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PRESS RELEASE

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Organic industry welcomes large stonefruit grower

A family that has been growing stonefruits for four generations has achieved organic certification status, making it one of Australia's largest organic stonefruit producers.

The Free family near Swan Hill, Victoria, supplies major supermarkets and organic retailers with nectarines, peaches, plums and apricots.

On the conventional market the Frees were well known by the trade name Free Fresh Fruit, now they are Alkira Organic certified by Australian Certified Organic, ACO.

Kelvin Free says they're matching conventional economies of scale with organic growing methods.

He says, "It's not difficult to get organic certification, but to farm organically is difficult. We farm in an environment surrounded by conventional growers and agronomists so there is little support available to help with technical growing issues."

It takes three years to achieve organic certification.

This season is the first time the Frees have sold certified organic fruit and for them it realises a long held desire to supply consumers with a genuine healthy product at a fair price.

The Free family started farming on 50 hectares in 1944. They never fully followed mainstream farming practices so taking on biological farming and becoming certified organic was a natural progression.





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Stonefruits are one the most difficult crops to farm organically because of the amount of pests and diseases the fruit attract.

According to a Friends of the Earth report conventional nectarines and peaches are in the top 10 foods grown in Australia with the most pesticide residue detected.

Kelvin says converting to organic was an extensive period of trial and error and he believes that a mix of biological farming principles and scientific research will lead to a vibrant organic industry.

The Frees are having success with compost applications to build their soils and are using biological control methods for pest and disease issues.

They are also working to perfect their application times and frequencies but overall they say their 65 year old farm is thriving.

Kelvin says, “Some positive evidence has been that tree blocks which have had fruit quality problems and light crops have been much more productive under an organic system.

“We have noticed our fruit does not go brown as quickly when cut; we have cut fruit up for a cheese plate and been astounded when the apricot still hasn’t gone brown by the end of the night.

“There have been many positive developments but we have not reached the pinnacle of pest control.”

The organic stonefruit industry is valued at over \$6 million and retailers have struggled to keep up with demand according the 2012 *Australian Organic Market Report*.

Alkira Organics is supporting the new consumer initiative the Bud Organic Club.





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It was developed by Australian Organic (formerly Biological Farmers of Australia, BFA) to educate people about organic farming and the benefits of buying organic food and fibre.

Australian Organic's Marketing Manager Debra Drury says, "We congratulate Alkira Organic for achieving organic status and making more organic food available to consumers.

"We also applaud the Frees for putting back into the community by becoming a sponsor of the Club.

"Bud Organic Club is a free consumer club created to help people learn and live the organic way."

The Frees are in good company - organics is one of Australia's top five growth industries in 2013.

Kelvin Free says, "We want to grow our business so that more people can access organic fruit. We are working to grow our markets, to supply more consumers.

"We are striving toward a future of sustainable farming, where we can produce high quality fruits and vegetables that taste great but also do the right thing by the environment.

"Where all is equal, good always wins."

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Photo available

Please note: Alkira Organic is part of the Wattle Organic Farms group.

