

Audio transcript

Woolworths Chief executive officer, Simon Susman talks about Farming for the future

What is Farming for the future?

Farming for the future is a wonderful, midpoint between organic and standard commercial. We focus on the soil, we focus on plant health and we feed and water or spray only as is minimally required. That cares for our soils and cares for land and produces strong, healthy plants to give the quality and shelf life and flavour that we want to put into Woolies' products.

How is farming for the future different to organics?

This isn't organic, but it's a sister of organic. And we've found that organic has a role in the Woolies catalogue, but organic is a method of farming that does give quite variable crop yields. It's important, and we should have organic and do have organic on our counter, but when we're looking at commercial scale farming, organic is not productive enough, that is a fact. So we needed something that sat somewhere between standard commercial agriculture which is requiring more and more inputs of fertilizer and pesticides to keep the yields up, somewhere between that and organic lies a much more natural happy medium, that is Farming for the future.

Will Farming for the future products be as costly as organically farmed products?

Organic doesn't necessarily have to be costly but can be costly because the yields are variable in organic. Farming for the future has the same or lesser input costs as commercial standard farming. We're finding already we're using less pesticides, using less insecticides, we're using less water. The soil itself is being improved. And it is in the soil and the stability of the soil and the richness of the soil that the health of the plant is generated.

What makes Farming for the future better for the planet and customers?

We're able to provide, at no extra cost to our customers, produce that has less spray on it, has had less water wasted on it, creates less run-off, improves the soil, all at the same price. One of the key tenants of Farming for the future is that as you improve the soils. So by putting compost

and humus back into the land, it re-establishes the soil as one of the key carbon sinks, so we're taking carbon dioxide out of the air and putting it back in the soil.

We're not desiccating the soil with more and more fertilizers and more and more chemicals. This is natural carbon going back into the soil. So it helps bio-diversity, it helps in a small way, climate management but it makes the soils more sustainable into the future.

How have your farmers responded to Farming for the future?

This is being driven as much by our farmers as it is by ourselves. We work very closely with our farmers. The Woolies farmers are very passionate, really care about their land and although I'm sure we drive them to distraction, work very powerfully with us to do things better every single day.

How much of Woolworths fresh produce will be farmed using Farming for the future principles in the future?

Already something like 50 to 60 percent of our fresh produce, depending on the time of the year, is farmed according to Farming for the future principles. We're setting targets now that at least 85% of our fresh produce is farmed according to these methods over the next 3 years. That should be more than achievable. There will be a small range of organic continuing to be on offer and because of the seasons work; there is a tiny proportion which we import. But the bulk of all of Woolies fresh produce will be farmed according to Farming for the future principles, within the next 3 years.