

Organic



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This newsletter is published by the Organic Trade Association, the North American trade association committed to the promotion of organic products in the marketplace, and the protection of the integrity of organic standards. Its membership includes more than 1,700 producers, processors, distributors and retailers of organic foods, fibers, farm and garden supplies, and health and beauty products. OTA is your leading resource for information about this industry.

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Farmers: “Organic practices are good for our cows” By Jennifer Rose

Organic is often celebrated for its positive impacts on the environment and personal health. According Maryellen Franklin of the Franklin Farm in Guilford, VT, animals raised using organic practices also come out on top.

Franklin transitioned her dairy farm to organic in June 2003. “We always knew that organic was the better way to farm for our land and our family,” she explains. “What we didn’t know was just how much better a way it was to raise cows.”

The organic difference was almost immediately apparent. “As crazy as it sounds, when we went organic, we just didn’t have many sick animals on our farm anymore.” Nor did she face the large veterinary bills she incurred when she was operating her farm conventionally. At that time, the veterinarian made monthly visits to examine and treat sick animals; now, the vet stops by only occasionally to treat animals whose health problems cannot be managed using homeopathic remedies.

Franklin has also noticed a difference in her cows’ overall behavioral patterns since she made the switch. “We’ve always had good animals on our farm, but our organic cows are the nicest, mellowest bunch we have ever worked with. Weather-permitting, they go out to pasture from the beginning of May until early November, bask in the sun, and enjoy the grass-based diet nature intended them to.”



Photo courtesy Rod Morrison.

Rocky Mountain Organic Beef livestock enjoy grazing on the range in Wyoming.

Dairy farmer Edward Eugair of Morning Meadows Farm in Florence, VT, has also found organic practices have a positive impact on his cows’ health. Eugair, whose operation was “pretty much organic” before its official transition took place, has seen a noticeable decline in animal illness over the five years it has been certified organic. “Our cows experience less mastitis and have hardly any foot problems anymore,” he notes. His vet bills have seen a similar drop.

In addition to a reduction in illness, Eugair, like Franklin, has observed positive changes in his cows’ temperament. Eugair attributes this to a number of factors, including organic’s emphasis on high quality feed, access to the outdoors, and production rates that are in keeping with the animals’ natural tendencies. “The cows are much less stressed, and their behavior really reflects it.”

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Douglas Turner, owner and operator of Simplicity Farm in Waitsfield, VT, has been similarly satisfied with the effects of organic practices on his herd's well-being. His animals, which have historically been outside from May until the beginning of November, now spend even more time on pasture. This change has led to an improvement in the animals' overall health. His cows are now more resistant to mastitis and pneumonia. "Our cows are sick less frequently than in the past, and when they do get sick, we catch it early and are generally able to treat them with inexpensive remedies like salve and aspirin," Turner explains.

For cattle rancher and chief executive officer of Rocky Mountain Organic Beef Rod Morrison, "Organic has been, unquestionably, the way to go" to ensure his animals' health. His cattle roam freely on his 600,000 certified organic acres in northwest Wyoming, where they have consistent access to high quality pasture, a large number of watering holes, and the freedom to "behave the way nature intended them to." The result? Few health problems, lower vet bills, and yes, "happier cows." As Morrison explains it, "What you see when you observe our cows is a group of animals that are in excellent physical condition and at ease with themselves and each other."

Dr. Hubert Karreman, a dairy veterinarian in Lancaster County, PA, offers a similarly positive view of organic cows' health. "I've worked with thousands of animals in the course of my career as a veterinarian, and I can confidently say that the organic herds I deal with do not experience as many illnesses as those that are managed conventionally." Particularly on farms where the rolling herd average is 18,000 pounds or less—a common size for small, organic farms—the number of production-related health problems drops off considerably. As Karreman puts it, "In general, animals raised as part of these smaller operations are just healthier."

For Dr. Juan Velez, Senior Vice President of Farm Operations at Aurora Organic Dairy, the beneficial impact of organic management is less clear cut. "I've seen incredibly healthy and happy cows that have been raised conventionally, and I've seen organic cows that have suffered from various health problems. In this sense, the issue is less about organic versus conventional and more about how an individual farmer chooses to manage his/her operation."

Linda Tikofsky, Senior Extension Veterinarian with Quality Milk Production Services at Cornell University, agrees. "Whether one is talking about organic or conventional farm management, there is always a range with respect to animal treatment and health. What matters most is how committed the farmer is to doing what is right for the animal."

Still, both Velez and Tikofsky agree that the organic system, which is governed by a set of strict and enforceable rules, does help to ensure that a basic commitment to animal health is made and upheld. For example, because it prohibits the use of antibiotics (except in

circumstances where the animals' health/survival is in jeopardy), the organic system supports and promotes a preventative approach to health care that benefits animals and farmers alike. Most notably, it compels farmers to establish a close relationship with each animal. Cultivated through frequent interaction and "near constant observation," this relationship enables farmers to quickly identify, assess, and respond to behavioral changes before they develop into health problems. Moreover, it helps organic farmers to avoid reactive, antibiotic-based treatments, which can be costly and can jeopardize their animals' organic status.

From Tikofsky's standpoint, the organic system also promotes animal health through its understanding of and support for animals' natural behaviors. As she explains it, "Cows are designed to spend much of their time outside on the pasture, where they can acquire the nutrients they need to survive. To the extent, then, that the organic system makes access to the outdoors a priority, it gives cows access to the high forage diet they need to maintain digestive health."

Karreman agrees. "Much of the organic system is about trying to mimic Mother Nature. Her cues point to the importance of fresh air, dry bedding, sunshine, quality pastures, and high-forage feed, so that is what the organic system attempts to provide."

Several studies have found that cows raised organically are less prone to lameness and foot disease, due, in large part, to the fact that they move about on pasture, which is easier on their feet than concrete. Other studies have shown that animals consuming high forage diets experience fewer instances of mastitis and tend to enjoy greater longevity than animals whose diets are more grain-based.

While such findings are encouraging, the shortage of comparative research on animal health in organic and conventional systems remains an obstacle. "At this point, we simply don't have data that conclusively shows that organically raised animals are healthier than their conventionally raised counterparts," says Velez. Tikofsky agrees. "Anecdotal evidence definitely points to the positive impacts of organic management on animal health. What we need now is the hard data to back it up."

According to Karreman, progress is being made on this front. Thanks to a grant made available through the Northeast region of the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, a team of researchers conducted a study in which the health of cows on 30-40 certified organic farms in Lancaster County was compared to that of animals on similarly sized conventional farms located approximately one mile away. The study, which consisted of a 308-question survey, an evaluation of dairy herd improvement information downloaded from Dairy Records Management Systems in Raleigh, NC, and the aforementioned farm-pairing, revealed that some organic cows are underweight and that there is room for improvement in the organic management system. Nonetheless, the study itself represents an important step towards amassing concrete, comparative data on the health of organic animals.

Research is also being done to expand the information available about organic alternatives to traditional, antibiotic-based treatments for

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Organic news

- To best feed the world, a growing number of researchers, development experts, farming groups and environmentalists are calling for adoption of organic agricultural practices to improve yields and access to nutritional food in developing countries, according to a new Rodale Institute research paper (www.rodaleinstitute.org/files/GreenRevUP.pdf).
- Michigan's Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program now includes a monthly fresh produce allowance that can be used to buy organic foods.
- GustOrganics in New York City has opened a certified organic bar featuring certified organic wines, beers, and mixed drinks.
- Elevation Burger, a new organic burger restaurant chain, opened a store in Baltimore, MD, in November, with plans to open three such stores within the next five years.
- Organic To Go™ has opened its ninth Los Angeles International Airport grab & go location.
- Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, MS, is the first military base to install YoNaturals' organic and natural food vending machines.
- Earthpure Organics™ and Power Engineers are collaborating on a pilot program to help bring employees organic options to their current vending kiosks. Earthpure is a private label brand and an organic vending distributor.
- Nature's Path has bought 2,240 acres of organic farm land for sourcing cereal grains. It has partnered with two organic farmers on separate farms in Western Saskatchewan, Canada, to expand their farms and grow more organic crops.
- The Family Farmers Seed Cooperative, with farms in Colorado, Washington, and Oregon, received a \$120,000 grant from USDA's Rural Development division to expand organic seed production and marketing.
- Cabrillo College in California will launch a new degree program in organic food production in the spring of 2009.
- The Cornercopia student organic farm on the St. Paul campus of the University of Minnesota has received organic certification.
- The organic farming enterprise at the Fresno State's University Farm Laboratory recently received a \$250,000 grant from USDA. The enterprise currently has 0.08 acres certified as organic by the California Certified Organic Farmers.
- The University of New Hampshire's Dairy Bar features local and organic food.
- A team led by University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture food and poultry scientists has been awarded a three-year grant for nearly \$600,000 from USDA's National Integrated Food Safety Initiative to conduct food safety research in natural and organic poultry.
- The director of "Feed the Poor," a Salt Lake City, Utah, food bank, aims to provide at least 50 percent of the food it gives to nonprofits as organically produced.

Research findings

- A new study (http://www.unep.ch/etb/publications/inside/CBTF_OA_2008.pdf) from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) suggests that organic farming is a sustainable and environmentally friendly production system that

offers African and other developing countries a wide range of economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits.

- Researchers at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Lugo, Spain, have found significantly lower percentages of antimicrobial resistant *E. coli* isolates in organically raised poultry than in conventionally raised poultry. In the comparison, researchers studied 55 samples of organic poultry meat and 61 samples of conventional poultry meat (*Journal of Food Protection*®, December 2008).
- Agricultural Research Service (ARS) scientists have shown that pecans grown organically on a 20-acre test site in north-central Texas have out-yielded the adjacent conventionally managed commercial pecan orchard in each of the past five years. ARS scientists estimated that the conventional management systems generate about \$1,750 per acre, whereas the organically managed system would gross \$5,290 per acre.

Environmental news

- **Freshwater pollution:** Researchers at Kansas State University estimate that freshwater pollution by phosphorous and nitrogen costs government agencies, drinking water facilities and individual Americans at least \$4.3 billion annually. Of that, approximately \$44 million a year is spent just protecting aquatic species from nutrient pollution (*Environmental Science and Technology*, Nov. 12 online issue).
- **Toxic pesticide cocktails:** Research conducted at the University of Pittsburgh published in *Oecologia* shows that ten of the most popular pesticides, when mixed together even at concentrations considered safe, can destroy amphibian populations. Such "cocktails" are frequently detected in nature.
- **Nitrates in ground water:** A nationwide study of nitrate levels in U.S. ground water showed nitrate concentrations increased significantly in seven of 24 well networks between 1988 and 2004. Findings, published in a supplement to the September-October 2008 issue of the *Journal of Environmental Quality*, linked these increases to the increased use of synthetic fertilizers.
- **Spreading antibiotic resistance:** Researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health have found evidence that driving behind trucks transporting broiler chickens from non-organic farms to slaughterhouse can expose humans to antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The study showed increased levels of pathogenic bacteria, both susceptible and drug-resistant, on surfaces and in the air of cars traveling behind trucks that carry intensively raised poultry (*Journal of Infection and Public Health*).
- **Disappearing amphibians:** Data from a field study of the northern leopard frog in wetlands across Minnesota implicate the use of agrochemicals, particularly atrazine and phosphate, to the abundance of debilitating larval trematodes (parasitic flatworms) in the frogs (letter in *Nature*, Oct. 30, 2008). ♦

Quote of Note

"Organic agriculture can increase agricultural productivity and can raise incomes with low-cost, locally available and appropriate technologies, without causing environmental damage."

— Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa, 2008



“Organic practices are good for our cows.”

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animal health problems. Karreman himself has done extensive work in this area. Over his 20-year career, he has dedicated much of his time to learning about “natural” treatments, and has developed a number of botanical and biologic-based remedies for common livestock ailments. Karreman is optimistic that research on organic approaches to treatment will continue.

Information about organic animal welfare is likely to increase further in the coming year. According to Tikofsky, a multi-state study will begin in Spring 2009, directly comparing the overall well-being of organic cows with their conventionally raised counterparts. The study will examine milk production and quality, lameness, mastitis, and other indicators of animal health. From there, Tikofsky hopes that definitive statements about the impact of organic practices on animal welfare can be made. “If we get the results that we expect to, showing that organic animals are healthier and less stressed, we will finally be able to say, with confidence, that organic is the superior way to raise livestock.”

In addition to gaining academics’ attention, organic animal welfare is likely to get a boost in the regulatory arena. According to Karreman, who chairs the Livestock Committee of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), this issue is poised to become a central focus of the Committee’s work. “Having successfully developed a series of proposed aquaculture standards, we are now ready to tackle

animal welfare head-on.” In practice, Karreman says this will most likely mean clarifying the terms of the existing pasture rule.

“Without being overly prescriptive, what we need now is a tightening of the rule to ensure that organic can legitimately assert itself to be the gold standard for animal health and welfare.” ♦



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