

Organic Farming Is Good For The Ground And The Bottom Line



For David, organic farming is as convenient as conventional farming. Although it does add more labor, he doesn't have the added expenses of costly medicines and fertilizer bills.

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Editor's Note: This is the second article in a special June Dairy Month series on "Dairy Profit Possibilities."

MANHEIM (Lancaster Co.) — For David Martin of Manheim, it seemed more practical to work with nature than to use

chemicals. To him, organic farming was just the right thing to do.

David and his wife Robbin milk 95 cows and farm 160 acres. His farm and dairy herd has been certified organic since 1995.

The Martins and their 12 children, Melissa (20), Joshua (18), Laura (17), Carla (15), Abigail

(13), Suzanna (11), Naomi (9), Ramona (8), Caleb (6), Noah (4), Samuel (2), and Sarah (9 months old), worked together on the organic farm to raise a high quality product and sell it at a good price.

In fact, the Martins market their milk to Natural By Nature of Parmalat for \$19 per hundredweight. That's about seven dollars higher than what the average dairy farmer is getting paid. They also sell organic-raised beef on their farm and have about 200 customers who come from as far away as New Jersey to buy their beef.

"One of the advantages to farming organically is that once you see it as functional, you can experience the whole system," said Martin. "You really get attached to what you're doing."

David started farming with his father Daniel and was brought into part-ownership in 1974. He decided to convert the farm and dairy operation to organic in 1990.

His father still helps on the farm and runs the broiler house, where they have 50,000 chickens. Lately David has been helping more with the chickens and is working with his father to get the broiler operation organically-certified.

"I always thought that chemicals were the answer to everything," said Martin. "But whenever I used chemicals for one thing, it seemed to generate some other problem. It seemed just as convenient to work with nature than to use chemicals."

Converting the farm to organic took four years. The land had to be farmed organically for three years before it was certified organic. After that, the cows had to be milked for one year while eating organic feeds.

Obtaining his certification through Pennsylvania Certified Organic, headquartered in Centre Hall, Martin is prohibited from using any hormones, antibiotics, or other synthetic medicines. Any medicines necessary to save a cow's life can be used, but then that cow must be sold to a conventional herd.

The requirements also include animal husbandry issues, such as keeping the cows well-bedded and using novocaine to dehorn the calves. At age two or three, the cows are no longer allowed to be dehorned.

In place of normal health practices, Martin uses biothera-

py alternatives. "When we switched to organic, we gave the vet a copy of the standards so he would have it as a reference," said Martin.

On the land, Martin can only use natural substances, such as dust and manure, to eliminate pest problems and fertilize crops. "I know some farmers who use substances like sugar and fishmeal to sweeten plants and discourage bugs."

Martin raises corn, alfalfa, grass, soybeans, and a little barley on his farm. He also has 35 acres of pastureland. The animals do graze on pasture during the summer, but the cows get a total mixed ration all year long.

When he first converted to organic, Martin admits to seeing some decreases in field crop yields. But now the decreases in yields are minimal.

"The first couple of years were affected by the transition," said Martin. "But now my yields are similar to other producers."

One thing that changed Martin's way of thinking was a study from Rodale Institute that compared crops grown conventionally and organically over a ten-year period. "The conventional crops had the highest individual annual yields, but the organic land yielded the most over the ten year period."

Martin's crops are rotated on a six-year plan with three years of alfalfa or pasture followed by corn, then a double crop of beans and barley, another year of corn, and back to hay.

"My biggest problem when I

switched to organic was Burr Cucumber or wild pickle," said Martin. "I was able to reduce that problem because of my crop rotation."

Martin's herd of mostly Holsteins, with a couple of Jerseys and Dutch-Belted crosses, averages 16,000 pounds of milk with 3.8 percent fat and 3.1 percent protein. According to Martin, production has a lot to do with how you handle the cows.

"When we push our cows for production, we can get more out of an organic herd," said Martin. "But we don't push our cows hard. They last longer and have fewer health problems."

According to Martin, organic farming does take a little more labor than conventional farming does. And solving problems on the farm can be more difficult.

"Sometimes you can't do anything to resolve a problem because of the requirements," said Martin. "You need to be on top of what's happening so you can prevent problems before they happen."

One of Martin's biggest challenges with organic farming is keeping detailed records. "They need to be sufficient enough for the inspector to review," said Martin. "I like having good records, but I don't always have the details the way they want them."

Now in his fifth year of organic farming, Martin admits that there's a learning curve that comes with making it work.

"You really have to believe in it and let it get into your heart."

Organic Dairying Dollars And Sense

According to Ned MacArthur, vice president of operations for Natural Dairy Products Corp., increased profits from organic dairying range based on the farmer's management skills and feed methods.

"It's hard to pin-point an average profit above conventional dairying because you have some farmers who are running a really successful operation and some who are just keeping it above the line," said MacArthur.

"It also makes a difference when you're grazing your herd," he said. "It doesn't matter if you're a conventional or organic dairy farmer, grazing is the most inexpensive way to make milk."

Start up costs for organic dairy farms include \$500 to 600 for the paperwork involved with the certification and about 12 months of added feed costs while your herd is converted to organic.

"Organic feed costs about 30 percent more than conventional feeds," said MacArthur. "The farmer has to absorb that costs for the transition period. That's why I encourage farmers to push grazing as much as they can to keep costs down."

The price for organic milk on average is about five dollars more than conventionally-produced milk. "Right now the industry is paying between \$19 and 20 per hundredweight for organic milk."

Natural Dairy Products Corp. markets its organic products, which are sold under the brand name, Natural By Nature, all over the East Coast. The products have the same shelf life as regular dairy products.

According to MacArthur, organic milk processors have people available to help farmers get started in organic dairying. "That's basically what I do."

Milk Marketing Board Maintains Over-Order Premium

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — Pennsylvania Milk Marketing Board Chairwoman Beverly R. Minor announced that the Board Members voted unanimously for a \$1.00 over-order premium to be paid to Pennsylvania dairy farmers per one hundred pounds of their Class I milk (bottled milk) that is produced, processed, and sold in Pennsylvania.

The premium will be effective for a period of six months beginning July 1, 2000. This action is the result of a public hearing held on May 3, 2000.

The previous over-order premium of \$1.20 (\$1.45 including the fuel adjustment premium) was due to expire June 30, 2000.

Although market conditions still warrant the necessity of an over-order premium, the dollar amount was reduced by \$.20.

Testimony presented at the hearing showed that premiums in the surrounding states ranged from \$.83 in New Jersey to \$1.30 in Maryland and Delaware. Maintaining an over-order premium in Pennsylvania of \$1.45 would be difficult and could have an adverse affect on Pennsylvania Dairy farmers.

The Board Members stress that this action has no affect on the \$.25 per hundred pounds of Class I milk that was added to the current over-order premium to help offset the increase in fuel costs. Beginning July 1, 2000, the

total over-order premium placed on Class I milk that is produced, processed, and sold in Pennsylvania will be \$1.25.

The over-order premium is a dollar amount added to the minimum Class I price to be paid to Pennsylvania dairy farmers that is announced by the Federal Government and the Milk Marketing Board monthly.

Since 1988, the Milk Marketing Board has mandated that a premium be paid to Pennsylvania dairy farmers for their Class I milk that is produced, processed, and sold in Pennsylvania. Through March 2000, the premium has generated an additional \$200,512,000 to Pennsylvania dairy farmers.



Abigail and Suzanna are responsible for feeding the calves, which are fed organic milk and feeds to meet certified organic requirements.

May Class I Price Announced

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — The Milk Marketing Board (MMB) announced the prices to be paid to Pennsylvania dairy farmers for May Class I milk as an average of \$15.33 in the western areas of the Commonwealth, and an average of \$15.81 in the central and eastern areas of the Commonwealth. Class I milk is beverage type milk.

These prices do include the current over-order premium of \$1.20 per one hundred pounds of milk, and the fuel adjustment premium of \$.25 per one hun-

dred pounds of milk.

Since 1988, the MMB has mandated over-order premiums on Class I milk due to adverse conditions affecting the Pennsylvania dairy farmer. The current premium of \$1.20 was ordered to offset losses due to drought conditions.

Chairwoman Beverly R. Minor announced that since the inception of the MMB's over-order premium in 1988, Pennsylvania dairy farmers have received an additional \$200,512,000 in income.