

Organic Dairy Panel, August 17, 2002
NY Graziers Event
By Lisa McCrory

The Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance held its second annual Field Days Event August, 2002, in Truxton, New York and the following day participated in Graze NY's first Empire State Pasture Day at the Burgett. This event focused on the numerous aspects associated with rotational grazing and pasture/hayland management including trade show exhibits displayed by farmer associations, educational organizations, businesses and resource groups plus demonstrations ranging from sheep dog herding to pasture irrigation. Also scheduled though out the day were speakers covering various grass-based topics including multiple species grazing, seasonal calving and cross breeding. Also featured that day was a panel discussion on organic dairy farming. NODPA organized this panel inviting a producers from Maine, Vermont, Pennsylvania and New York to share their experience relative to four specific areas on their farm. There was some lively dialogue following the farmer presentations including some information on the role and mission of NODPA in the Northeast.

Below is a write-up of this fantastic panel discussion. Thanks again to all the producers on this panel and to the NODPA volunteers that helped organize this event.

Ralph Caldwell, Turner, Maine

Ralph has a 150 Holstein cow, fall freshening dairy farm in Turner, Maine and has been certified organic for almost 3 years. His herd production is between 18 to 20,000 per cow per year. Ralph raises some of his own grains and various silages including wheat, rye, corn, and sorghum. The rest of the grains fed to the cows are purchased separately and mixed on the farm.

Shipping organic milk is not the only thing that happens on this farm; The Caldwells have a licensed bottling plant allowing them to bottle and sell raw milk (legal in Maine) which is sold at the farmers market from May to October. Other products that are marketed are organic and natural beef, butter and baked goods.

Transition:

Ralph began shipping Organic milk in 1999, after selling his conventional herd the year before. He kept his young stock and started with a newly transitioned herd of first calf heifers. At the time of transition he had some fields that were not organic because they had been in conventional corn. He fed feed from those fields to his beef animals and youngstock (which at the time was acceptable under MOFGA's certification rules).

Market:

The majority of Caldwell Farm's milk is shipped to Horizon. Ralph's daughter is also involved in the business and takes meat, milk and other products to farmers markets during the summer. Ralph also raises some natural beef on a separate farm, with Maine barley for grain. He is selling more natural beef than organic at this time.

Calves:

Calves are raised in pens in a barn until nine months of age. Then they are on pasture during the season. They get 3-4 pounds of grain and silage and hay free choice until the pasture is available.

David Johnson, Liberty, Pennsylvania

Dave has a 50 cow seasonal organic dairy herd in Liberty, PA. He started from scratch 4 years ago. He came into farming with no previous experience and carefully looked into the best and most cost effective way to dairy farm. He started his seasonal grass-based dairy with the intention of being certified organic from the start. Dave does not push his cows for production, but instead strives for a healthy, low stress environment for his

animals (producing 12,000 lbs per cow per year). Another way of keeping costs low for this farm means that the whole farm is in grass and the animals do most of the harvesting; there is minimal use and need for machinery.

Transition:

David started the certification process in the fall of 2000. At that time, certification requirements mandated that the land be free of synthetic fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides for 3 years and the herd needed to be managed with 100% certifiable feed and health practices for 90 days before the milk would be considered organic. Since the Johnsons were grass based (intensive rotational grazing), and had started dairy farming with the intent of being organic, transitioning for them was not that difficult or expensive. Being seasonal, there is at least a 6 week period of time when their herd is not producing milk and the cost of feeding the cows is at its lowest. The transition period was timed to take place during the dry period .

Market:

David emphasized the importance of having two critical things in line before taking on any costly changes: 1) get a market lined up (contact the different processors buying milk in your area) and let them know that you are interested in producing organic milk, 2) get a commitment from a buyer; it is highly recommended to get that commitment in writing. David contacted CROPP and Horizon when he started looking for a market. At that time Horizon was not interested in seasonal herds, but CROPP was interested in his milk, and he started shipping to them in March of 2001.

Calves:

The calves are born from March to late May on the Johnson's farm. Three groups of calves are eventually created; they are raised on pasture in movable sheds. The young animals are trained to electric fence as soon as possible. By the time they are 6-8 months, the calves are moved to an open sided barn and wood lot for shelter. Round bales are placed strategically in the pasture where the calves will winter.

Paul and Maureen Knapp, Preble, New York

Paul and Maureen milk about 70 cows and are located in Preble, NY. They have been rotationally grazing their animals for the past 5 years and shipping their milk to an organic buyer for the last year and a half.

Transition:

Prior to getting certified, the Knapps had worked a lot on cow health using homeopathic remedies and other approaches that would be allowed under organic certification. Once they were comfortable with their animal health practices the decision to transition seemed like the next logical step. Other parts of their transition have not been as easy. Not all of their land is certified yet; some of it is still in transition and as a result they have to buy a lot of feed. It is painful for them, but they will make it through it.

Market:

Finding a milk market was easy for Paul and Maureen. They had three processors to choose from at the time that they were interested. Not knowing when there would be another recruitment for organic milk, they decided to get certified before all their land was done transitioning. This would require selling their transitioning feed and buying certified feed to make up for what they were unable to grow.

Calves:

The Knapps put up a Cover-All greenhouse style building to house all ages of animals in pens on a bedded pack, calves included. The calves are raised in groups of 6-8 in a pen using a 10-teat mob feeder. The calves benefit from the natural light and abundant ventilation of this building as well as having access to a waterer at all times. Homeopathic remedies are administered at birth as preventatives and to help start calves on the right track. No vaccines are used. The calves seem to respond well to this system though the Knapp's hope at some point is to get a pasture suitably fenced so the calves can have some outdoor time.

Mark and Sarah Russell, Sudbury, Vermont

Mark and Sarah have a seasonal organic dairy in Sudbury, VT. They milk about 42 cows and have been rotationally grazing their animals for over 8 years and certified organic for 5 years. Another unique feature about their farm is that they out-winter their animals.

Transition:

Their transition to organic production was smooth because they had been working on sustainable farming practices years before getting certified. They moved from a confinement dairy, bringing the feed to the cows, to a grass based dairy, and finally to seasonal/grass based dairy production. Through this process of change they also realized that antibiotics was not an effective way to treat their cows and focused on preventative management strategies instead and shortly after joined the growing number of certified dairies in Vermont. Mark smirked as he mentioned that he was called an 'extreme grazier' in his neighborhood.

Market:

"With a little forethought, transitioning can be easy," says Mark, "thinking sustainably first, and securing the market next". One day, when someone asked him why he wasn't organic, Mark couldn't answer the question. That got him curious and he started looking into the organic market. He secured a contract with one of the processors and planned his transition. The required transition time in 1996 was 90 days 100% organic feed and 90 days health management practices that complied with the organic standards. Being a seasonal grass based dairy farm, the Russells planned their transition time to take place during the dry period so the added grain costs (from purchasing organic grain) was very little.

Calves:

The Russells keep their calves with their mothers until weaning (75-80 days). They want them really robust for the weaning process because when they separate them from their mothers (the weakest part of their management, Mark feels), it takes one week before the blating stops. The calves are kept on grass from birth until they leave the farm (at weaning) and are raised outside all of the time until they get milked. Nurse cows have worked well in the past; they would graft a calf onto a cow with a high somatic cell count which would feed the calf and sometimes bring the count down to a reasonable level and enable them to bring the cow back into the production string.