

## 2005 Field Days and NODPA Annual Meeting on August 12<sup>th</sup>

The Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA) held its fifth Annual Summer Field Days Event on Friday and Saturday, August 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005 in Nichols NY, just west of Binghamton, NY. The field days were attended by over 140 farmers from Maine through to Pennsylvania. The event was hosted by Englebert Farm (Kevin, Lisa, Kris, Joe and John) and sponsored by Horizon Organic Dairy, Stonyfield Farm Inc. and Organic Valley Family of Farms.

The Field Days started at 1:00 p. m. on Friday, with a field trip to the Englebert Farm to look at organic corn, soy and hay production and walk their pastures. The Engelbert family has been farming in the Southern Tier of NY since 1848 and at their present location since 1911. They own 140 acres of pasture and 150 acres of crop land, plus nearly 300 acres of woods. They also rent 450 acres suitable for row-cropping and 150 acres of permanent grass hay land. No chemicals have been used since 1980 and rotational grazing was begun in the late 1980's. They currently feed their cows 8-10 lbs. of high moisture ground ear corn per milking cow per day, along with pasture, supplemented with baleage. Their herd health involves keeping their soils healthy and in balance, but, according to Kevin Engelbert, to be truly sustainable, "farmers need a fair price, namely parity price, for their products." The field trip involved a crop walk which concentrated on weed control in corn and soybean production. The visit from dairy farmers from all over the northeast also brought the first significant rain for the last month to the farm.

The Friday night banquet was held at the Creamery in Nichols and featured spit-roasted organic veal from Engelbert Farms, salt potatoes, green salad, corn on the cob and ice cream donated by Barts' Homemade. NRCS grassland specialist Darrell Emmick gave the key note address on organic pasture management which highlighted the social, environmental and economic benefits of using grazing-based dairy production systems in the northeast region of the US. Darrell's work includes the development of practical application guidelines and the provision of on-farm technical assistance. He is the New York State Grazing Land Management Specialist with the USDA - NRCS. Darrell is also pursuing a PhD with his primary research interest being the foraging behavior of lactating dairy cows and the influence of supplemental concentrate feeds.

This was followed by a producers' and NODPA members' meeting. NODPA President and Maine farmer Steve Morrison welcomed the farmers to the meeting, and reviewed the evening's agenda. This was followed by a brief review of NODPA's activity in the past year by New York organic dairy producer Kathie Arnold. NODPA has supported the National Organic Standards Board's livestock committee action in their proposal that dairy cows and other ruminants obtain a significant portion of their annual feed from grazing on pasture. NODPA actively supported a proposed guidance document that requires significant pasturing for ruminants. Kathy also gave a brief update on the Harvey Lawsuit

and its future impact on the organic dairy standards – particularly the 80:20 rule that allows transitioning farmers to use a percentage of non-certified feed. There was a straw pole of farmers present to see if NODPA should support the movement to open up OFPA (the NOP enabling law) to try to keep the 80:20 rule. There was no support for this idea. There was a brief discussion on the ability of organic milk producers to apply to the USDA for a return of the \$.15 per cwt for dairy marketing that is deducted from all milk checks and the implications for the future marketing of organic milk. Kathie explained that there is a form available for organic farmers to fill out to get those funds back.

Steve Pechacek from Wisconsin gave an update on the Midwest Organic Dairy Producers Alliance. There were several representatives from this organization including Steve, who is the President, Ed Zimba (Board member), and Jim Greenburg (Vice President). Steve Pechacek thanked NODPA for its support and help in getting MODPA started, and emphasized the importance of the two organizations working together. Steve discussed MODPA's support of parity pricing of organic milk that would reflect the annual increases in the cost of goods and services in order to maintain a pay price that allows a living wage with a return on investment.

Sarah Flack followed Steve's presentation with some preliminary information from the economic study being done on cost of production of organic milk on farms in Vermont and Maine.

Steve Morrison presented a review of the priorities set by farmers at the 2004 producer meeting. These were prioritized by members at the 2004 producer meeting in the following order:

1. Pasture access standards,
2. General organic standards,
3. Viable pay price,
4. Consumer confidence,
5. Consumer education,
6. Creating a national organization,
7. Concern about big companies and farms,
8. Networking and educating farmers and supporting NODPA.

Ed Maltby (NODPA coordinator) then facilitated a discussion amongst NODPA members, starting by reading some comments from several farmers who were unable to attend. These included the suggestion for the need for increasing the pay price for organic milk to match production costs, and the importance of organic dairy farmers supporting one another. Kathie Arnold then presented the producer priority input collected earlier in the evening that would guide the NODPA Board and management in 2006. These fell into four main areas:

1. Pay price
2. Pasture rule

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### 3. Education and networking of farmers

#### 4. Organic grain price, quality and availability

Discussion for the rest of the evening focused on pay price. Comments included farmers from different regions reporting wide variation in cost of production, but all reporting significant increase in cost of production over the past few years. Some regions report larger problems with higher costs of grain (increasing from \$6 per bushel to \$9.00) and fuel than other areas. Many farmers are concerned about shrinking margins and organic producers returning to the conventional market to be able to stay on their farms. There was a suggestion that more farmers should contact their milk buyers to give them information on the current cost of production. There was a lot of discussion on what level of pay price increase farmers should ask for; if there should be a linkage to retail pricing, and what sort of regional variations are needed.

The evening closed with a motion by Kevin Englebert that members support the actions of the NODPA board and staff, and request that they continue to work on increasing the base pay price by meeting with farmers, milk handlers, processors and retailers to devise the best approach to working toward an increased milk pay price. The motion was seconded by NODPA Treasurer Henry Perkins and was passed unanimously.

The Saturday morning proceedings were opened by Steve Morrison, NODPA's President, followed by "Measuring The Health of your Soil." Janice Degni, and Fay Benson of Cornell's South Central NY Dairy and Field Crop Team used some of the practices that have been discussed in their winter soil health meetings to show farmers how to measure the health of their farm soils. This workshop was available throughout the event and they had different stations to measure soil health, such as: soil aggregate stability was measured with a rain simulator; microbial population was determined by the length of time a cellulose chip is digested by the soil; how growing a corn plant in the sample soil and comparing it to a corn plant grown in sterile soil can measure harmful nematodes populations, and penetrometers were demonstrated.

Klaas Martens of Lakeview Organic Grain lead an interactive workshop on soil fertility management. Klaas has been growing certified organic field crops since 1994 and currently he and his family are growing 1,300 acres of diverse crops. Klaas has served as a mentor and consultant throughout the organic community advising on soil structure and fertility, and how it affects the rest of an organic system. Klaas grew up on a dairy farm in Penn Yan, NY and graduated from SUNY Cobleskill with a degree in Animal Husbandry. In 1991, he branched out on his own and started exploring organic methods. Several years ago, the Martens purchased an Agway feed mill that had been out of operation for a number of years, and opened Lakeview Organic Grain in Penn Yan. He gave a very interesting presentation on soil health, spending over an hour answering questions from farmers about their own farm situations.

Jim Gardiner followed Klaas with a talk about medicinal and nutritional uses of herbs in relation to livestock health care. Jim and his family operate a certified organic dairy farm in Otselic, NY, and during the past 14 years, they have worked at finding alternatives to medications through the use of vitamins, minerals and herbal foods to help their livestock recover from 'dis-ease'. Jim was able to share his experience with practical methods of preventing and treating sick animals without compromising organic certification. He spent over an hour interacting with farmers about their different problems and working on solutions.

At 12:30 a magnificent pork BBQ lunch was served with excellent local organic produce. At 2:00 p.m. the field days participants toured the Moore's farm of 250 acres on the Pennsylvania border. The Moore's milk 55 crossbred cows as a seasonal, pasture based herd in a New Zealand-style swing 10 milking parlor housed in a solar barn. Moore Farms has been certified organic since 1998 and have pioneered many different practices in low cost, high quality production techniques. Their farm is totally grass based, feeding only pasture, hay and grass baleage, and raising calves on their milking mothers. Rob and Pam Moore and Darrell Emmick led discussions on grassland management; once-a-day milking; strategies for reducing use of purchased grain, plus practical difficulties of milking cows with calves still suckling. ♦