

Organic Futures – March 2007

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Spring on its way

Undoubtedly spring is nearly upon us and as we approach the vernal equinox there is a marked difference in the bird song in the hedgerow and the moods of people. For farmers and growers it is an enjoyable time of year, be it a time for spring lambs and calving (despite long days and short bouts of sleep!) or the time when much crop sowing and planting is taking place. Growth of wild plants in field margins and hedgerows starts a pace and with a mild and wet winter behind there are now good conditions for plant growth.

Akin to growth in the natural world, Organic Futures now has a feeling of fast growth – more later. But firstly, it is important for those new to the project and to those who have been on board for a while, to revisit what the project aims to do.

What is it?!

The aim of Organic Futures is *“removing barriers to young people entering the organic food and farming professions.”*

Remember that the average age of farmers in Britain is 56. That is a staggering and very worrying statistic. Besides the problems this may create for food security in future years, the existing barriers confronting young people wanting to enter farming prevent those people from setting up their own businesses in what is a very strong and dynamic marketplace. The mood within organic food and farming is undeniably buoyant and market opportunities abound. Indeed, the whole nature of the sector lends itself to the dynamism and energy that young people bring in to business.

So, how do we tackle the issue? Well, undoubtedly the answers are diverse and complex. There are relatively easy methods, such as setting up a “matchmaking service” between those who can offer land and those who want land. Not to underestimate this approach, for it’s important and relatively simple – indeed this newsletter carries a few such examples.

But that approach assumes there is a ready supply of young people willing and able to on land and set up their own businesses. People with the skills and desires to go in to a lifestyle that will bring many benefits and a living, but far from fast or large financial wealth. As much as this may be a wish, it is probably far from reality.

The commonly held image of farming is a negative one, pure and simple. Organic and local food may be experiencing huge economic growth and cultural awareness, but farming as a career is not really on even on the Career Adviser's radar. Children don't know where milk comes from or how potatoes grow. So there are inherent problems with society and education that negates against the next generation of farmers coming through.

Then there are massive problems with land prices, apathy from land owners and by-laws preventing land segregation. The whole planning system is steeped against housing for farm workers and owners in rural areas. HM Customs and Revenue think it's OK to tax labour but not machinery – in effect saying that the de-populising (and therefore de-skilling) of agriculture and horticulture is a good thing.

So many issues and so many problems. The whole issue is both daunting and challenging, but one that cannot be ignored. Organic Futures will be a broad project that, if successful, will be hugely important to the future of the land in Britain. But how on earth can all this be achieved?

Formally “a project”

It is fortunate that on our side is some foresight from a number of individuals at the Soil Association(SA). Always at the forefront of sustainable farming and rural communities, the importance of this project has not escaped the notice of the Association. They have years of experience of campaigning, running projects, dealing with the media and have a huge range of contacts with a wide range of projects and associations and really committed employees. It is therefore entirely right that SA get on board Organic Futures(OF).

Much background work has been going on to turn OF in to a formal project – i.e. one that is funded! This work has carried on at a strong pace over the past month and the prospects are looking up. It would be wrong to say too much at this stage, or even to make promises that *may* not be kept. But it is right to say that this project is going to be a central focus of SA over the foreseeable future.

As more concrete information comes forth, you will be the first to know about it. Meanwhile, OF is gathering momentum and work can be done in the current way through the ever-growing e-mail network and monthly newsletters.

“Who's on board?”

A line unashamedly plagiarised from Radio 1's super-energetic and passionate DJ Zane Lowe, who is on board Organic Futures? At the moment I can disclose the e-mail group has reached exactly 100, which is a tremendous achievement, but we

need more, many more. This is a call to each and every one of you to find at least one other friend, family member, colleague or associate who would be interested in “getting on board”.

They may work in farming or growing, food processing or delivery, research or manufacturing, or in associated business. But so long as they have a desire for more young people to enter the food and farming professions, they need to be in with us all. The more people in the group, the more powerful it becomes, the greater the energy and the wider the outreach. We need people in every corner of the country and lots in between. Please ask them to e-mail j.smith@scillyorganics.co.uk or, with their permission, send their name and e-mail address.

You are welcome to circulate any news, events, questions, information or comment related to the project. But for Data Protection reasons, the e-mail addresses of people have not been identified, so please send them to the above e-mail address to be circulated.

Serious opportunities

As promised, below are some serious farming and growing opportunities. Anyone wishing to place an “advert” in this newsletter please get in touch – you are welcome, as part of Organic Futures is to act as a matchmaking land and business service.

1. Linscombe Farm, Devon

Established in 1996, Linscombe Farm, near Crediton in Devon is an award-winning organic horticultural holding. A very successful business, it runs its own local box scheme and attends a weekly farmers market. The ethos behind Linscombe is local food for local people, ensuring people have access to quality food produced with a minimum impact on the environment. The business has been built on a base of ethical standards, quality of service and integrity.

It is a farm comprised of different areas and types of land on three different sites. The business is now at a stage where it could offer a living to more than just one family. Phil and Helen, the owners of Linscombe Farm, are offering a business opportunity to a person who is serious about making a living from organic farming. This could take the form of horticulture and/or livestock.

At present they are open to ideas, but the suitable person must be committed to making the business successful and have a sound knowledge of organic production and some marketing skills. There are however tremendous market opportunities in the Crediton and Exeter area and the outlook for the future is very bright indeed.

If you are interested in taking on your own organic farming or growing business, without the difficulties of starting from scratch, this could be the ideal opportunity for you. Please get in contact with Phil on 01363 84291 or phil@linscombe.co.uk.

For further information please visit www.linscombe.co.uk

2. Land in Cornwall

20 acres of Soil Association certified land on the Roseland Peninsula in Cornwall is available for rent. Currently down to grass, it would provide an opportunity for livestock and/or horticultural enterprises. In a good geographical position, it is south facing and adjacent to a river estuary. Water is available on site and a large disused barn is situated on the land. Truro, a large and growing local and organic food centre, is half an hour's drive away and St Mawes, a wealthy holiday destination, is just down the road.

This land is available at a very sensible rent to anyone wishing to take it on as a long term organic farming or growing business due to the desire of the land owner to see the land used properly.

Please contact David Halsey on 01872 580776 if you are interested in this exciting serious business opportunity.

3. Pembrokeshire share farming

'We are currently advertising on the SA website for a share farming partner who would be interested in expanding an embryonic horticultural enterprise, and now also seek individuals with ideas, experience and confidence for using more of our land, either for establishing new enterprises e.g. micro dairy (we have a redundant milking parlour) or pigs, or for expanding our existing poultry enterprise.

We farm on the north Pembrokeshire coast near Fishguard and Goodwick (population 7, 500 - but a lot more in the holiday season). There is currently a shortage of direct sellers of organic produce in north Pembrokeshire, and we are not able to do justice to demand that we experience at our local farmers' market. Please contact tom.latter@btopenworld.com or ring 01348 873315

Event coming up

EASTER TREES

6th - 9th April

A weekend of tree-planting, chocolate-hunting and camp-fire sparks...at Crynfryn farm, Mid Wales.

Come and join the wood, plant trees and name your copse - whether it be for new

beginnings, carbon crimes or just to work up an appetite for the Easter egg hunt...
come for the whole weekend or just for the day.

FRIDAY 6TH APRIL

Turn up and pitch up for the early birds

SATURDAY 7th APRIL

Turn up and pitch up for the later birds

Tree-planting day followed by an evening's meal to refuel

SUNDAY 8th APRIL

Easter egg hunt, walks, fresh air, sleep...

For those that want, people are welcome to camp over on the Sunday evening as well.

WHAT TO BRING

Welly boots, warm clothes, tent - anything else that makes for a happy camper (Jem suggestions = torch, oh - and a cup to drink out of - in my experience it is always hard to find enough cups about for tea and tipples when there are more than say, four people!)

Food (evening meal on Sunday and breakfast on Sunday provided)

Whatever your tipple is...

Easter eggs for the hunt (cheeky Jem suggestion = Maya Gold or homemade ;)

A spade if you have one...

Musical instruments, energy and anything else to share around the campfire £5 contribution to food and trees.

For more info please email willowgrace@mac.com