for many years it was also regarded as the 'de-facto' Australian domestic standard.

Domestic and import standard

An additional Standard has been developed which specifically covers organic produce sold within Australia (the domestic market) and which also

includes imported products. Published by Standards Australia, The Australian Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Products AS 6000-2009 was developed at the request of The Organic Federation of Australia (the peak organic group) by relevant stakeholder groups, including industry, consumers, retailers and regulators. The export standard was used as the basis for this new standard.

This domestic and import standard establishes an agreed set of procedures to be followed for the production, preparation, transportation, marketing and labelling of organic and biodynamic products including food and processed food within the Australian domestic market. It also covers organic food imported into Australia

The need for a domestic and import standard arose primarily because of misrepresentation of the word 'organic' and the lack of a clear definition within the Australian marketplace. This lack of a standard applying within Australia was also causing concern amongst Australia's trading partners.

The publishing of AS 6000-2009 aims to assist the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to operate more effectively under the *Trade Practices Act 1974* to ensure that claims made about organic and biodynamic products, whether domestic or imported, comply with the Act.

Organic certification organisations

Whilst requiring certification neither the export nor domestic standard can mandate certification. Both standards set out requirements for industry organisations seeking to become 'approved certifying organisations'. This is achieved through a system of third-party accreditation.

Under these arrangements each certifying organisation is audited to ensure that the organisation and its members meet the requirements of the Standards. In addition, AQIS accredits and conducts audits of certification organisations and their documented Export Control Orders and importing country requirements.

Currently seven organisations are accredited to provide inspection and certification services for a range of organic or biodynamic commodities and production practices.

- AUS-QUAL Limited (AUSQUAL)
- ACO - Australian Certified Organic
- Bio-Dynamic Research Institute
- NASAA - The National Association of Sustainable Agriculture Australia
- OFC - Organic Food Chain
- Safe Food Production Queensland
- Tasmanian Organic Dynamic Producers

The AQIS website provides up-to-date details on organic certifying organisations – see www.daff.gov.au/aqis/about/contact/aco.

The role of the certifying organisations is to ensure that products marketed under their logo are produced according to specific standards. Some certifying organisations have their own standards in addition to the National Standard. In addition, some are accredited by overseas countries to certify products in accordance with those countries standards. This recognition effectively provides equivalence to these countries' certification systems, thus allowing market access for Australian organic products accredited under those systems.

Details regarding the process of gaining organic certification can be found in the publication [Conversion and certification for organic farming](#).

Standards review

Both the export standard and the domestic standard undergo periodic reviews to ensure Standards remain current and aligned with the requirements of state and federal governments and overseas countries.

In addition, each standard contains lists of substances or processes which are permitted in organic farming or in the processing of organic products. Expert panels regularly evaluate applications for the addition or removal of permitted substances to or from the standards.

The future

Both the export and domestic standards are currently undergoing a side-by-side comparison in order to determine which standard is the more appropriate for export. The newly formed Organic Industry Standards and Certification Council (OISCC) will maintain the standard AQIS deems is required for export. The OISCC will only recognise one standard which will be used for both domestic and export product.

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More information

The AQIS organic and biodynamic products web page includes links to the Export orders and the National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce – see:

www.daff.gov.au/aqis/export/organic-bio-dynamic

AS 6000-2009 can be purchased from SAI Global – see:

www.standards.org.au/DevelopingStandards/BuyingaStandard.aspx

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