

Opening Address

John Kerin*

This conference is concerned primarily with grains, the staple food of people and most of their domestic animals. For reasons that I will mention shortly, the conference theme is 'A Time of Challenge', but of course the provision of food in the right quantities, at the right place, and at the right time is always a challenge somewhere on earth, and storage specialists have a paramount role to play in meeting this challenge.

Feeding the world's population is perhaps humanity's greatest ongoing problem, and one that has been tackled vigorously, and I think with some success, since the spectre of the 'population time bomb' first emerged about 30 years ago.

The response to exploding world population led to the 'Green Revolution', during which enormous gains in crop productivity were made through the activities of organisations such as the International Rice Research Institute. Countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia which had food deficits and needed to import rice, the staple foodstuff of most of their populations, now have food surpluses. Rice production in Vietnam is accelerating and it seems likely that that country will, by the turn of the century, be second only to Thailand among the world's rice exporters.

But the gains have not all been due to production factors, as is well known to this audience. Indeed, plant breeders and other production orientated people seem to have consistently forgotten that when the crop is harvested it generally has to be stored for shorter or longer periods. Early in the green revolution it became painfully obvious that while many of the new crop varieties developed grew rapidly and had high yields, they also had very poor storage characteristics and were particularly attractive to the insects, moulds, and rodents that make a living infesting foodstuffs. So began the development of a range of modern postharvest technologies, many of which will be discussed during this conference.

These technologies have played a key role in ensuring food security in many of the countries in this region. I think here immediately of Australia's nearest neighbour, Indonesia, whose National Logistics Agency (Bulog) maintains buffer stocks of rice using controlled atmosphere storage techniques developed and refined in association with CSIRO and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), two of the Australian agencies much involved in organising this meeting.

The maintenance of food supplies is a general, ongoing challenge, but the organisers of this conference had in mind some specific current issues when they gave the 6th International Working Conference on Stored-product Protection the epithet 'A Time of Challenge'.

These days — and another indicator of just how much things have improved — markets and consumers are demanding not just food, but what they construe as good food. This generally means food free of contaminants such as insects, moulds, and preservatives or other introduced chemicals. I believe — and I am sure most of you do too — that they are entitled to expect this, but of course it makes the storage specialist's life even more difficult.

Health and environmental agencies around the world are homing in on chemical pesticides and fumigants used to protect stored grain and are imposing severe limitations on their use. I think it is safe to say that in doing this they have the general support of consumers.

Perhaps the writing was on the wall for chemical protectants in any case, seeing as stored-product insect pests have so strong a propensity to develop resistance to them.

Methyl bromide, a particularly useful grain fumigant, especially for quarantine applications, has been identified as an atmospheric ozone depleter and international agencies are rapidly phasing it out. Finding suitable replacement technologies is an immediate challenge on which many stored-product specialists are currently focusing their attention. The methyl bromide problem, and possible solutions, are the subject of many papers to be presented during the coming week.

Despite these challenges, I do not think that we need to be pessimistic about the future of stored-product protection. Stored-product specialists have shown themselves to be innovative and committed to the task. The fact that you people have come here — many of you from the other side of the world — indicates a high level of interest in tackling the problems involved.

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Here in Australia, we are proud, and justifiably I believe, in our contributions to postharvest technology. During this conference, we want to share them with our overseas colleagues, in a personal way, but of course we will be picking their brains for some of their secrets too.

This conference is about sharing current technology for the common good and providing a forum for discussion on what are the problems, which have the highest priority for attention, how we should address them with current technology, and where new knowledge is needed to provide satisfactory solution of the problems.

There is a dangerous notion being promulgated in some quarters that we know it all, and that research — the search for knowledge — can be put on the back burner. I believe that nothing could be further from the truth. The work of the Stored Grain Research Laboratory — Australia's national grains postharvest facility — is testimony to this. It could never have achieved what it has without the basic research that is part of its program. Through its ongoing support, the Australian grain industry recognises this.

The participants in this conference come from many countries. In some developing countries, the main issue is still to halt the depredations of stored-products insect pests. In developed countries, the focus is now more on issues of quality and the tailoring of products to specific markets. The perspectives may be different, but the objective is the same — the preservation of food and feedstuffs. Current projections on world food supply and demand indicate that this objective is imperative.

I commend the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), CSIRO, and the Australian grain handling industry for their efforts in organising what seems certain to be a successful meeting on a topic of perennial, international importance. I welcome all delegates, from all parts of the world, to this conference.