

Making The Leap To Organic Dairy Production

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Transitioning to organic dairy production will require many changes for most farms — some major and others minor — and can involve a lengthy time period. The biggest change often required, however, is the change required in the mind of the farmer.

One may have to go from a mindset of “I need hormones to be sure my cows get bred” and “how can I control weeds in my corn without herbicides?” and “I can’t possibly take care of my herd without antibiotics” — to a mindset open to new, and sometimes old, information, skills, knowledge, paradigms, standards, etc.

It may require a change from “I’m not going to have someone else dictate how I have to farm” to “I’m willing to accept and do whatever is required to produce this product to meet the needs of our customers.” It may require a shift from a desire for quick fixes out of a bottle or spray truck or from a view that organic standards are burdensome regulations to an understanding that the extra challenges and requirements of organic production are what allow for a premium price for certified organic products.

For some people, this transition can take years, for others only some fine tuning of their current thought processes. Many farmers will never be able to make the shift or even have any desire to try.

Other areas of change and new management tasks include animal husbandry, likely major health care changes, land and crop management, record-keeping, sourcing new and different inputs, the certification process, alternative marketing, economics, and developing a new or enlarged support network.

Land Transition

All farmland to be certified, including pasture and cropland, must be managed organically for a minimum 36-month period before it can qualify for organic certification. That means that no herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, commercial fertilizers, treated seed, or other prohibited substances can be used during that time period. Adequate records need to be kept to verify the land management.

There are numerous resources available to help with organic crop management, from magazines to handbooks. In New York, there are organic crop field days events and monthly get-togethers with presentations on organic crop production. Most

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