

Organic Dairyman Profits From Doing What He Believes

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"The public wants milk that's made on grass," he said.

Stoltzfoos, a member of Lancaster Organic Farmer's Cooperative, said that a cheesemaker recently contacted the co-op saying he wanted milk from cows that are fed no grain at all, only grass. He was especially interested in conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) content of the milk. Studies have shown that CLA content is significantly higher in grassfed animal products and has benefits to human health, including cancer-fighting properties.

Spring Wood Farm was certified by Pennsylvania Certified Organic in 1995. According to Stoltzfoos, going organic was a natural step after the switch to grazing.

"With grass, you don't need chemicals (pesticides and herbicides)," he said.

The biggest challenge in organic grass production is supplying enough nitrogen without a commercial product. Using compost made mostly from manure on the farm, Stoltzfoos can provide a lot of the grass's nitrogen needs in a stable form. He supplements with manure from the farm's organic turkey operation. Good clover populations in the pastures also help supply nitrogen to the grasses.

According to Stoltzfoos, grazing is a better way to

promote nitrogen utilization by plants than row-cropping systems.

"Grazing encourages the nitrogen cycle to work better," he said. "Intensive cropping puts a net drain on the soil, even if you're organic." The goal is to spread two tons of compost per acre each year. When he falls behind, the pastures show it, Stoltzfoos said. Last year, for example, he was busy irrigating paddocks and didn't get all the compost spread. He suspects that was at least part of the reason for a dip in milk production this spring.

Controlling flies and internal parasites without chemicals is a challenge in organic cow care, Stoltzfoos said. He uses diatomaceous earth in the feed to help control parasites, but admits that it is ineffective against coccidia organisms. Animals under 6 or 7 months are especially susceptible.

"We're not immune to losing one or two," he said. Keeping energy levels high in the feed ration is another precaution against the weakening effects of parasites.

For fly control, an apparatus with hanging pieces of material sweeps flies off the backs and sides of cows when they come in for milking. The blue lights of an attached "bug-zapper" then attract a number of the flies to their electrocution.

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