

# Making The Leap To Organic Dairy Production

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200 days of grazing for our milking herd and often a month more than that for our dry cows and many of the heifers.

During winter, the pasture environment can't be duplicated, but the same basic tenets apply — to keep the cows in a low stress environment with lots of fresh air, daily exercise, and high quality food — supplementing their diet with immune system boosters such as kelp, Vitamin E, and selenium.

When an animal does get sick and needs treatment, options available include homeopathy, herbal/plant-based products, and immune system supports such as vitamins and colostrum whey products.

Management of mastitis without the use of antibiotics again rests on ensuring that animals have a strong, healthy immune system and good sanitation. Frequent monitoring of individual cow somatic cell counts and the culturing of individual cows to identify both problem cows and problem organisms are two useful tools for organic farmers.

Organic farmers need to substitute tight management in place of the use of antibiotics. I know it is possible, for we have gone from a somatic cell count of around 400,000 when we started organic produc-

tion to averaging around 200,000 four years later.

## Marketing

A most basic piece of information that a farm should secure near the start of the transition period is to ensure that once certified, they will have a market for their milk.

Some farms have started on-farm processing or have found an alternative market, but these options are not easily or readily available. There are some geographic areas that are currently too far from the organic milk pick-up routes and there just is no market for the milk from farms in such areas.

Since it is costly to go through organic transition, it is important to have assurance, in writing if possible, that the intended milk buyer will indeed pick up your milk once transitioned. Given the unpredictability of the growth of the organic dairy market, it often is hard for the buyer to know for sure when additional milk is needed. They may not be able to give a letter of intent until it is time to start the last 90 day, 100-percent organic feeding phase.

Farmers need to find, or already have, professional consultants (i.e. veterinarian, nutritionist, etc.) who can work within the confines of the organic standards. As with anything new, it is also

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