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Olive industry pushes agenda

THE international olive industry is a step closer to implementing regulations that will support fair exports and consumers' interest following a hot-topic session coordinated by the Australian Olive Association at the American Oil Chemists Society (AOCS) Annual Meeting held in Seattle recently.

President of the Australian Olive Association (AOA) Paul Miller was invited by the AOCS, the major international organisation for food oil chemistry, to present a session on regional approaches to extra-virgin olive-oil quality, which included nine speakers from Europe, Argentina, the US, Canada and Australia.

Mr Miller says Australia, which is currently the largest consumer of olive oil per capita outside the Mediterranean, is seen as a technical leader of new olive-oil producers due to its modern technical and scientific approach to agriculture.

"Our olive-oil industry is involved directly in issues of regulation and quality definition whereas, in the EU countries, there is a disconnection between the producers, the scientists and regulators," says Mr Miller.

"Our integrated approach helps us find ways to better authenticate olive oil and describe its quality and to overcome problems with dysfunctional European standards."

Australia's production of extra-virgin olive oil represents two to three per cent of the world's extra-virgin production and at least five per cent of the world's high-quality extra-virgin olive oil.

Australian production is also expected to rise from 14 million litres in 2008 to 27 million litres by 2014.

Miller said one of the issues discussed at the international meeting was the difficulty many countries, including Australia, have with existing EU standards and the Codex Alimentarius Standard.

"These standards have been used to restrict trade as they apply restrictive levels on some minor components of olive oils that many oils don't meet," says Mr Miller.

"At the same time, the standards do not adequately detect the blending of refined olive oil with extra-virgin olive oil.

"Because of this, consumers are disadvantaged when they buy imported extra-

virgin olive oil believing it to be the best when, in fact, there may be quite a bit of second grade oil in the bottle," he says.

"The Seattle meeting put the matter of true olive-oil quality from new producing countries firmly on the global agenda and should help protect trade of Australian olive oils into the US and Canada and, in the longer term, in other countries."

The value of Australian extra virgin olive oil exports rose from \$1.2 million in 2002 to \$12.3 million in 2007, with a positive outlook for the future partly due to the increase in production.

Mr Miller explained that the US – with California being a growing producer of olive oil – announced during the session proposals to establish standards that will for the first time see detailed quality requirements for olive oil in the US backed by newly created laboratories and tasting panels.

"Australia supports this move and has had input into the standards to ensure that they accommodate our natural variations in olive-oil chemistry while at the same time including testing that will be a good basis for the detection of fraud," says Mr Miller. According to Mr Miller, the Seattle session is not only a major step forward in enabling fair trade of Australian extra-virgin olive oil into foreign markets, but also a progression towards best serving consumers' interest.

"The AOA supports better ways to define freshness and quality because that is what our consumers want," he says.

"Their needs will be much better served as new methods are used to define the best olive oil.

"Thanks to this meeting, the concept of consumer preferences, freshness, taste and quality of the oil is now firmly on the scientific agenda."

Miller said the Australian Olive Association, which received financial support from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) to facilitate this international meeting, will soon commence surveillance of olive oils in the Australian market under the new Australian Code of Practice for the olive industry. The AOCS session provided excellent guidance on the direction this surveillance will take.

The Australian Olive Association was founded in 1995 as the industry body to

encourage research and dissemination of information and the sustained development of a national olive industry in Australia.



Olives ready for processing