



## World Organic Congress - Summary & Report Italy June 2008

We arrived in Modena, Italy via Bologna and Rome Saturday June 14<sup>th</sup>  
I attended the following venues & sessions.

### Sunday June 15<sup>th</sup>

#### Cherry festival in Vignola

We travelled to Vignola by bus where the cherry farmers and processors of the area celebrated their Annual Cherry Festival. Along the main street there were numerous stands of cherry farmers presenting their produce, some with their own processed jam and jars of preserved cherries.

Also were farming families showing their preserved olives and processed Olive oil. The presentations were similar to those that we see at our farmer markets in Melbourne and presented the same opportunity to sample and buy cherries, other fresh seasonal fruit, jams, wine and a lot of other produce typical of the region direct from the producers.

One of the main attractions of Vignola is the very ancient Castle of Levizzano. Here growers with their families had stalls with their home made wines, tasty matured cheeses and pastries. The Italian families showing off their product in this town were very proud of their work as had perfected it throughout generations.

At this festival growers and groups of growers were successfully marketing their own brand names in the raw state ( eg cherries, olives) and processed. ( eg jams, preserved and pickled) Some also offered farm stay vacations – their accommodation was very upmarket and apparently very successful.

In the city centre there was a “mass” of Ferraris about sixty in all – mainly red also some blue and yellow. The Ferrari factory is in Modena – host city for the Conference. The Vignola Ferrari Team Club used of the occasion to support the area and its industries – a great example of how we can mix and complement each others industries and promote all at the same time in the same area.

We then bus'd back to Modena to register for the conference then headed off to the city square to celebrate the opening of the conference, following this was an opera rehearsal featuring some of Italy's finest singers.

Here we absorbed the more of Italy's rich culture where the people including ourselves took time to enjoy “the moment”.

### Monday June 16<sup>th</sup>

Carpi – slow – bikes – siestas

We headed off to Carpi to register for the Organic Fibre & Textile Conference. This took place in an old un – consecrated Church/Cathedral the Auditorium S. Rocco. One of the many beautifully recently renovated buildings in Carpi.

In the opening forum the various speakers discussed to what extent the textile and fashion industry can reduce the social and environmental “footprint”.

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There was discussion regarding stress related to farmers and the world wide trend of suicide amongst farmers. This due to pressure on farmer who faced failed crops and resulting increased debt loads. Also was agreement amongst the speakers that the farmer who produces the primary product does not receive enough return for his work.

The concern or emphasis was about what relationship our social responsibilities and protection of the environment have with changing fashion industries. For example the how the price of a pair of blue jeans can vary – the same pair of jeans can vary in price up to 250% depending where and how it is marketed. And is the distribution of profit even or equal along the supply chain?

I took note of Jill Duman from Patagoni's opening comment "organic is no longer niche; it is an expectation" It is a product that consumers from all parts of the world are wanting. It is no longer class differentiated to the consumers – the mindset that only the rich can afford organic is no longer evident. All consumers are now making conscious decisions about their lifestyles as they are wary of the impact they can have on the environment.

During this opening forum we met up with a Turkish company who manufactured organic cotton materials. They were looking for opportunities to blend organic cotton with organic wool. Since returning to Australia we have already made contact with this company. We will look at how we can value add the grower's wool and deliver organic yarn which means moving away from the traditional way of selling it greasy at auction.

Following this opening forum we attended a very special presentation of Organic fashion and contemporary dance at one of the very old theatres in Carpi.

This "fashion parade" was very different to the catwalks of Paris. The clothes / costumes created and designed for the dancer/singers flowed gracefully with their dance movements. The performance included instinctive, sensual and earthy movements. These extremely talented young Italian "models" were artists performing in their subtle flowing costumes as they danced and sang with endless energy.

## **Tuesday June 17<sup>th</sup>**

### **Organic Fibre and Textile Presentations**

#### **Morning**

Throughout the morning session speakers gave an updated picture of the development of organic cotton in main regional areas included were third world countries. They addressed the social and environmental impacts from the use of pesticides, the diffusion and impacts of GMO in cotton crops and labour conditions. Balancing the principles of Organic Agriculture - Health, Ecology, Fairness, Care were the topics addressed by the forum.

#### **Afternoon**

My Rural Organics address was given with The Merino Company . The other presentations in this session were about cotton cultivation in Peru, Organic cotton in Brazil, the development of organic cotton in Uganda and development of organic silk in Thailand. All presentations addressed the four principles of organic agriculture and described the management tools they used to overcome any in balances.

Each address was similar as each small region had been farming their products by default eg cotton in Peru, Brazil and Uganda, silk in Thailand and wool in Australia's outback. It was by chance that we discovered we were farming organically and took advantage of our clean farming environments by managing them organically.

However although our environments were free of contaminants our management had to conform to the organic standards.

It was a pleasure to be presenting with The Merino Company (TMC) as some as my growers supply their raw greasy wool into TMC. TMC operate their own processing plant in China - growers who eliminate the auction system and sell to the processor are a step closer to value adding their wool.

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TMC address had to be downloaded from the internet however the facility was not available at the venue in Carpi also the technicians were unable to help out. It was a bit of a dilemma however the Telstra bigpond soft ware that has been installed into my computer for my outback trips was able to download the presentation for TMC. It was quite amazing that outback technology in this very old beautifully renovated Carpi building could overcome technical difficulties in southern Europe.

My address presented well and I will now be looking for ways to ensure that Rural Organics wool reaches shelves of shops with the same quality and integrity that it is grown. This will involve building and cementing relationships with companies along the production line from the sheep to the shelf – also a comprehensive business plan. In it we will address a marketing program that will assist growers to make conscious business decisions about how they want to market their wool.

**Wednesday June 18<sup>th</sup>**

**Initially my plan to take the train to Florence to check out the latest fashions and fabric for Europe's winter however to my disappointment I could not get a connecting train so I attended the Climate Change Workshop.**

Workshop on Climate Change

This workshop was organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations. The three areas covered were climate change adaptation and mitigation, energy use and bio-energy and carbon in organic certification.

The speakers addressed the effects that climate change is having on productivity, food supply systems and consumption. They covered the impact of food production and consumption on global warming as well as the potential of organic food systems in decreasing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating climate change. There was a call for diversified organic systems in order to secure both sustainability and food security.

The forum questioned the bullock verses the tractor.

With western agriculture's broad acre farming debts are increasing annually due to ongoing costs and increasing prices for fuel, fertilizers and upgrading equipment. They are beginning to look at farming which requires fewer inputs and lessor costs and farming systems where their soils can be fertilized using natural inputs.

In the third world countries where the people are farming organically they can not afford the ongoing costs the western farmers accrue.

Where there is only one tractor to share on an estate the farmers are unable to plant all land to crops as time runs out. They also miss out on a harvest.

Using the bullocks they can plant their crops and they have a crop to harvest. Climate change has less affect and their land is more sustainable due to their farming methods.

More people need to be involved on the farm and so have self worth. Question arose is it necessary to use tractors (instead of labour) costing fuel and other inputs that impact on climate.

Bullock verses the bullock. Does it matter that more people are required to use the bullock and old farming systems in the third world countries. At least the farmers maintain a sense of self worth.

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The third world countries have been and will continue to farm organically as they have for generations simply because they cannot afford the costs of large scale farming in the western countries. To them it is about looking after their families, their existence and their livelihoods – survival. Some are also beginning to profit from premiums received from the sale of their products. So they are thinking they have a system that is working .

In many farming areas of the world where there has been excessive pesticide use the resulting pollution in the rivers is causing long suffering illnesses and death. So as a result organic farming although an old farming system is being adapted with new methods and it is happening that farming needs to be sustainable simply for survival.

Energy efficiency of the UK agriculture sector was discussed based on the Soil Association analysis of the results of Life Cycle Analyses of organic and non – organic products. Also explored was the sustainability of biomass production for energy use and the compatibility of large scale bioenergy supply with the organic principles of closed nutrient cycles and energy sufficiency.

Our Australian scientist John Paull linked carbon footprint offset programs to increasing pesticide in silviculture, arguing for the adoption of organic forestry standards and certification. Carbon credit discussion included soil and more low emission composting technology and the process for its approval as a greenhouse gas Emission reduction project that qualifies for generating carbon credits in several countries. Information given suggested that the carbon credit program in Australia is still in its infancy and procedures to be adopted are currently being studied.

Sustainable Transport discussed food miles comparing energies and effects of farm emission outputs to those of industry, manufacturing and transport. The feeling is that emission could be reduced from better organisation.

I found the climate change session very interesting and a topic that Australia's certifying bodies should be involved in.

### **Thursday June 19<sup>th</sup>**

I headed down to these sessions with a small Malaysian woman – who had been involved in the tsunami disaster. On our way we discussed providing food for the world. I questioned whether there was enough food in the world to which she replied a definite yes. She had been involved with the distribution of food during the tsunami crisis. She commented that the amount of the food that the world supplied at the time of the tsunami was enormous. It was supplied instantly from all parts of the world and there was more than enough. Her final comment was there is enough food in the world - it's just the way that it is distributed.

### **Organic Pest Disease Management – cultivators**

Discussed biological pest control strategies used by innovative commercial organic farmers for perennial weed control and the resulting affects. Was pointed out that Where human labour was employed to pull out weeds manager needed to be sure his “weed pickers “ could discriminate between the weeds and the plant. In some cases weeds and plants are similar in appearance.

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In regions where the guinea fowl has been introduced in the management of grasshoppers the farmer not only saves his crop but also has the guinea fowl (organic) as a sideline income. Is similar to our grape growers in Australia where some farmers graze sheep or goats to eradicate weeds between the grape vines.

Were given good insight into mechanical weed control in Germany where innovative farmers have designed a goose foot, uni – hackle, finger hoe and a torsion shackle. All could be attached to existing machinery so eliminating extra tractor work, fuel and man hours on the tractor. They were designed not to cause too much plant damage. I Will be passing hints and contacts onto Australian farmers.

#### Organic Practices and Livestock/Animal

There were four main issues discussed for balanced sustainable organic farming

- 1) The animal – the animal has to be able to perform its normal social behaviour, So its condition and locomotion (mobility) are taken into account .If these are not addressed it will not perform anyhow.
- 2) Workers – workers need to have a safe and comfortable working environment
- 3) The environment whether the animals live inside or outside need to have available nutrition and good water.
- 4) It has to be economical for the farmer.

#### Organic Practises and Management Performance

Of particular interest in this session was a presentation from Viv Burnett (Australia) on dryland organic farming. She discussed how their experiments managed the dry climate to achieve affective yields.

The different European countries and North America showed their ways of managing soil fertility, composting and crop management with specialty equipment for organic no – till cropping. An effective breeding program for wheat in the Netherlands showed how this method could be financially viable.

Dinner at IFOAM venue

The high light of the Dinner was the attendance of two very old sisters from Argentina who had attended every IFOAM conference.

### Friday June 20<sup>th</sup>

#### Genetic Engineering and Genetically modified Organisms

It covered practical ways of dealing with GMOs and discussed how it implicates the organic movement. It gave an understanding of the different contexts that organic farmers work in. Suggested that if were to be banned how would you police it. The scientists at this session were practical with their input and had simple solutions. They advised that the organic industry should be vigorously involved in breeding programs to negate the need for GMOs and that we should be recruiting organic farmers to breed organic varieties.

#### Nanotechnology.

Nanotechnology is regarded as a key technology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which will penetrate all industrial sectors in the medium term. Nano particles will soon have many applications in agriculture, food processing and packaging.

There are considerable knowledge gaps relating to the impact of nan – particles on human health and environment. With few exceptions , there are no organic production standards relating specifically to the use of nan – particles. Need to work out if it is a necessity or an alternative and how it affects the environment, human health, quality of life.

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## **Conclusion**

Climate change, rising fuel prices and the energy crisis are issues causing consumers, manufactures and farmers to change their lifestyle and methods in order to sustain.

The four principles of organic agriculture Health, Fairness, Care, and Ecology are influencing organic farming to become mainstream around the world.

The 2008 World Organic Congress in Europe's Italy was an ideal venue to gain ideas for growth and expansion of the Organic industry in Victoria. I was lucky to accompany Diane Carson throughout the trip to Modena/Italy and to the conference venues. Her commitment, interest and passion for organics to explore and hear about some of the world's already successful organic systems at the conference was very professional.

Finally I sincerely thank the Victorian Government and Diane Carson ( Regional Development Manager for Regional Development Victoria) for the opportunity to present my paper on the Certified Organic and Bio – dynamic Wool Industry of Australia and also the opportunity to attend the conference.

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