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RIRDC RESEARCH MOVES FORWARD IN MANY DIRECTIONS

The Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) has worked with the deer industry since 1991/92. In that time the Deer Research and Development Program has provided matching funding for over 150 research projects in areas identified by the deer industry as priorities.

In late July 2008, the organics industry held its Organics Expo at Sydney Exhibition Centre. RIRDC was represented at this Expo and disseminated a wide range of material about the research supported. The Expo featured a wide range of organic meat products in fresh, cryovac, cooked, frozen and meal-packed forms, but there was no representation from the deer industry.

The Australian organic sector was estimated to be worth A\$400 million in 2005. Production in Australia has been increasing between 6-15%pa, whereas consumption is growing at 25-40%. The balance is imported.

A new report commissioned by the Biological Farmers of Australia and RIRDC, "*Australian Organic Market Report*" (AOMR), has found that "despite widespread drought in Australia, organic growers have experienced an 80 per cent growth in farm-gate sales over the last four years." The report also found that:

- Retail value (incorporating imports and adjusting for exports) was estimated for the first time above \$0.5B;
- 2007 farm gate values were estimated to be in excess of \$231,000,000;
- With 11,988,044 hectares, Australia accounts for the largest amount of certified organic farmland in the world, the majority of which is used for extensive grazing;
- Major retailers now carry in excess of 500 different organic lines in fresh and grocery categories;
- The number of certified organic operators have increased by an annual 5.2% average net over the last 5 years, during a time of ongoing decrease in overall farmer numbers in Australia;
- The average age of an organic producer in Australia is lower than a non-organic producer;
- Horticulture remains a major stay of the industry;
- Despite widespread drought, farm gate sales have risen by over 80% as an average across all sectors since last reported in 2004;
- 40% of consumers now buy organic food on at least one occasion.

If conversion by consumers continues, there will be increased competition for the remaining mainstream markets. This suggests there could be room for further research into the development of an organic deer meat production manual and protocols for certification of organic venison. There could also be room for product specific research into food preparation and packaging to ensure organic and other specialized markets can be addressed. Literally, this is food for thought.

On a different note, the Fodder Crops R&D Program has just released "Producing Quality Lucerne Hay", a publication by NSW Department of Primary Industries agronomist Mary Anne Lattimore. The publication provides a "how to" manual that will be useful for all farmers from beginner fodder growers to experienced growers. The report provides a useful adjunct to a similar report by Dr Pamela Zwer titled "Producing Quality Oat Hay" that was released in 2006 by RIRDC. Both publications are designed to support both specific fodder growers and growers producing on-farm feed for their animals and are available by going to the RIRDC website, following links Fodder Crops/Free Downloadable research reports.