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tassium can tie up magnesium, and excessive magnesium ties up everything including magnesium! Excessive calcium can do the same. Even something as good as organic matter can be overdone – if the organic matter has too wide a carbon-to-nitrogen ratio, it can tie up nitrogen so severely as to cause crop damage. Too much organic matter can also cause weed problems.

It is important to not put on materials unless you know what nutrients they actually contain. There is a tremendous possible range in nutrient content in materials like manure and compost. For this reason, it is important to test each amendment before application to soil. Be sure you understand whether the test results are on a 'dry matter basis' or 'as is'. If the test is on a dry matter basis, and you are putting on something with varying moisture like compost, you will have to take the moisture level into account by varying the application rate.

Klaas Martens, along with his wife Mary-Howell and their three children, farm 1,400 acres of organic grains in the Finger Lakes area of western New York. They also own and operate Lakeview Organic Grain, an organic feed and seed business in Penn Yan, NY. They can be contacted at kandmhfarm@sprintmail.com. ♦

Grain, Grain, Where's the Organic Grain?

By Kathie Arnold

Along with the current big increase in organic milk supply, comes perhaps what could be called a perfect storm to limit a similar increase in organic grain supplies. I recently had an opportunity to testify before the Senate Ag Committee on behalf of organic needs for the 2007 Farm Bill and had a chance to visit with Lynn Clarkson, who was also testifying. Mr. Clarkson is current president and founder of Clarkson Grain Co., Inc. in Illinois. In the business of contracting with grain growers and supplying organic, non-GMO, and conventional grains domestically and internationally, he is in a position to know what is going on in the grain business. He related that he is concerned that the supply of domestic organic grain may actually go down this year as he sees farmers deciding to make the switch from organic grain production back to conventional because of what they are perceiving as less risk with conventional production. With the government subsidies for corn based ethanol, conventional corn prices have been driven to record heights that look very attractive. And crop insurance, although not working very well for conventional producers, works considerably poorer as a risk management tool for organic grain growers.

That was made clear to me by Rick Glenister, a grain grower from Moravia, NY that we buy from who has this to say: "While transitioning to organic grain farming, I recognized just how vulnerable crop farmers are since their income and financial survival depends on just the current crop season. Therefore in late 2004 I began researching crop insurance options for the 2005 season. After studying the various crop insurance programs it became clear to me that none of the policies really offered very much effective protection at affordable premiums. Nonetheless I enrolled in the standard corn and soybean policies thinking that some insurance was better than none.

Unfortunately the 2005 season was exactly the kind of drought year that tests a farmer's mental health. You could practically draw a line running east west across Central New York about half way between Auburn and Ithaca with record drought to the south and perfect growing conditions to the north. I could stand here in my dooryard and hear the thunderstorms pass to the north just out of reach. Of the 10.6 inches we received that growing season (our average is 16-18) 6 inches came on or before June 12th (with 3 inches in one event) and the remaining 4 inches two days after Katrina de-



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 stroyed New Orleans on the 29th of August. Remarkably there was enough moisture in the soil that the earlier planted corn pollinated and made a partial crop (about 50%). The soybeans, however, while they managed to grow plants, simply didn't set seed so that there were empty pods but very few beans. In my case, what should have been an expected 2100 bushels was only 398 which includes the 2 Bu/A field losses (they even count those beans you lose during harvest).

Now the typical crop insurance policy is written such that it guarantees some level of yield (in my case 55%) if the yield is below a certain trigger level (45%) adjusted for any actual yield. You can purchase higher levels of protection but the premiums increase dramatically and are unaffordable. In the case of the corn, since the yield (47%) didn't drop below the trigger level I couldn't recover. For the soybeans the actual yield was 4.9 Bu/A instead of the guaranteed 26 Bu/A. As a consequence, instead of a \$30,000 soybean crop, I recovered \$3418 in crop insurance, enough to pay for the seed used but almost nothing for the land rent, taxes, fuel and labor.

My part of the policy premium was \$689 and the government's portion was \$1705 for a total premium of \$2494. In addition, my premiums for the next year

were doubled so the company recovered any loss and in effect punished me for the weather."

Not only do organic crop producers have to pay a 5% surcharge for crop insurance, but they are most often reimbursed for crop loss at the conventional price, not the organic price for the crop. Both Mr. Clarkson and I testified before the Senate Ag Committee that changes in the crop insurance program for organic producers are sorely needed.

Here in NY, NOFA-NY has no new grain growing applicants to be certified this year so it looks like the impetus to convert more grain acreage is nowhere in sight for the time being. So here we have it—increased demand for organic livestock feeds matched with a likely stagnant domestic organic grain supply. Supply and demand does seem to be alive and well in the grain market so we are no doubt going to see organic grain prices continuing to increase until the prices get high enough to encourage more acres into organic production—which may not be until 2008 or beyond.

So what is your game-plan to weather the year with higher organic grain prices? Those who are 100% grassfed don't have to change a thing but the rest of us

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 had better sharpen our pencils and plan ahead and think about how we can put more high quality pasture and grass into our animals and less grain.

Sumner Watson, of Cold Springs Farm in Sharon Springs, NY who processes and sells bulk and bagged organic grain, related that he has clearly seen a correlation between those farms who buy lots of high protein feed being the ones who are building his unfortunately long list of accounts receivable versus the producers who buy little high protein grains being the ones who are paid up. This shows that there may be real opportunity on some farms for reformulating rations to use lower protein feeds which are cheaper and / or less grain over all and yet still have a better bottom line.

At Twin Oaks Dairy, we take the higher protein grain out of the ration for May and June while the cows are consuming large amounts of pasture and then keep the level reduced compared to the winter ration for the rest of the grazing season. We also have not used corn silage in many years and believe that we can do better economically by raising much of our own protein through high quality grass / legume crops and buying energy feeds like corn and barley that, while expensive, are far cheaper than soy meal.

It has been years since we have fed any soybean feed.

We use wheat midds as an economical protein source and when they are unavailable, we turn to field peas, sunflower meal, and we have used linseed meal with good success.

With higher grain prices, pencil pushing to determine economic levels of grain feeding will be necessary. And in any changing environment, it behooves producers to rethink their strategies and management and consider alternatives.

Kathie Arnold is the Policy Committee Chair for NODPA. She, her husband, and brother-in-law have been shipping organic milk from their Truxton, NY farm since 1998. ♦

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