



Udvalget for Fødevarer, Landbrug og Fiskeri

Til: Udvalgets medlemmer og stedfortrædere

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Artikel fra Brian Chamberlain, New Zealand

Hermed omdeles artiklen "Can organic farming feed The World", af landmand og journalist Brian Chamberlain, som udvalget mødte på studieturen til New Zealand.

Brian Chamberlain oplyser, at han skrev artiklen for nogle år siden, og at de mennesker, han citerer, talte på en konference i Mexico i juni 2003. Brian Chamberlain har ikke deres talepapirer.

Med venlig hilsen

Eva Esmarch,
udvalgssekretær

CAN ORGANIC FARMING FEED THE WORLD?

by

Brian Chamberlin

It is high time that the people of New Zealand and the politicians who represent them at national and local level took a closer look at organic farming and the claims that are made in favour of it.

There are a number of good organic farmers in New Zealand. Most of them are very dedicated and determined to succeed. They have a genuine concern for the health of their soil, plants and animals. We can all learn from some of their practices. We know that some farmers have used chemicals indiscriminately, while others have used them to cover up poor management. We now know that we have to be much more careful than we have been in some instances when we are farming near lakes and waterways.

There is probably enough land that has been farmed organically for long enough for us to determine that production levels can be maintained at reasonable levels for substantial periods without the use of artificial chemicals and fertilisers. This form of farming has a place in a dynamic market-led farming industry.

Having acknowledged this, I am still unhappy with the way the industry is being so heavily promoted. One political party has a policy of wanting to change the whole country's farming industry to organics. Several local authorities appear to favour organics over conventional farming. Those opposed to the lifting of the moratorium on GE research are in some cases doing this because they consider that it may damage organic farming in their area.

There are several questions that need to be asked before we deliberately favour organic farming over conventional agriculture as a matter of policy. The big one is - can production from organic farming be increased enough to feed the people of the world in the years ahead? There are others too. Is organic farming as friendly to the environment as its proponents would have us believe? Are the markets for organic produce growing as quickly as is claimed?

I took the opportunity when I attended The World Agricultural Forum in the United States and the Mexico Action Summit earlier this year to put the first two questions to world authorities on the subject. To answer the question on whether or not organic farming can feed the world, I approached Dr Pedro Sanchez from Mexico, Chair of the United Nations Task Force on Hunger. He

is emphatic that it cannot. He says that the maximum number of people that could be fed by organic farming is four billion. We already have six billion people in the world and the number is expected to increase to ten billion during this century.

Dr Sanchez's view is backed up by Dr Norman Borlaug from the United States, who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for his work in developing productive agricultural systems, especially for people in poorer countries. Dr Borlaug pointed out to the conferences that the world's population had increased to its present six billion from just two billion in the relatively short period from 1935. He said that world cereal production has trebled since 1950 from approximately the same area of land and that this is a great achievement for high yield agriculture. He argues that this has been good for the environment, because it has saved millions of hectares of forest and numerous species from destruction.

Dr Borlaug also argues that artificial nitrogen is less polluting than natural sources such as animal waste. He supports this by saying that nitrogen from a bag is 100% available nutrient. Alternatives such as animal excrement contain approximately 8% of available nutrient, while the rest of it is useless waste.

These eminent authorities acknowledge that organic farming can produce reasonable yields on good land, but are adamant that it cannot deliver the yields to feed the present population, let alone fill the demand increases we will see over the next few decades without a massive rise in the acreage farmed.

It can be argued that New Zealand does not have a responsibility to ensure that the world's people are adequately fed. We could become a nation of organic producers supplying the top end of the wealthy markets in the world. Proponents of this policy claim that the premiums we would earn would more than compensate us for the reduced production and higher labour costs that go with organic farming.

It is not an argument that stands up on present information. Premiums do exist for some organic produce, but in many cases they are not high enough to compensate the producers for the higher costs involved. In some countries extra subsidies, over and above the huge ones already paid to farmers, are needed to keep organic operators in business.

I am told that the market for organic produce is growing in New Zealand, but I see very little evidence of it. Sales of conventional products are much greater than those for organic products. The highly vaunted premiums are erratic to

say the least. In some cases they do not exist at all. In our local supermarket, for example, organic kiwifruit has been cheaper than the conventional product for much of this year.

Export earnings for organic produce are negligible in comparison with the earnings of traditional agriculture. In the year ended June 2002, agriculture earned 16.595 billion dollars. Only 75 million (less than half of 1 per cent) of that came from organic produce.

In the last 16 years New Zealand's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew by 44 per cent. Agriculture grew by 72 per cent, while the rest of the economy only grew by 39 per cent. In that period agriculture's share of the GDP increased from 14 to 17 per cent. Almost all of this growth came from traditional agriculture's uptake of new technology. This growth has taken place on less land, as 2.6 per cent of pastoral land has been turned over to forestry in the last decade.

A wholesale change to organic farming would lead to a huge fall in production and loss of revenue to the nation. It would do very little for the environment and may actually harm it. It could lead to an increase in on-farm employment because of the extra labour required for organic farming, but there would be huge lay-offs in the processing, marketing and service sectors.

There is a moral issue too. Changing our whole industry to organics would mean New Zealand's opting out of any responsibility we may have to ensure that all citizens of the world are adequately fed.

There may well be a place for organic farming in a free and dynamic economy, but that is something the market should decide. There is certainly no reason for it to be given preference over other forms of farming in central and local government planning.