

When organic means nothing - the Benzene debacle

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On Wednesday 18th July, ABC's 7:30 Report highlighted how some allowable organic inputs used on organic farms were contaminated with benzene and nitrate. The programme questioned why one of Australia's largest organic certifier, Australian Certified Organic (ACO) would allow some Nutri Tech Solutions (NTS) products that allegedly contained traces of benzene and unacceptable levels of nitrate.

http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/730report/video/podcast/r974806_10607483.m4v

Ducking for cover?

Following this both ACO and NTS published statements. ACO said that it was conducting its own testing on all NTS products currently certified as allowable inputs for organic farmers. As a precaution, sixteen organic products were withdrawn from Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA) registration awaiting the results of the analysis.

<http://www.bfa.com.au/IndustryResources/BFAPublications/OrganicAdvantage/OrganicAdvantageArchives2012/mid/777/newsid777/194.aspx>

In NTS's release they stated that "some of you may be aware of a television report this week regarding the levels of two compounds that were found to be present in 2 of our 200 products". Further, NTS stated that "The show was initiated as part of an ongoing campaign of vilification conducted by two disgruntled ex-employees".

<http://us4.campaign-archive1.com/?u=ac6ba98d6481ea32f0260ca57&id=e0b086942e&e=3fa3aacaf3>

As you can already see, the potential for litigation here is huge.

How safe is benzene?

According to www.cancer.org, Benzene is a colourless, odourless compound that is a common solvent used in petroleum, dyes, detergents, shoes, drugs and pesticides. It is a known human carcinogen associated with leukaemia and possibly breast cancer. Long term side effects include anemia (low red blood cell count - feel weak) and low white blood cell count (ability to fight infection). It is fat soluble and has a high acute toxic effect on aquatic life. Just what we need on an organic farm.

When an allowable input shouldn't be

Modern organic farming has drifted a long way from the principles laid down last century. As discussed in my last article, "The organic fraud - why chemical free is not enough", organics has moved towards input replacement rather than farm design, humus building, composting and remineralisation. I don't know of any logical or technical reason how any organic certification body can allow a coal based product treated with potassium hydroxide or nitric acid to be used on an organic farm. Apparently this produces humic and fulvic acids. Whatever happened to producing a quality compost rich in superior humic fractions. All for no added cost. This process dates back thousands of years but unfortunately can't be patented or raise funds for the certifying body. Maybe it comes down to marketing as

each of these allowed inputs must be registered with the certification body and yes, it costs money.

On the other hand the conventional farming industry have used superphosphate as a source of phosphate since 1843. Here natural rock phosphate is treated with sulphuric acid. What is the difference between both of these products if they both undergo extreme chemical reactions? Why has the organic industry taken such a “holier than thou” approach when its backyard is “very soiled”.

For those farmers that have used a NTS product (NutriCare) that may contain benzene or one of the many other products that contain NTS Fulvic 1400 (may contain elevated levels of prohibited nitrate) the news is not good. If the results come back positive they will probably end up being decertified for a number of years. This does not only effect ACO/ BFA certified clients. Many other certified bodies also use BFA Allowed Inputs. This has the potential to lead to a class action all because the certification bodies refuse to stick to the fundamental principles of organic farming.

The horse has bolted & again the consumer holds the baby

The real danger is that benzene is fat soluble and may be present in oilseeds and potentially meat and or root crops. If Nutricare is found to contain unacceptable levels of benzene then a full food recall is warranted. Each of the farms that used the product should then be audited and any product grown on those paddocks must be tested. The obvious issue here is what happens if carcinogenic benzene is found in certain oilseeds, root crops or meats and they have already been consumed? Again the consumer wears it on the chin all because the industry is lazy and doesn't audit correctly. Why aren't new organic farmers taught about the founding principles of organic farming. Why isn't it mandatory for these new entrants to do a course like TAFE's Diploma of Organic Farming (NEC).

Consumer trust and knowing where your food comes from

Finally, this benzene debacle highlights the importance of knowing the first name of your farmer and understanding how food is grown both organically and nutritionally complete. Yes, it takes time but when we are talking about the health of you and your loved ones surely it is an investment worth taking.

A little background information about Organic Garden

Organic Garden is a certified organic market garden (NASAA #4242) of 1.25ha located on the highly fertile red volcanic soils at Mount Tamborine, Queensland. Organic Garden specialises in unique flavoursome European and Asian vegetables grown traditionally with quality humic rich compost and minerals not found on these soils. Owned and managed by Adam Willson, Adam brings 25 years of organic horticultural and agronomic experience. He is the director of Soil Systems Australia and is a board member of the Organic Federation of Australia (Australia's Peak Industry Body).

<https://www.facebook.com/mt.tamborineorganicgarden>