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Professor Peter Newman  
Director, Sustainability Policy Unit  
Policy office  
Department of the Premier and Cabinet  
15<sup>th</sup> Floor, 197 St Georges Terrace  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Professor Newman

Please find attached a submission responding to “Focus on the Future; Opportunities for Sustainability in Western Australia”. This submission was written on behalf of the Organic Growers Association WA.

I hope that the Sustainability Policy Unit will find this submission of use.  
If you would like any further information please contact either the President of OGAWA, Annie Dunn, on (08) 94451415 or myself on (08) 97612666.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on such an important issue. I look forward to a Strategy on Sustainability that includes the Organic Industry of Western Australia.

Yours sincerely

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Organic Growers Association WA Inc

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This submission was written for the Organic Growers Association of Western Australia Inc

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## Introduction

Producing food and fibre in an organic, sustainable fashion should be an integral part of any discussion and certainly any strategy, for state sustainability.

Western Australia is fortunate in that this state already has numerous practitioners of organic farming, as well as wholesaling, manufacturing, and processing businesses related to the organic industry.

These operations, both primary and processing, provide clean food, fibre and inputs for local, interstate and export consumption. They work in harmony with the environment, provide employment and job satisfaction and demonstrate positively and realistically that our future can be provided for without continued negative impact on our environment.

The purpose of this submission is to bring the West Australian Organic Industry to the attention of the Sustainability Unit and to suggest ways that this thriving industry may be incorporated in the Sustainability Strategy. The intention is to do this by responding to the general questions raised by “Focus on the Future”, and by practical examples. To demonstrate ways in which the Organic Industry in WA currently, and in future, can meet the demands of sustainability.

The words “sustainable” and “organic” have been bent to suit the needs of many different voices.

For the purpose of this submission I will define Organic as stated in General Notes of the Australian National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce

”.....Organic farming requires the nurturing and maintaining of the land for future generations. Emphasis is placed on the use of renewable resources, the need for conservation of energy, soil and water resources and the maintenance of environmental quality. The production cycle is as closed as possible..... The objective of this system is to be sustainable.”

The National Standard for Organic and Biodynamic Produce (implemented in 1992) was developed by the organic industry in cooperation with AQIS (Australian Quarantine Inspection Service).

This standard is the benchmark AQIS uses to accredit organic certification agencies. There are currently six bodies accredited with AQIS to carry out certification of organically managed operations.

The purpose of all six agencies is to provide regulation and recognition for all businesses that are operating in compliance with the standards. That is, operating using sustainable practices.

With two exceptions, examples used in this submission are businesses that have achieved organic certification.

## Response to key questions

### *Is sustainability a worthwhile pursuit?*

Sustainability is a worthwhile pursuit. In a State where salinity, acidity, depletion of biodiversity, pollution of waterways and erosion are major issues due to past and current farming practices, farming in a sustainable manner cannot be under valued.

For the practitioner using sustainable methods there is the satisfaction of renewing and maintaining the full health of the land so that it can provide an income for ongoing generations.

Land in full health produces a better quality product. If this land is managed properly sustainable yields of quality produce can be continued indefinitely. If the land is overworked, deficiencies are not corrected, or nutrients taken out are not replaced, the soil will become poorer and the balance is lost.

Re-building the soil to full health requires time and usually money. At present there are no incentives for farmers, already feeling the financial squeeze of poor seasons, low yields and possibly pressure from the banks, to convert to more sustainable methods. The change cannot happen overnight and bills must be paid in the short term.

Several broad acre farmers in the West Australian wheatbelt have been gradually converting their land to organic management practices. Organic Farms WA is a group of broad acre farmers who are all certified by the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Australia (NASAA). These growers have been using organic practices for varying lengths of time, but have banded together to network, improve management practices and to work towards developing markets for their produce ie grains and sheep for meat and wool. They have resisted the economic pressures, ignoring the short-term gains that heavy cropping cycles can nett, to ensure the long-term sustainable health of their land.

### *What benefits could flow if sustainability was taken more seriously?*

If sustainability were taken more seriously, these organic growers and other like them would have greater support, which would enable them to convert fully to organic practices sooner. Other growers would be encouraged to change their practices to sustainable organic methods. Processors, confident of supply would be more likely to develop their facilities along sustainable lines, with the result being a product grown and processed, even delivered to the consumer in a more sustainable way.

More primary producers would mean a larger pool of supply. Market confidence, which is currently lacking among bigger purchasers (from grain mills and abattoirs, to supermarkets), would be established.

Supermarket chains, for example, are well aware of the increasing demand for fresh organic produce.

In turn, they demand large quantities of good quality produce at low prices, and a year round supply. To meet this demand requires networking of growers across the state (different growing seasons), growers operating on a scale large enough to meet demand and absorb costs, and growers who have the advanced marketing and negotiating skills needed to deal with a large corporation.

A project currently being developed in the South West of Western Australia is the Natural Medicines of Australia Ltd. This project could include up to sixty-five individual farmers developing their own land for organically grown crops. The initial crop is to be Ginko Biloba. My discussions with individual farmers considering joining this venture included their excitement at a new venture, their enthusiasm for the chance to farm organically and their fear of the financial pressures of the start up costs.

These growers are looking for new opportunities with a sustainable direction.

The benefit of taking sustainability more seriously is the correction of problems such as salinity, acidity, erosion, waterways pollution and the depletion of biodiversity.

Providing support for people looking for sustainable directions benefits the grower, the processor, the consumer and the State as a whole.

*What opportunities exist to pursue sustainability?*

Commercial opportunities driven by market demand are numerous for organic agriculture. Recognition, support and ongoing commitment from government can help to make these opportunities a reality.

Markets for certified organic products are growing rapidly in response to consumer demand for safe, healthy food produced with consideration for the environment.

Sustainable organic production is recognised as satisfying these consumer concerns.

Demand for organic products covers virtually all food categories, and WA is an excellent position to produce organic grains, meats, dairy, fruit, vegetables, herbs, honey and a vast range of value-added products. In fact we already have a few organic examples in all of the above categories.

The existing framework for certification is an effective way to pursue sustainability.

Growers and processors currently involved in the Organic industry have a wealth of information and experience. Unfortunately there is no structure in place to co-ordinate the exchange of knowledge accumulated by individuals within the industry. There is also no formal recognition or financial reimbursement in most cases for the passing on of this valuable information.

*What is the role of government, business and the community in facilitating change to be more sustainable?*

In developing a viable organic industry the role of government should be one of recognition and support. The organic industry is an important role model in providing direction and practical solutions for a sustainable future. This industry can provide social benefit and economic rewards. The government needs to develop a link to people

working within the organic industry so that the real issues can be understood and addressed. Government has the ability to learn what the issues are and to develop policies and strategies to build the industry as well as to provide relevant information and education to the general public.

A pressing current example is the introduction of genetically modified crops into Western Australia. If genetically modified crops are allowed into this state without appropriate research into the implications of each individual crop, it will have serious consequences for the local organic industry. Under current certification standards the use of genetically modified crops is not permitted. Contamination by neighbouring crops could lead to decertification.

When the Organic Growers Association of WA arranged a meeting with the current Minister for Agriculture, Kim Chance, he and his advisors did not seem to know that there was an established organic industry in this state. In conjunction with Agriculture WA, a discussion paper has been released, on the intent to introduce genetically modified crops into WA. This paper covers ways to introduce genetically modified crops into Western Australia. There was no invitation to debate whether they should be released in WA.

Within the West Australian Department for Agriculture (AGWEST) a few projects have included some elements of organic production. Steve McCoy, a Development Officer with AGWEST is researching Organic

Agriculture in general. His work includes general industry development and a horticulture project including practical trials. New publications by the Department include production guides for organic wheat, beef, vegetables, grapes and wine.

Unfortunately no data has been collected to date on the exact amount of organic produce being exported from WA. Some estimates put it as high as A\$5-6 million annually. Australian organic exports are said to be around A\$30-50 million and world trade is estimated at US\$26 billion. Various European governments now subsidise the change over of individual farms to organic management systems.

Denmark, for example, has a US\$500 million, 5 year programme supporting not only conversion to organic production but also promotion of organic consumption.

The Organic Industry locally and worldwide does have significant economic rewards. There is also a direct dollar value attached to the farming methods. These dollar values relate to issues ranging from land degradation, silting of rivers and dams, through to public health and pesticide use.

Steve McCoy sees “terrific export opportunities for certified produce”. He encourages the use of such a high value export orientated product to develop sustainable agricultural systems.

Currently there is no funding specific to organic/sustainable farming practices. However most growers pay levies to the relative industry R & D Corporation. Some assistance can be sought through a variety of options from Land Care and Innovation programmes, through to Forestry or Dairy restructuring.

A farmer using organic practices needs to be adept at seeking funding to obtain any assistance for his particular sustainable project.

Business has shown an interest in organics for its economic potential. The best examples of this interest would be the processing operations that are providing support in the form of a higher price paid to the individual farmer and/or processing their product as a market test. This means considering the long-term possibilities rather than the short-term profits. This support gives the organic enterprises financial support and/or breathing space to move through the three-year conversion phase and to get their systems perfected. Business can also provide support for sustainability by insisting on proof of organic and sustainable claims. Purchasing policies that insist on organic certification strengthen the industry and provide assurance to the consumer.

Anne Lyster of Casuarina Valley, Manjimup, one of the states largest apple producers, intends to set up an organic apple orchard as a small part of its overall production. This orchard would conform to certification standards and sell into the organic market place. If managed as a supportive, inclusive venture, this type of support from large successful operations validates the smaller grower, opens larger markets and possibly provides packing and transporting breaks for the smaller operators. They in turn have experience and knowledge of use to the larger grower, who is new to this type of production. If managed as a competitive venture, the larger operation can control the market and wipe the smaller growers out within a few seasons.

The community is already showing its support by the ever-increasing demand for organically produced goods.

The fact that these goods often come with a premium price means that community support is put under pressure, as the goods are not always affordable to the average household.

The community is also becoming more educated to the realities of the organic market. The demand for quality, price parity and for proof of organic claims has sometimes led to sensational and negative media attention.

The success of the dozen or so organically orientated retail outlets across the state, and the increase of organically certified products on supermarket shelves proves that the demand, and the support, is there.

Community Supported Agriculture includes the general community in several different ways. It links the customer directly to the growing process. Depending on the set up the customer may support the operation financially, by physical support or other skills (such as bookkeeping, legal advice etc).

While farming in a partnership near Pinjarra, Rick and Annie Dunn developed a subscription system. Customers paid a set amount at the start of the year, which entitled

them to fresh produce, home-delivered weekly, for that year. The customer could choose to pay for the full amount or could pay half in cash and work once a month in the market garden. As a city based customer/subscription worker I gained skills and knowledge, and for one day per month, came face to face with the realities of primary production and the need to keep the environmental balance

Another working system involves several investors providing start up funds, specific skills and maybe labour in return for produce and a share in the profits.

*What best practice examples exist to demonstrate how sustainability is being progressed?*  
Currently in Western Australia there are around 150 organically certified operations. 70% of these are involved in horticulture, 25% in viticulture and broad acre farming and 5% in wholesaling, manufacturing and processing, including farm inputs and value adding of primary produce.

Eighty to ninety of these are certified with NASAA (The National Association for Sustainable Agriculture).

Twenty odd are certified with BFA (Biological Farmers of Australia) and around forty are certified with DEMETER (Bio-Dynamic Research Institute).

Several are certified with the OHGA (Organic Herb Growers Association). The other two certification bodies accredited with AQIS are the OFC (Organic Food Chain), and TOP (Tasmanian Organic-Dynamic Producers Co-operative). Keith Morris of the OFC says negotiations are happening with a potential client in WA.

TOP is an interesting concept as it includes state/regional branding as well as organic status.

Certification provides the customer with an assurance that organic (and sustainability) claims are valid and that best practices are being followed.

Individual examples are provided on page 8 of this submission.

At present there is little research in Australia examining sustainability measures of organic agriculture. However scientific evidence is mounting from Europe, the USA and elsewhere that show, compared to conventional agriculture, organic systems use less energy, rely on less input materials (especially non-renewables) and require less water. They improve soil resilience to various forms of land degradation and can increase biodiversity on and around farms. The off-farm negative impacts are also lower, thereby reducing the cost to the community of these often costly side effects.

*What research and development is needed to ensure sustainability outcomes can be achieved?*

Formal research and development of sustainable, organic practices are being carried out by several bodies across Australia. Steve McCoy (AGWEST) is carrying out trials



looking at different methods of organic production. Lack of financial support keeps the practical research to a minimum.

Formal and informal research is being carried out by many of the certified operations across the state. Peter and Suzanne Little, NASAA certified Karridale viticulturists, are a good example of private individuals taking research on and inviting agencies to work in partnership. Their operation is described in more detail in the next section of this submission.

Although most of the primary production operations do not take such a formal scientific approach as Peter and Suzanne Little, most operators become researchers by default. Where conventional farmers would have recommended rates for inputs provided by the Ag Department, consultants or suppliers, the farmer using organic practices is breaking new ground, trying new methods and often developing unique equipment or inputs to meet their particular needs. They do not have the routine support generally available to conventional growers.

The Gwellup market garden run by Rick and Annie Dunn has been used for experimenting with new equipment by Kleenheat Gas, Ag Department research, and for their own research and practical trials, including ongoing development of organic seedling production.

The farm is also used for the purpose of education. Field days are regularly held, school children carry out projects in designated areas and people interested in learning more are welcomed as hands-on helpers.

There are many other examples of private individuals attempting to fill the gaps and move the industry forward.

Research and development by government bodies should include

- × assisting the conversion process
- × carrying out research to gain understanding of how organic systems work below and above the ground
- × assessing the true cost of conventional farming compared to organic
- × researching the use of organic methods to remedy land degradation

*In a more general sense, what else should Western Australia be doing to contribute nationally, regionally, and globally to progress sustainability?*

In a general sense Western Australia has a prime opportunity to be seen as a “clean, green producer” This is not just an economic argument, but also a chance for Western Australia to set an example in sustainability locally, nationally and internationally.

A strategic plan for Western Australia that deals with long-term sustainability could provide a framework to encourage more primary producers into sustainable practices. Current issues such as bio-degradation, the timber production debate and the introduction of genetically modified crops send international messages that are not favourable, and local messages that do not encourage better practices.

If we seriously worked, as a state, towards using sustainable farming practices, we would be developing long-term supplies of quality food, land that could continue to support us indefinitely, increased employment, and an international reputation that could be used as a positive example. To unite and develop the current industry, government recognition and support is needed.

Further to this the development of exchange programmes, study tours and conferences would allow Western Australia to contribute nationally and globally in a positive way.

Mike Christensen, current co-ordinator for Manjimup on the Move (Government funded position for the improvement of industry and agriculture in Manjimup), sees a marketing and environmental opportunity in moving the whole region of the South West of WA into sustainable agriculture, horticulture and aquaculture. He sees a unique opportunity to blend marketing and good farming practices to ensure a viable future for the whole region.

Currently there are many initiatives and various avenues for funding that have created different groups, all working nationally and regionally towards sustainability. There does not seem to be any umbrella coordination that links these groups or allows for information to pass among them, except on an ad hoc basis. However effective each group is there is no overall coordination that allows for a unified approach. Finding a way to link these groups for both information and action would allow for a more unified approach to sustainability.

## **Practical examples of Sustainable Organic Enterprises operating in Western Australia**

Peter and Suzanne Little take a scientific approach to their farming methods. They make available the results of their research to relevant parties. Research projects on this property include monitoring water quality and nutrient levels in and out of the property, investigating whey as a disease prevention and fertilizer, and researching nematodes to control garden weevil.

The water quality and nutrient testing is part of the efforts of the Lower Blackwood Land Council District Committee (LCDC) to monitor water quality in the Glenarty Catchment Basin. Fortnightly, every landowner along the creek monitored water in and out of their property. The Waters and Rivers Commission analysed results retrieved from the water samples.

Peter and Suzanne also monitor their own nutrient run off between the vines and the creekline to establish how long after fertilizer application nutrients become available to plants, enabling optimisation of fertiliser use. Results to date indicate virtually no leaching into waterways.

In the tests of water in and out of their property the analysis found that water going off the property contains less nutrient than incoming water, highlighting the importance of maintaining and rehabilitating creekline vegetation.

The research into the use of whey (again in conjunction with the Lower Blackwood LCDC) has a huge potential in the Margaret River region, as it is both a dairy and a wine region. Making use of the dairy industry waste product (whey) to benefit the wine industry is a large-scale example of practical, sustainable, possibilities for both industries. Contact has been made with people undertaking similar research at Adelaide University. The nematode trials are being carried out in partnership with Stuart Learmonth of the WA Agriculture Department.

The produce of Bridgetown Apple Orchardists Gilbert and Marilyn Rowan-Robinson has been certified organic for more than a decade. Gilbert began experimenting with sustainable practices as soon as his father allowed him control of some trees. He and Marilyn have built up their orchards, trained workers to their specific needs

and negotiated their place in the local and interstate markets, over a number of years. They have sold fruit internationally but prefer to supply local markets first.

The Rowan-Robinson's have the knowledge through experience that could be of use to others setting up in the same industry. This knowledge could also be of use to a conventional orchardist wanting to convert to organic practices.

The Rowan-Robinson's give generously of their information by giving talks and lectures, and allowing field trips to their property. According to Marilyn, at one time the Department of Agriculture was referring people on to the Rowan-Robinson's for information as well as asking their own questions on organic orchard practices. The Rowan-Robinson's have suggested working with Agriculture WA, using their property for research, but have not been taken up on the offer.

Wes and Pauline Giblett are Demeter certified milk and veal producers in Bridgetown WA. They have been developing their operation for the past ten years. Certification has been taken up more recently as, until deregulation, there were no immediate markets for the certified products.

Currently a business plan is being worked on to assess the viability of a factory for this organically certified product. Recently a lucrative market for the veal has opened in Victoria.

A mineral supplement programme, Annutriculture, is used to promote animal and soil health. The cows produce less per lactation than those of a conventional dairy would, but are milked over a longer period of time. A conventional dairy cow might be used for four to five lactations at most, then sold off. Some of the Giblett's cows are up to their ninth or tenth lactation and still milking. Wes says that you get a lot more out of a cow if you treat it like an animal rather than an udder.

He is often asked to speak at seminars and his advice is sought by private individuals as well as various sectors of the Department of Agriculture (Australia wide). He is not often offered reimbursement for the passing on of his knowledge.

Errol and Irma Seymour have developed a viable, thriving, strawberry industry. Set among areas of natural bush are his fenced in strawberry plots and packing shed. In only their second year of production, they are the largest organic strawberry growers in the state, serving organic shops, supermarkets and the Eastern States export market.

The business, Drovers Rest Enterprises, is NASAA certified for organic berries and mixed vegetables. The vegetables are grown in between strawberry rotations within the fenced in plots. Errol and Irma have commenced developing a value-adding fine-food business, selling their first produce into a Perth supermarket. They plan eventually to build a factory on-site to value add their own produce as well as produce from other growers. They employ up to a dozen people on a casual seasonal basis and work with the local Land Care Officer to maintain and preserve the bush areas on their property. Their plans include an Eco-tourism venture at the farm, demonstrating synergy between organic farming and environmental sustainability.

Wayne and Kaye Nobbs have spent many years developing their vineyard and their winemaking. Now Settlers Ridge Wines, is winning awards for its premium, organically grown and produced wines. The Nobbs have created their own markets locally and internationally. Kaye includes a variety of sustainably produced goods in her Settlers Ridge showrooms at Cowarumup near Margaret River.

They have developed an internationally successful product without compromising their environment in the growing of the grapes, or the making of the wine.

Peter, Sarah and Rifka Smith have developed a diverse range of industries on their NASAA certified broad acre property. This land borders on the Watheroo National Park. Not only do they not impact on the natural bush of the National Park, they have developed their property to increase the areas of bushland. Low-lying land is renewing its native vegetation and the poorer soils are not cropped more than once in eight years. Their activities include pig, cattle and sheep breeding, grain production and some fruit production. Activities have mutual benefits (eg grain used for animal feed, sheep used as weed control and fertiliser for the next crop) and all activities are monitored for their impact on their environment.

Organic 2000 is a NASAA certified fertilizer made from composted chicken manure. Toby Riseborough and Ian Penton have developed this business in response to an industry demand and an environmental problem caused by intensive poultry farming practices.

Their product uses the manure created by Wanneroo poultry farmers. This is composted, pelletized and sold to commercial farmers of all types as well as backyard gardeners. Organic 2000Plus Blood and Bone uses waste chicken product from Inghams chicken as the blood and bone element.

Organic Farming Systems is a consulting business started by Steve David in 1995. He provides specific programs to enable farmers to convert from conventional to organic production techniques. His clients that have successfully converted are primarily vineyards (Cape Mentelle, Cullens Wines) and tree crop producers. His business also includes a range of organic farming input products including compost made from chicken manure and green waste, as well as a fish emulsion made with fish waste.

Wayne Edwards of Manjimup is in the process of converting the family property to organic farming practices. Part of the farm is BFA certified for vegetable production. The remainder of the farm is used to produce conventionally grown cauliflowers. This subsidises the change over. Wayne states that he will support any organic ventures in his region.

These are just a few examples of the 150 certified organic enterprises in Western Australia.

## **Suggestions to improve and assist the current organic industry**

1. The development of a peak body to create networking, education and marketing opportunities. A peak body would also be a cohesive, credible voice to liaise with government, media, as well as international and interstate agencies. This could include a business office, a support officer / coordinator or even a media officer.
2. The development of educational structures that allow for the exchange of knowledge as well as recognition and financial reimbursement of long term organic practitioners who are sharing their knowledge. This would include making it possible to bring in interstate or overseas experts to share their knowledge locally.

3. Recognition by State government of the local organic industry. This could include tax breaks for businesses using sustainable practices, purchasing policies of government departments, development of a full programme within Agriculture WA.
4. Creating a link between the people working in various sectors of the organic industry and the Government so that the government can learn what the real issues are, can make policy in relation to those issues and can inform and educate the general public.
5. The development of models for Community Supported Agriculture, which could be applied to all types of sustainable farming.
6. Supporting the development of a working model of an organic farm to:
  - provide a practical point for research and development
  - provide an educative facility where any member of the public can experience working in a holistic, sustainably managed system
  - provide a viable working farm as an example for people wanting to begin farming organically, or to convert from conventional farming practices
  - provide a focal point for tourists and travelers from interstate and overseas as an example of Western Australia sustainable policies and intentions

## **Summary**

A thriving, viable organic industry already exists in Western Australia. This has been built up through the ethics and dedication of individuals. The examples mentioned in this submission are just a few of the many successful businesses being run using sustainable principles. I have not given specific statistics for each business as that seemed to be too great an intrusion into their privacy, and unnecessary for the purposes of this submission. I have obtained permission to present these businesses in this submission.

If the Western Australian government is seriously considering a strategy for working towards a more sustainable future, the organic industry must be an integral part of that strategy.

Certification provides a benchmark for the organic industry. At the moment only the certified organic industry can give assurance to the consumer that they have purchased a product that is genuinely clean and green.

The current certified organic practitioners are an example to encourage and to educate others towards more sustainable methods.

The markets already being developed give any new entry to the industry an incentive and a focus point. Most of the hard work has already been done for prospective growers. The organic businesses are already being used, ad hoc, for information and example, by both government departments and private individuals. Not many organic practitioners mind information sharing although most would like some recognition, if not reimbursement, for it. The sporadic nature of the intrusions and the lack of value placed on information gained is a frustration to many. The difficulty in accessing information and support has prevented many more from pursuing an organic, sustainable business.

A government truly interested in a sustainable future has the ability to address problems of unity, continuity, availability of information and as well as providing legislative and economic support.

Overall the government has the ability to recognise and acknowledge the organic industry as an important factor in the sustainable future of Western Australia.