

Chairs' Report to Soil & Health Association of New Zealand Inc. AGM
October 2023

Marion Wood:

Tēnā koutou e hoa mā. It is somewhat ironic that, at a time when the message of Soil & Health is more relevant than ever, the Association is facing real difficulties which inhibit our ability to promote the undoubted benefits that growing organically can bring to our nation and to the world.

But first the successes. Parliament finally passed the Organic Products and Production Act in April this year. Soil & Health has campaigned tirelessly over the years for legal regulation of organic claims and our new Chair, Jenny Lux, has been central to promoting the interests of small organic growers throughout the process. BioGro has also provided solid expertise in this work through the CEO, Donald Nordeng, whose breadth of knowledge of the organic sector around the world has been of inestimable value.

Organic Week continues to be a very positive focus of our work and the OrganicNZ awards will grow exponentially over the next few years. Last year we were forced by Covid to abandon plans for an in-person event to present the awards, but this year the awards evening was thoroughly enjoyed by all. Our plans for 2024 are well underway and include 2 new judged awards – the Organic Exporter award and the Organic Leader award.

We have also completed the revision of the constitution, thanks to the thorough work of our Treasurer, Barbara Collis, who trained as a lawyer and has been able to walk us all through the process with calm and clarity. We introduced the new draft constitution at the last AGM in order to allow plenty of time for any changes sought by members.

In my report last year I explained that we had made a conscious decision in 2021 to invest \$30,000 of reserves in marketing the magazine in order to increase subscriptions and sales. The changes we made were very well received and seemed to stem the tide of decline for a while, but we have not been able to maintain this momentum. The reasons for this are complex but first and foremost we are sitting in the middle of an economic downturn, interest rates have risen dramatically and people have less disposable income. This has impacted heavily on the organic sector – our loyal supporters stay with us, but many people decide they cannot afford organic goods. Added to this is the reality that print and paper costs have

risen dramatically and print media is in decline all over the country and indeed the world.

This resulted in an operational loss of \$51,827 for Soil & Health. The economic headwinds have also not spared BioGro who ended the year with an operational loss of \$286,922. Due to the loss made by BioGro, there was a journalled expense recorded against Soil & Health of \$210,943 "to recognise impairment loss in investment in BioGro NZ Ltd", hence, when this "expense" is added to the parent organisation's operational loss, the total deficit for Soil & Health for the year is \$262.770.

2022 was known as the year of the Great Resignation and Soil & Health was not spared from this trend. In September last year our editor resigned. We were lucky to contract our new editor, Sheryn Dean, who has worked with unstinting energy and incredible passion to make a success of the magazine. The National Council was in the process of deciding whether to downsize the magazine at the beginning of the new financial year, but opted instead to increase the price and invest in more marketing.

Then in May this year our General Manager, Pete Huggins moved on to a new position. Pete worked with the association for 3 years, bringing a wealth of organisational, campaigning and marketing skills. When he left it was clear that Soil & Health was going to need to move into a new era. As I had already indicated that I intended to step down as Chair, and as Jenny Lux had agreed to take on this position with the blessing and support of the National Council, I decided it was more sensible to let Jenny take over, so she could established the ongoing relationships with staff and contractors.

Jenny has brought to the role of Chair a thorough analysis of every aspect of our work. She has been instrumental in driving the newly invigorated campaign against the introduction of GE crops into our environment and has spent an inordinate amount of time appointing new staff and contractors and supporting the magazine. Sadly they have not been able to achieve the miracle necessary to rescue the magazine and the National Council has now made the difficult decision this week to cease publication of the print magazine and move to an online newsletter.

This is a heart-breaking decision, but our finances will not support the continuation of the print magazine and it is our responsibility to maintain the financial integrity of the association.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the members of the National Council who contributed their time and energy to Soil & Health. I know we will move beyond this difficult time with the support of our members and the hard work of our National Council and staff.

Jenny Lux:

I thank Marion for her kind words. It's not been an easy time to take over as Chair. We have had changes in our team which I personally managed over the last six months, bringing in a new Designer, a new Advertising Manager, a Marketing Manager and a new Administrator. These are all talented and creative people who do a fantastic job! We have now had to disappoint just about everyone with the news of the impending change in our publication for 2024, forced on us by the financial situation.

Our main source of funding, magazine retail sales and subscriptions, is down by 10% already in this financial year. Donations towards the GE Appeal have been generous but modest so far, and the usual general donations we receive from supporters are down by more than 50%. Companies are cutting advertising from their budgets to save money. The upcoming magazine issue sold less than half the advertising it would normally attract. To put it in perspective, the shortfall in advertising income just for this coming issue alone is equal to the cost of printing and distributing it. We have a few advertising debtors who owe us money and are months overdue, despite much follow-up from our office. We have significant accounting costs associated with the company that we own (BioGro) and no extra revenue from it in this financial year. We must tighten our belts.

The other thing that has concerned me is that I don't have a full National Council. We will be five, if the three people who have put their names forward are elected this year. We really need financial and fundraising expertise on Council. We can appoint the right people, if they come to us. For the sake of Soil & Health, I urge members with the right skills to step up and approach the next National Council.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said "Life is flux". He pointed out in 500 BC that everything is constantly shifting, and becoming something other than what it was before. Like a river, life flows ever onwards, and while we may step from the riverbank into the river, the waters flowing over our feet will never be the same waters that flowed even one moment before. Heraclitus concluded that since the

very nature of life is change, to resist this natural flow was to resist the very essence of our existence. "There is nothing permanent except change" he said.

A refusal to embrace change as a necessary and normal part of life leads to problems, pain and disappointment. Therefore we must practice acceptance, embrace change, and do the best we can with what we have. It is really the only way forward.

The current National Council has been discussing the digital publication of OrganicNZ and we feel that there could be some advantages to it. For example, there will no longer be such a strong limit on space. If well organised, it can be a noticeboard that is more frequently updated with events and breaking news. It will involve the use of fewer material resources.

It is also likely that we will need to have more voluntary contributions to it, in terms of content. We will need to use our collective creativity and effort to help our newsletter and our whole organisation thrive again.

So, I conclude this report without a resounding conclusion, rather with an invitation to get involved, to truly be a part of this movement that upholds the importance of healthy soil, healthy food and healthy people.