

More Money Than Brains

By DAVID LEYONHJELM

I have long regarded the fascination with organic food as God's way of saying some people have more money than brains.

On any objective reasoning the arguments in support of organic food are unsound. There is no evidence that trace levels of most synthetic pesticides are harmful. There is no evidence that organic production is inherently better for the environment or more sustainable than conventional production. Organic food rarely tastes any different and is often aesthetically inferior.

Less objectively, I am amused by reports describing the hazards of 'natural' pesticides such as pyrethrum, rotenone, copper and sulphur, and how organic foods are subject to more health warnings and recalls due to problems such as bacterial contamination. All that manure is bound to have an effect.

Despite that, I also take the view that people should be free to spend their money as they choose. It is not for me, and certainly not the government, to tell people what kind of food to buy. If someone wants to spend their money buying organic food, pointless and costly as it may be, it is their business.

However, the influence of organic agriculture has been far greater than its small size. Incessant propaganda about the dangers of pesticides has convinced a lot of people, including many regulators, that modern agriculture is fundamentally unviable. The effects are many and varied, but opposition to aerial spraying and genetically modified crops are among the most well known.

The result is higher costs of production, not only on farms that deliberately employ organic methods but more generally. Using the same examples, aerial spraying of bananas is not permitted close to towns, even when totally innocuous, and delayed access to GM canola has cost millions in lost competitiveness.

As the world is now discovering, food production no longer exceeds demand. Rising affluence in China and India, the diversion of food into biofuels and droughts in Australia

and elsewhere have combined to eliminate any surplus. The resultant steep rise in prices is a serious concern in many parts of the world, raising the prospect of famines and civil unrest in places where a preference for organic food is more than a little inappropriate.

Last August I wrote that the diversion of food into biofuels raised ethical questions that may ultimately challenge its long-term prospects. That is happening much sooner than I expected. Biofuels are currently being repositioned from desirable green alternative to selfish rich indulgence. It is only a matter of time before governments withdraw subsidies.

It is therefore logical to ask how long it will be before organic food is subject to a similar assessment. The fact is, organic production is lower yielding than conventional production. Its supporters argue that is not necessarily the case, and there are exceptions, but it is certainly true on average and over an extended timescale.

There is clearly an ethical problem in employing low yield agricultural production while there are increasing numbers of people in the world suffering from a lack of food.

But it is not just organic production that has a problem. Any opposition to yield-increasing technology is similarly caught. Blocking genetically modified crops and cloned livestock, for example, will probably contribute to greater misery and starvation among the world's poor.

Except for the biofuels aspect, Dennis Avery foresaw much of this over a decade ago in his book, "Saving the planet with pesticides and plastics". In his presentation at the Avcare conference in 1995 he predicted the impact of rising living standards in China and India on food demand, and the focus this would place on high yield agriculture. He argued that the pesticide industry had a right to claim the moral high ground, as it provided some of the best tools for delivering high yields.

Time has not only proved Avery right, but strengthened his argument. High yields are not

needed simply to avoid the conversion of forests into farms, but to help save people's lives.

This may take longer to accept than the new reality on biofuels, but ultimately governments will stop subsidising the organic industry. (That includes Australia, where state agriculture departments give it a lot of support.) Organic production will continue by choice, but the presumption in its favour will be reversed.

And as China and India embrace genetically modified crops and cloned livestock to meet the expectations of their increasingly affluent populations, governments that adopt policies to limit agricultural productivity, such as South Australia's ban on GM canola, will find themselves called on to explain why starvation in Ethiopia or Bangladesh is an acceptable cost.

Those in the business of high yield agriculture, like suppliers and distributors of agricultural chemicals, fertilisers and biotechnology, will have even more reason to argue from a position of virtue.

As for the people with more money than brains, they will find something else to worry about.