

Steak-holders carve out a meat marketing niche

Orietta Guerrera



Rendina's Butchery of Balwyn is a stockist of Enviomeat.

Photo: *Gary Medlicott*

FARMERS have long had to live down the reputation, deserved or not, as poor environmental managers. But now a small group of Gippsland beef producers is fighting the stereotype by producing a brand of "environmentally friendly" meat, shifting the onus of proving their green credentials to the consumer.

One of the drivers of the product Enviomeat, Tarwin Lower grazier Jenny O'Sullivan, said when local farmers first formed an alliance five years ago to explore marketing strategies, they identified a growing demand for organic food, and decided to create a product using sustainable farming practices. Mrs O'Sullivan said while the focus of organic products, which use no chemicals, was "clean", the focus of Enviomeat was "green". Twenty-five farmers are now involved.

To be accredited, they have to show they are minimising environmental impact by using free-range feed and not using growth hormones, are protecting waterways and natural vegetation and are testing the soil to better manage fertiliser use. They must strive to eradicate pests and weeds, and treat animals humanely.

The product was launched a year ago at farmers' markets, and is now available at two butchers, in San Remo and Balwyn, with a third store soon to open in Rosebud. Also planned is an Enviomeat pie.

Mrs O'Sullivan said that while sales were growing, Enviomeat was a niche product, with many customers unwilling to pay between 7 and 10 per cent more for environmentally friendly meat.

At this week's international Landcare conference, opening today in Melbourne, Mrs O'Sullivan will discuss how the farmers have tried to bridge the gap between the city and the bush, and whether those in the city are prepared to meet them halfway.

"Farmers are changing practices," she said. "However, the public and consumer also need to take some responsibility for our environmental state and the rate of change."

The Landcare conference marks 20 years since the volunteer program was started to encourage local farmers to tackle soil degradation. Now there are 4000 Australian Landcare groups, and the program has expanded to Germany, China, South Africa, the United States and Canada.

www.internationallandcareconference2006.com.au

www.enviomeat.com.au