

Berry Springs' spirulina health farm - Australian made



Photo: TAUU Australia Spirulina plant staff Gary Huang, Director Bel Huang, Shorty Ainsworth and Christopher Blow.

A Spirulina plant in Berry Springs, the only spirulina-growing facility in Australia, has complained that imported product is being characterised as Australian-made.

Tauu Australia Director Bel Huang says the company only sells the health food to export markets, as imported spirulina is too cheap.

Mr Huang said the price for spirulina is "ridiculously low".

"Our manufacturing costs are higher than the retail price," he said.

"Our running costs are four to five times that of (spirulina manu-

facturers in) China, Thailand or India."

Mr Huang alleges that imported dried spirulina is only packed or pressed into tablet form in Australia, yet it is claimed to be made in Australia.

A spokesman for the Australian Competition and Consumer Council (ACCC) confirmed that the matter was being investigated.

The spokesman said when misrepresentation of the Australian origin of a product was alleged, there were two tests the product would have to satisfy.

Under section 53 of the Trade Practices Act, at least half the production and manufacturing cost of the product has to be incurred in Australia, and there has to be a "substantial transformation of materials" in manufacture, the spokesman said.

It is unclear whether packing and packaging of a product is considered a substantial transformation, although the spokesman acknowledged the cost of production would probably include "bringing the goods to a saleable state".

"It's a piece of legisla-

very broadly," he conceded.

However, the \$5 million Berry Springs plant seems to be doing very well with high-end markets overseas, with a turnover estimated at \$1.5 million.

The operation produces 50 to 60 tonnes of the dried algae a year.

The automated plant, which consists of 96 ponds growing the culture, filtration sinks and a \$2 million dehydration tower, is the company's own design.

Integral to this was an innovative method to gently agitate the culture using pumps. Agitation is necessary for the survival of Spirulina, which only thrives in salty, alkaline conditions - if the water is too still, the organism rises to the surface of the water and is killed by an overdose of sunlight.

The design, which received an Australian patent, was necessary for the location.

Mr Huang says it took two years before the various approvals were given - the plant has the only licence to import live Spirulina culture in Australia, and the start-up culture itself spent a year in quarantine.

anticipating selling to markets closer to home in Malaysia and Indonesia next year.

The project received an AusIndustry grant to assist with design and "invaluable technical assistance" from the aquaculture section of the Department of Business, Industries and Resource Development.

According to Mr Huang, Spirulina has been farmed commercially for about thirty years, and noted that in other markets such as Europe, the US and Japan, consumers were happy to pay an "extra dollar for better health".

Spirulina is an edible cyanobacteria (the common name of this class of organism, 'blue-green algae', dates back to times it was thought to be algae).

It has been eaten for centuries in Africa and South America.

Mr Huang says there was only two locations in the country that he would consider as viable for growing the nutritious algae, being Darwin's rural area and Cairns.

Mr Huang opted for Berry Springs for the quality of the water, which he said is essential for production, the continuous sunshine in the Dry, and the lack of pollution from industrialisation. Christopher

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