

FARMING

'In a small way this could help to change the world'

Organic farmers can command a premium for their produce, but many of those transitioning from conventional systems have to wait until they've been fully certified before they're able to see a significant financial benefit. **Sue Bradley** meets a student working on a solution and discovers how gaining organic status has meant a world of difference to a family farm near Bristol

THE demand for organically-produced food and drink continues to increase, but farmers involved in switching over from more conventional practices often face a long wait before they're able to see a higher return.

At the same time, many families living on tight budgets are unable to afford the higher prices commanded by products certified by organisations such as The Soil Association.

Now a student from the Royal Agricultural University has come up with a scheme to provide a dedicated label of quality for farms that are in the process of becoming organic, and his idea is already attracting attention from a major retailer. Constantin Huet's 'Pre-O' concept also impressed judges in the RAU's recent 'Grand Idea' enterprise awards, the first prize in which was £2,500 worth of investment in the business.

Constantin, who comes from Switzerland and has just completed his degree in real estate, believes 'Pre-O' will give consumers greater choice and enable farmers to charge a slightly higher price to reflect their changing practices to complement any grant aid they're able to secure to support their organic conversion through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

"Pre-O addresses a problem that many people aren't aware of," he explains.

"Farmers who want to change to organic systems have to go through transition periods of two to five years. During this period their overall yields go down, at times by as much as 20 per cent according to our lecturers, but prices stay the same because produce can't be sold as organic while farms are in transition. Meanwhile costs go up because organic farming is more skill intensive."

Research indicates that the demand for organic produce is outstripping the supply, with consumers facing the prospect of buying more goods from abroad if UK producers aren't able to keep up.

At the same time, a study into consumer shopping habits by Kantar Worldpanel Plus, based on a survey of 34,297 panelists, reveals 72 per cent of respondents perceive organic goods as too expensive, an issue Constantin hopes to address by providing people with an affordable means to buy food and drink that



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have 'almost organic' qualities. "My research has revealed two problems: a consumer problem and a producer problem," says Constantin.

"A dedicated label which markets produce from farms going through the transition process – farms which grow food that is between conventional and organic – will help transition farmers command better prices, while providing the end consumer with an alternative, affordable environmental food choice.

"I think this is something that works well with existing organic certifiers, of which there are around eight in the UK: I think having one standardised pre-organic label would prevent any confusion.

"I've already held a meeting with a top five retailer and our discussions were positive."

In a further boost for farmers, Constantin says he's come up with a 'revolutionary' business model through which producers would not have to pay to subscribe to the scheme.

"Pre-O is beneficial to the consumer who perhaps can't pay regularly for high-end organic produce, and beneficial to the farmer who is in the 'organic transition' period yet suffering from non-organic prices," he says.

"Until now, no outright 'pre-organic' offering has existed in the food market. We are making that change. The mission of this venture is to help the farmers and democra-

tise healthy, environmentally friendly produce by making it easier for consumers to access. In a small way it could help change the world: many farmers are not switching to organic production because of the financial challenges of transition.

"Pre-O would make it more feasible for them to become organic, which would be fantastic for the environment."

Preparing the ground

Constantin Huet spent his first 18 years in the Swiss countryside and has always lived close to nature.

His concern for the environment dates back to a school lesson on the Trans-Amazonian Highway, during which he learned about the deforestation that took place to build it.

"Since then I have been engaged with the climate and our world because this is the challenge for our century," says Constantin, whose parents are Swiss and Dutch.

Film making presented Constantin with his first means of raising awareness of environmental issues, with his documentary *Facing the Flood* investigating the changing conditions in Greenland and the Maldives, and winning him second prize in a competition run by the World Bank.

Yet while he's still making films, he believes his idea for a 'Pre-O' label could have a big impact in encouraging more farmers to adopt organic farming.

"Every single farmer we encourage to transition helps the environment," he says.

"I love the quote from Mahatma Gandhi, that 'in a gentle way, you can shake the world.' I hope that small changes, like a Pre-O label, will have big consequences."

Constantin has recently come to the end of his BSc in real estate studies at the Royal Agricultural University and is moving on to spend a year looking at consumer psychology at the London School of Economics (LSE).

"I will pursue Pre-O alongside my studies, and if it takes off really quickly I'll look at going part time or even deferring my masters degree," he says.

"I am encouraged that good things are happening to help the environment. The size of the challenge we face is big, but the younger generations are motivated to make changes."

