

## Organic certified production with bees

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### Introduction

Beekeeping is an agricultural industry that relies very little on the use of synthetic (man-made) chemicals. It is an industry that causes minimal environmental damage and is sustainable, producing products that require little or no modification during the stages of production. So you may think that it would be an easy transition for a beekeeping enterprise to become certified organic. This is far from reality, with certification as an organic beekeeper being more difficult to obtain than for many other agricultural industries. There are many requirements the enterprise needs to meet to gain certification. The issue of the mobility of bees being able to forage over large areas is just one aspect that adds complexity to the ability of a beekeeper to become certified organic.

### Organic production

'Organic' is a term used to indicate that a product is produced in a way that cares for the environment:

- All inputs are of natural origin.
- The product is free from man-made chemical contaminants.
- The product has not been chemically altered.

### Certified organic production

Organic certification is an audit and inspection process which allows enterprises to be verified 'organic' by a credible independent organisation. A producer may claim that their products are organic, but without a recognised audit and inspection process the consumer would have great difficulties in verifying such a claim. As a result, independent certifying organisations have evolved to provide this service. The Organic

Industry Export Consultative Committee (OIECC), which is made up of relevant industry stakeholders and government agencies, has the responsibility of developing and maintaining the *National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce*. This national standard is used as a basis for the certifying organisations to develop their standards for each agricultural commodity.

### Organic certifying organisations

There are currently seven organisations accredited to provide organic certification within Australia. These organisations are regulated by the Organic and Biodynamic Program of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS). To operate as an organic certifier, the independent organisations must be accredited by AQIS.

Currently (as at May 2006) there are seven approved certifying organisations—see the [table](#) on page 2. Not all seven of these organisations provide certification for honey bee production.

For up-to-date details on organic certifying organisations, see the AQIS website at [www.aqis.gov.au/organic](http://www.aqis.gov.au/organic), and follow the link 'Contacts for AQIS Organic Program and approved certifying organisations'. You can then access the organic standards for each of the organisations via its website, or you can contact the organisations direct.

### Organic standards

'Organic standards' are sets of definitions, requirements, recommendations and restrictions regarding the practices and materials that can be used within certified organic production and processing systems. These documented standards define the requirements that a producer/processor must meet before the certifying organisation will certify the enterprise 'organic'. The organic standards from each organisation are available for public scrutiny.

The standards may vary slightly between the organisations, with the *National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce* providing the



basis for the organic standards of all the organic certifying organisations in Australia. This national standard can be found at:

[www.aqis.gov.au/organic](http://www.aqis.gov.au/organic) (follow the link 'Legislation relevant to exporting or producing organic or biodynamic food' and open the PDF file 'National Standards for Organic and Biodynamic Produce 2005').

If you are targeting overseas markets, then the certifying body of your enterprise needs to be accredited by the governing agency of the importing country. Unfortunately other countries have differing standards, so for an enterprise to maintain its organic status, it will also need to be managed and audited to the standards of the importing country. This may result in stricter requirements for the enterprise.

## Biodynamic beekeeping

The author is unaware of any certified biodynamic honey bee producers in Australia. Biodynamic honey bee production standards are based on the organic standards, with the additional requirement that hives are located on a certified biodynamic farm, or in native bush with close access to a certified property. Finding suitable sites that would meet these standards would be difficult, and the author suggests that this could only be done with very small hive numbers. As a result the costs of producing any quantity of honey under such a system would be restrictive.

*The seven organisations currently accredited for organic certification*

Approved certifying organisation	Address	Contact details
<b>Australian Certified Organic</b>	Post Office Box 530 CHERMSIDE 4032 Level 1, 766 Gympie Rd CHERMSIDE 4032	Contact: Akiko Nicholls Phone: +61 7 3350 5706 Fax: +61 7 3350 5996 E-mail: <a href="mailto:info@australianorganic.com.au">info@australianorganic.com.au</a> Web: <a href="http://www.australianorganic.com.au">www.australianorganic.com.au</a>
<b>Bio-Dynamic Research Institute</b>	Post Office POWELLTOWN 3797 Main Rd POWELLTOWN 3797	Contact: Frances Porter or Alex Podolinsky Phone: +61 3 5966 7333 Fax: +61 3 5966 7433 E-mail: n/a Web: <a href="http://www.demeter.org.au">www.demeter.org.au</a>
<b>National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia</b>	PO Box 768 STIRLING 5152 Unit 7, 3 Mount Baker Rd STIRLING 5152	Contact: Lyn Austin or George Devrell Phone: +61 8 8370 8455 Fax: +61 8 8370 8381 E-mail: <a href="mailto:enquiries@nasaa.com.au">enquiries@nasaa.com.au</a> Web: <a href="http://www.nasaa.com.au">www.nasaa.com.au</a>
<b>OGA Certified Pty Ltd</b>	PO Box 6171 SOUTH LISMORE 2480 Southern Cross University Crawford Rd LISMORE 2480	Contact: Debbie Holley or Howard Rubin Phone: +61 2 6622 0100 Fax: +61 2 6622 0900 E-mail: <a href="mailto:oga@nrg.com.au">oga@nrg.com.au</a> Web: <a href="http://www.organicgrowers.org.au">www.organicgrowers.org.au</a>
<b>Organic Food Chain</b>	PO Box 2390 TOOWOOMBA 4350 Lamascotte Kelvinhough Boodua Rd BOODUA via OAKEY 4401	Contact: Marg Will or Ivy Inwood Phone: +61 7 4637 2600 Fax: +61 7 4696 7689 E-mail: <a href="mailto:ofc@organicfoodchain.com.au">ofc@organicfoodchain.com.au</a> Web: <a href="http://www.organicfoodchain.com.au">www.organicfoodchain.com.au</a>
<b>Safe Food Production Queensland</b>	PO Box 440 SPRING HILL 4004 12 Helen St NEWSTEAD 4006	Contact: Paula Seal or Kerry Bell or Phil Pond Phone: +61 7 3253 9800 or 1800 300 815 Fax: +61 7 3253 9824 E-mail: <a href="mailto:info@safefood.qld.gov.au">info@safefood.qld.gov.au</a> Web: <a href="http://www.safefood.qld.gov.au">www.safefood.qld.gov.au</a>
<b>Tasmanian Organic-dynamic Producers</b>	PO Box 434 MOWBRAY HEIGHTS 7248 197 Wilks Road LORINNA 7306	Contact: Julie Page or Joe Gretschnann Phone: +61 3 6363 5162 or mobile 0427 613 697 Fax: +61 3 6363 5162 E-mail: <a href="mailto:tas_organicdynamic@yahoo.com">tas_organicdynamic@yahoo.com</a> Web: n/a

**Note:** Not all of these seven organisations provide accreditation for honey bee production.

## Organic beekeeping

The two main reasons beekeepers consider certified organic production are for the financial gain or for ideological reasons, often in combination. When considering becoming an organic beekeeper you should first read the section 'Bee products' in the *National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce*, to see if your production system would meet or could be changed to meet the requirements.

If you think your enterprise could comply with the standards, an assessment of each certifying organisation should be carried out to find which one best suits your enterprise and markets.

Issues to consider when deciding on the certifying organisation include their standards, probation period, auditing process, fees and charges, location of the organisation, potential market access that the certifying organisation enables, and the name/logo you want your product to be associated with. You may need to meet additional standards in order to gain access to certain overseas markets.

The processing and packing operation of products also needs to be certified. So if you are selling bulk certified organic honey, you can only market that honey as such if the packing plant is also certified organic. This limits the number of packers you can sell your honey to. If packing your own honey is part of the enterprise, then this component of the business also needs to be certified. This applies to the processing and packing of other organic honey bee products.

Some areas of the standards that may pose the greatest difficulty in becoming certified organic include the following:

- Apiary sites must be situated more than 5 km from any:
  - flower-bearing crop treated with pesticides or genetically modified/engineered organisms;
  - urban or industrial activities;
  - waste sites.
- Detailed records must be kept for each apiary site, including hive numbers and the condition and management of colonies.
- There are restrictions on materials used in hive construction, and on the preservatives and coating used on these materials.
- Extraction and storage surfaces must be made of food-grade materials.
- Disease control options are restricted, which particularly affects the control of nosema and European foulbrood disease. (If antibiotics *are* used, the organic status for those treated hives will be withdrawn for a period of 12 months.)

- There are restrictions on supplementary feeding (i.e. on what can be fed to hives) if the organic status is to be maintained.
- Obtaining an adequate number of sites that will maintain the health of all your hives for all types of seasonal conditions.

You should read the full national standard in order to assess your ability to become certified organic.

## The pros and cons of becoming certified organic

### Pros:

- increased price for product;
- increased marketability;
- satisfaction of producing a clean product with minimal environmental damage;
- product assurance for purchaser;
- complete traceback system for product, from the consumer to the hive;
- increased management awareness of the enterprise.

### Cons:

- availability of suitable apiary sites for a range of seasonal conditions;
- limitation on disease management practices;
- limitation on feeding management practices;
- cost and time involved in converting an enterprise to certified organic production;
- costs associated with certification, such as joining, certification, auditing, sampling, annual membership, levies etc. (certifying organisations have varying fee structures);
- increased record keeping (if the enterprise is already Beesafe or Beequal accredited, the increase will be small);
- one year probation period prior to becoming certified;
- many importing countries paying little or no premium for organic honey;
- countries having differing organic requirements;
- the majority of sites suitable for organic honey produce dark strong flavoured honeys which usually have a lower market demand.



So before you rush to become a certified organic honey bee producer, your business needs to be fully assessed. First, you need to see if your enterprise has the capability to become certified organic:

- How much it will cost?
- Have you got a market for your product that will justify the expense of becoming certified?
- Will it be financially beneficial?
- Does this suit your lifestyle and your philosophy?

Becoming certified is not easy and does not instantly bring good money; however, the change *can* be made and *is* being made viably by apiarists throughout Australia.

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