

# Bill Jordan: I don't think organics will feed the world

Tom Levitt  
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Jordans cereals founder Bill Jordan says his company's method of farming can feed the world and safeguard biodiversity

As the owner of Jordans Cereals, Bill Jordan has spent years promoting [Conservation Grade farming](#), a system of agriculture that aims to increase levels of farmland wildlife.

Detractors say it is merely a 'B-grade' version of organic farming, as pesticides are not completely banned. But measures such as requiring 10 per cent of land on participating farms to be given over to wildlife-friendly habitats have increased numbers of birds and insects.



Bill Jordan is sceptical of organic farming's ability to feed the world

He talks to Tom Levitt about why he wants more farmers and manufacturers to start using Conservation Grade farming, his fears about GM food and why he is in favour of some pesticides.

## Tom Levitt: Why did you start using Conservation Grade farming?

**Bill Jordan:** When we started the business in 1972 I had just come back from America and it was fascinating the way the natural foods sector was growing there.

Myself and my brother David came at it originally from the organic perspective because we thought that everything was going to be organic. But the interest in whole and natural foods grew faster than the supply of the organic ingredients so we were looking for a halfway house, which is how Conservation Grade came about.

To begin with the system was about the inputs - so we stopped a lot of things farmers were using because that was what consumers were concerned about.

Over the last 15 years the interest has been in having ingredients from farms that are really healthy - "you are what you eat" was the Jane Fonda line. Another was, "food is as good and as clean as the land that it is grown on". That was our mantra 15 years ago and it's what we've been working on with our farmers to achieve - reducing inputs and increasing the wildlife they were getting on the farms.

## TL: How does Conservation Grade compare to organics?

**BJ:** Organic is about what you *don't* put in, it's the inputs you *don't* use. They get more wildlife than conventional farms but it's an add-on. We are committed to getting more wildlife on our farms.

It's biodiversity by design rather than accident.

We represent a style of farming that a lot of farmers now understand and we believe it could be very large. We only need another two or three more manufacturers to come on board and we'd be looking after a nature reserve bigger than the RSPB [there is already 60,000ha of land being farmed under Conservation Grade].

We'd never knock organic – it's a different style completely. They've got their advocates, [but]

it's not an easy style, there's a heavy premium to pass on and it's not for everyone. Conservation Grade could be a lot bigger.

The big challenge is feeding all these extra people. We think it can feed the world. It stands [a lot more chance than organic because it is using technology](#) - we can't mess around with horse manure, you are not going to feed the world without a bit of technology.

**TL: Where does Jordans stand on GM?**

**BJ:** As a brand we still don't allow our farmers to use GM. I don't like it and I'd be a lot happier if we had more trials because I don't think we've had long enough to see the effects yet. But given enough time and checking it is probably going to happen.

The likes of Monsanto are there lurking in the background and it seems to be slyly catching up on us. It's a concern but there's not much we can do about it but keep it out of our supply side.

I think farmers want it because if you can't differentiate your produce through [labels] like 'Conservation Grade' or 'organic' then you have to compete on the world stage. The farmers feel it will keep them commercial and viable.

**TL: Was it inevitable that you had to sell a majority stake in Jordans last year to Associated British Foods (ABF)?**

Thirty years ago we were the only brand pushing whole grains and natural foods but it has now become a much bigger issue and we are quite keen to protect our brand and not get dumped on by every multinational.



Nestle have got 'wholegrains' in big green letters on their packs; you've got Kelloggs saying they understand how to make a muesli; you've got Weetabix owned by venture capitalists.

If you want a brand that's going to work internationally then you've got to have scale. That's what ABF give us.

**TL: Where do you stand on the use of sustainably-sourced palm oil? [ABF was criticised by a recent WWF report]**

**BJ:** We haven't got the solutions we want yet on palm oil. The ideal would be a homegrown oil that has a long shelf life but that doesn't exist yet. We've done as much as we can with our scale of business to tell our suppliers that this is what we need and to get their R&D people working on it. The fact is we need oil as an ingredient.

**TL: Why does your campaign on bees, [BigBuzz](#), make no mention of neonicotinoid pesticides (which have been linked to bee deaths)?**

**BJ:** We are not avoiding the issue. We are considering [our use of neonicotinoids]. There's been people saying it might be when you spray or how you spray.

We've banned other pesticides before but the worry on neonicotinoids is that if we banned it and everyone rushed onto another spray that might be even worse. We don't know.

So at the moment we're spending as much time as we can and we have advisors who are looking at the issue and if they think it's a risk then we will ban it.

**TL: Could Jordans ever be pesticide-free?**

**BJ:** I don't think its possible. I am a supporter of organic but whether it is going to answer our global food consumption issues, sadly as I get older I am getting more cynical about that.

The inputs farmers are using are coming down dramatically anyway - some of the spraying is down to a teacup a hectare. It's not like 30 years ago when we were drenching the crops. They are better farmers nowadays and the better you are the less inputs you'll need.

**TL: You don't add salt or additives to your cereal, but what about added sugar?**

When we started in 1972 a lot of the food was rubbish. A lot of it was refined, white flours, starches - manufactured food with very little nutritional value. Whereas stuff we'd be designed to eat for thousands of years had the fibre, the vitamins, the enzymes that hadn't been knocked out in the primary process.

We've always been against additives - that is part of the natural foods philosophy. The same goes for salt. If you've got a pretty insipid product then you need salt to give it flavour and that is why manufacturers do it. We're quite lucky in having a lot of good ingredients that have flavour of their own.

Sugar is different.

We've always been annoyed that intrinsic (natural) and extrinsic (added) sugar content in food has never been separated. So for instance we've always had a range of muesli that hasn't had added sugar but has a high content of fruit and nuts.

For a nutritionist that's sugar and is going to mess you up but then you've got a Government department that says you've got to have five bits of fruit and vegetables a day.

I think you have to be a bit pragmatic: you can have the healthiest food in the world but if people aren't going to eat it, it's not going to do them much good.

**Useful links**

[Conservation Grade farming](#)

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[http://www.theecologist.org/Interviews/370842/bill\\_jordan\\_i\\_dont\\_think\\_organics\\_will\\_feed\\_the\\_world.html](http://www.theecologist.org/Interviews/370842/bill_jordan_i_dont_think_organics_will_feed_the_world.html)