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UNH organic dairy research facility at forefront of industry

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LEE — The Burley-Demeritt Farm doesn't look like a home to revolution. The 48 purebred Jersey cows standing in the fields and the bales of hay scattered about make the farm look anything but cutting edge. But the future was firmly in the minds of researchers and more than 100 organic dairy farmers gathered at the farm last Friday as they got a firsthand look at the University of New Hampshire's organic research dairy.



Farmers with the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA) and UNH faculty and researchers discussed how the Burley-Demeritt Farm, a first-of-its-kind organic dairy research facility, might eventually change how organic dairy farms are operated throughout the nation. At the open house, UNH faculty asked farmers how research on the farm can set up a scientific knowledge base for new organic dairy farmers and make organic farming easier and more efficient.

**Luke, front, and Ross Conroy of Berwick, Maine, get a chance to see some Jersey cows at the Burley-Demeritt Farm in Lee on Friday. The farm, the University of New Hampshire's organic dairy farm, was the site of an open house where about 100 organic dairy farmers, researchers and others gathered for a tour and workshops. The brothers played while their dad listened and learned.**  
(Pamela Hodgdon/Democrat photo)

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That sort of research will begin this winter. Now, the farm is still in its beginning stages, but already there is plenty of activity there. In December 2005, 48 purebred Jersey heifers were brought to the farm and are in the process of being transitioned to organic feed. The handful of aging structures on the 300-acre farm will soon be joined by a new milking center, feed mill and farm equipment building. New barns for the cows will also be built.

As the cows grazed, farmers, buyers and other members of NODPA made their way through four listening stations staffed by UNH faculty and researchers. Farmers discussed how herd health, grazing and pasture management, forage and crop conservation and farm economics all will impact organic dairy farming.

William Trumble, Dean of the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture, said the open house was a way to get input from organic dairy farmers in the region before



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operations on the farm are in full swing. Organic milk production is expected to begin in late December of this year. UNH is the first land-grant university in the country to establish an organic dairy farm, Trumble said.

The university also operates the Fairchild Dairy Teaching and Research Center in Durham.

"There's an educational component and a research component," Trumble said. "There hasn't been science-based research on organic foods."

There are plenty of areas to conduct research on. At each of the four stations set up around the farm, farmers quickly tossed out ideas on areas UNH researchers should look at, from farmer-centric topics like how multi-species grazing effects cows to consumer issues, like the taste and quality of organic milk.

There are 168 dairy farms in the state, four of which are organic, according to the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture.

Steve Russell, owner of the Pine Hill Jerseys farm in Winslow, Maine, has high hopes about the research that will come out of the farm. The timing couldn't be better, he said.

"I think (the organic dairy industry) will only continue to grow. Consumers want it. It's a gateway to the whole organic industry."

Russell has been milking organic for eight years. For new farmers making the transition to organic, there are few places to go for a solid knowledge base, Russell said.

"This way, they can do it in a scientific setting. It's more to help newer people have that learning curve, so that everybody doesn't have to reinvent the wheel," he said.

Mark Fellows, who operates Chase Hill Farm in Warwick, Mass., said the research farm will help conventional farmers transition to organic farmer.

"You need a different mindset to do organic," he said.

Chuck Schwab, a professor of dairy nutrition at the university, expects research to begin this winter. But even then, university researchers will be taking their cues from established farmers, Schwab told farmers gathered on Friday.

"We're going to learn more in the first 10 years from you folks than you'll learn from us," he said.

So far, there's been sizeable interest from students in the program, Schwab said. When

the creation of the farm was announced last December, Schwab said he immediately began hearing from students interested in working on the farm and participating in research. Schwab has big plans for the farm — eventually, he'd like to see a sprawling, dilapidated farmhouse on the property renovated and used to house researchers and students.

"This isn't just about New Hampshire," he said. "We're doing this for farmers throughout the Northeast."