

Conservation Corner for August 8, 2017

## **Dairy Done Differently**

*A look at a local organic dairy*

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How can dairy farming be done differently you ask? We'll explore how one farm has broken from the norm in our area and continues to be successful. Dave and Esther DeKam, along with their two young sons, Collin and Levi, produce milk and crops by being an organic certified farm.

### **Basic Terms**

Before we get too far along let's talk about some basic terms.

- **Conventional farming:** these farms can use any type of seed, fertilizers, and chemicals that suit their farm best.
- **Non-GMO:** these farms use seeds that have not been genetically modified. They may still use any fertilizers or chemicals that work for them.
- **Organic farms:** these farms must use organically raised, non-GMO seeds, and can use only organic fertilizers and organic pesticides. For livestock that become ill, antibiotics can be used, but the animal's meat, milk, or eggs may not be sold as organic. Farms must be certified by the National Organic Program (NOP) to sell their crops and animals as organic.

### **Why the switch?**

DeKam Dairy was a conventional dairy not that long ago. Dave and Esther felt that they could produce milk in a different manner by being organic. Their reasoning was that they wanted to really be more sustainable without having to buy as many chemicals and focus on being better stewards of what God has given them.

Part of their philosophy is using what God has blessed them and their land with. Dave and Esther mentioned that several times when I interviewed them. They want to work within God's creation not against it. They also wanted to raise their young sons in an environment where they weren't using chemicals that can be toxic.

Dave had tried no-till in the past and experimented with some fields with some organic methods and during those experiments is when Dave decided to go whole hog organic. He jokes that he could write a book about what not to do when transitioning to organic.

### **Challenges in being organic**

The farm milks about 280 Holstein cows and farms just over 1000 acres. Part of the requirements of being an organic dairy farm is that the animals have access to the out-of-doors all year around, and that during the grazing season, a minimum of thirty percent of their daily feed must come from pasture. In order to accommodate this requirement the DeKam's have made some former fields into quality pasture under center irrigation pivots. The irrigation makes

sure that the pasture stays green during the growing season. The cows are rotated through the pastures to make sure it provides optimal forage for them.

The farm raises corn, oats, peas, rye, soybeans, spelt, sorghum, triticale, and alfalfa/grass hay for their cows. Weeds tend to be the biggest problem in the establishment of the hay fields and in corn. Tillage is the answer to most of their problems. They also use a flame burner – a fun tool that burns weeds between corn rows. They have found that precise timing in using the cultivation tools and having balanced soils is key to raising organic crops successfully.

Insect pests can be an issue too. Dave had a problem with armyworms in their hay crop one year and by the time he had gotten an organically-approved pesticide, the beneficial insects had taken care of the armyworms.

Another challenge is getting enough nitrogen to the corn crop. Corn requires quite a bit of nitrogen to grow. A lot of organic sources of fertilizer other than manure are pretty low in nitrogen. Good manure management, compost, chicken litter, and cover crops have helped them address this issue.

### **How about those cows?**

Paying attention to detail is key on any dairy farm, but it really pays off on an organic dairy farm. Noticing small changes in animals can help stave off more serious illnesses. The DeKam's use some natural remedies on both the calves and the cows. They will use antibiotics as a last resort, but then the animal needs to be sold since the organic program does not allow any animals that have had antibiotics to stay on the farm.

By using different fertilizers, amendments, and with the cows on pasture, Dave has noticed that his cows are healthier and have better longevity. Like most dairy farms, the farm does use artificial insemination for breeding their cows. However, organic farms may not use the hormone shots that synchronize a cow's reproduction system, so he's using visual cues to know when a cow is ready to breed. Again, this requires more detailed management and really knowing your cows.

### **Is there room for growth in organic?**

The DeKam's milk goes to the Organic Valley cooperative, which also picks up milk from several other mainly Amish farms in the surrounding area. The green "USDA Organic" label found on this milk is the consumer's assurance that the farms that produced the milk are inspected every year by a third party to ensure that the organic standards set by the USDA are being followed. This assurance is important to many people, and the forecast is for continued growth in the organic marketplace. That growth as well as price stability are big advantages for organic farmers.

### **Separation from conventional**

Corn easily cross pollinates between varieties. Since the DeKam's are smack dab in the middle of other dairy farms, Dave has to time his corn planting a little later than other farms in the area so that their corn does not cross pollinate with any corn that has been genetically modified. To be sure that cross-pollination hasn't occurred, the DeKam's feed may be tested for DNA from

GMO corn. Another requirement is that Dave has to have a buffer in his fields to separate any crossover of fertilizer or pesticides from other farm fields. He's not wasting land per se, just protecting his field from accidents.

A lesser known thing that organic farms need to do is to clean any equipment that comes into contact with conventional crops to reduce contamination. This is a requirement of the organic program. This has made finding custom operators that spray or harvest a real challenge, so the DeKams decided to do most of the work themselves to lessen that hassle.

**Staying Organic**

Organic farming has its ups and downs just like any other type of farming. The farm employs quite a few folks and without those dedicated people the farm wouldn't be as successful as they are. Dave and Esther really wouldn't ever go back to conventional farming because of the economics, the community of other organic farmers and employees, and really because they feel that they are working in tandem with God's creation.

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All photos were taken by Jodi DeHate



Esther, Collin, Dave, and Eli Dekam on their farm. Being good stewards of God's creation is one of the main reasons they choose to farm organically.



Healthy pastures are an integral part of an organic farm. The DeKam's cows are regularly moved to fresh pasture and this helps promote the health of both the land and the cows.

