



Ted Zettel: father of six, General Manager of Organic Meadow and President of OFC

The Organic Federation of Canada is entering its fifth year of existence.

An interview with
Ted Zettel,
President of OFC/FBC

by Nicole Boudreau

OFC was first operational October 1 2007; four full years have passed since then. Are you happy with the evolution of OFC and the current challenges it is facing?

If we go back to October 2007, it was the time we were working on getting the Canadian Organic Standards developed and working towards the regulation of the sector; we needed an organization that could speak on behalf of operators and all those people who are involved in creating organic food; so that was a really big task that we undertook to organize in each province umbrella groups that would represent people at all levels of the value chain in organics. We have come a long way in 4 years; we have a functional network of organic representation starting with those groups in each province that represent producers and processors and other people all the way up the chain. They all come together with representation on the OFC board and OFC communicates with government on matters of regulations; it has been very essential and has made dramatic strides in these 4 years, but it is certainly not completed yet; we still don't have a secure method for funding this effort, it is largely volunteer driven; that is one of the things to continue to work on and we have to continue to build the organizational strength in each region.

Are you satisfied with the growth of the sector?

In general, we know that the organic sector continues to grow but that there is a very natural slowing of growth; as something becomes more mature, you have a bigger base to build on and the percentage of growth is naturally somewhat smaller. The other factor that affects the growth of organics is the overall general economic picture, because an organic product is a Premium product with higher price; the recession of 2007 caused us to slow down in terms of growth from double digit growth probably down to single digit in most commodities. That points out one of the needs that we still have: an executive database for gathering data that we need: what is growing, what isn't, how fast it is growing, where it is coming from, who is involved! That's a need within the sector.

There are several national organic associations; how can stakeholders differentiate them?

OFC has a mandate that is primarily on the regulatory front; but there is great deal of overlap between that mandate and the primary mandates of some of the other national organizations, such as COTA, (Canadian Organic Trade Association) whose mandate is primarily trade, and COG, (Canadian Organic Growers) whose mandate is primarily education.

These things overlap and a high level of cooperation between the national groups is required; we always felt that it is essential for the growth of the sector and we continue to work on having a good level of cooperation and communication between the national groups, while they each retain their particular identity and function

How do you think the organic organizations will assure sustainability in the future?

We have all come collectively to one observation: that the bulk of our members involved in the sector are primary producers already paying a host of checks off and levies and marketing fees which, at the present time, are used primarily to promote the conventional food sector. We would like to have a stable funding mechanism for the organization of the organic sector and we would like to be able to have that without extracting more money from the primary organic producers. So we have this problem, which is an administrative problem, of sorting out how to get some of that money already paid by organic producers that is really not doing the job on their behalf; we need to obtain some of that money and reroute it back into organic organizations. Many people across the country at different level of government and sectoral involvement are all coming to the same conclusion that there is an appropriate and reasonable need to do this; we just need to get at it and to find out the mechanism by which we can make it happen.

The Canadian Organic Standards revision has to be done in 2011 but there is currently no funding to make this happen; what are the solutions that you hope to apply?

This a fairly urgent issue; we have spent a lot of time and resources collectively, creating an organic standard and we seem to be reluctant to put a relatively small amount of resources into what is necessary now, which is to sustain that standard. It is not something that happens automatically; it needs to be reviewed, revised from time to time. We always knew that, from the beginning, that it is a living document and that the work on the standard would be ongoing indefinitely; this is no surprise.

What comes as a great surprise is that our government partners have more or less left this alone now and they decided that they are not going to pursue it. So there is a vacuum right now and nothing is happening on standards revision and maintenance. That is very dangerous for the sector and for us, as a country. When we entered into trade agreements with our international partners, we were aware that trade depends explicitly on a robust legal organic standard. We risk losing that if we don't pay attention and supply the dollars needed to sustain it. So it is urgent to get that conversation going at the level of government where we can make some break through.

What are your best wishes for the organic sector?

The people involved in the organic sector are great people, really passionate about what they do; for them, this a matter of deeply held values and I congratulate everyone who works day by day to bring good organic food to the tables of Canadians and hope and pray that they continue! That is what the Organic Week is about!