



## Expanding grass-based organic dairy enterprises among southeastern Iowa farmers

### Abstract:

Southeastern Iowa dairy farmers, including many Amish and Mennonites, need more outlets for their products, especially those being produced according to organic standards. This project promoted the use of grass-based dairy systems as a way to add value to dairy production in the area.

### Principal Investigator:

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### Budget:

\$24,816 for year one

**Q** Does milk from grass-fed dairy cattle contain higher levels of CLA, and can this information be successfully utilized to market farmers transitioning to organic production?

**A** CLA was present in higher levels in the milk of the grass-fed cattle studied. During the year, the number of certified organic dairy farmers providing milk to Farmers' All Natural Creamery increased from 17 to 33, indicating a substantial increase in interest and market potential.

### Background

The Farmers' All Natural Creamery, located in southeastern Johnson County, was established in 2004 to process organic milk produced on area dairy farms. It is owned and operated by local Amish and Mennonite farmers and is located in the largest Amish and Mennonite settlement west of the Mississippi River. The Creamery and other organic dairies in the region are struggling to find enough organic milk to meet their production needs.

The Iowa Valley Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) group joined with the Farmers' All Natural Creamery to promote greater use of grass-based systems among dairy farmers as one method of adding value along with organic certification. The project also sought to offer new marketing opportunities for conventional farmers transitioning to organic dairy production.

One marketing avenue was to document the increased levels of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a fatty acid found in milk and meat, as a means to market transitioning non-certified organic milk to prospective institutional customers. CLA has been shown to have potential health benefits for humans, and ruminant milk and meat have high levels of CLA.

Two key project objectives were to:

1. Expand the market for conventional dairy producers who are transitioning to organic grass-based systems, and
2. Expand the use of grass-based systems for 10 existing organic dairies and offer educational and support materials to about 220 conventional dairy producers.

### Approach and methods

A mail survey of nearly 500 producers in the study area was conducted to determine the opportunities and barriers that area producers saw in transitioning to organic systems and in the greater use of grass-based systems. Approximately 11 percent of the surveys were returned. The results were helpful in organizing future workshops and media coverage.

Five pasture walks (one more than originally planned) were held in summer and fall 2007, and two winter meetings occurred in winter 2008. Two fact sheets that shared project outcomes were published. Presentations were made at meetings of several partners, including the Sustainable Ecological Economic Development (S.E.E.D.), Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA), and the Center for Health Effects of Environmental Contamination at the University of Iowa.

Also related to this project, and to marbling and tenderness in grass-finished beef, was the sponsorship of two discussion sessions between area farmers and animal scientists from Iowa State University in 2007.

## **Results and discussion**

Fifteen area dairy farmers participated in the study of CLA content, while an average of 24 producers attended each of the five field days, pasture walks and two winter meetings.

The success of the project may be measured by the participation of more than 550 area dairy producers, primarily involved in dairy operations in the Iowa and Cedar Valleys and greater southeastern Iowa region. This was more than twice the level of participation anticipated. Several local institutions, organizations, and individuals partnered in this effort, including Farmers' All Natural Creamery, Kalona Organics, Metro High School in Cedar Rapids, the Iowa City Community School District, Grinnell College, the Grinnell Area Local Food Alliance, S.E.E.D., INCA and Practical Farmers of Iowa.

## **Conclusions**

Results of CLA tests done for this project reflected a correlation between increased pasturage and elevated CLA levels. As a result, the Amish and Mennonite communities are interested in increasing the CLA levels of their milk and expanding grazing in their operations. Project investigators will continue to monitor participating farms for changes in practices that stem from grazing knowledge gained from this project.

Discussions with area farmers have yielded strong interest in increased grass-based grazing by existing organic producers and interest on the part of conventional dairies in converting to an organic program. Institutional customers, particularly area schools, are interested in purchasing milk with higher CLA content, possibly from local organic dairies.

Promotion of grass-based dairying in southeast Iowa will continue as the project researchers solicit funds and partnerships to sponsor a series of workshops for producers. Survey results showed that farmers were interested in learning more about transitioning to organic production, and in workshops that offered them more information about finances, operation planning, herd fertility and business planning.

## Impact of results

The project generated valuable data about farmer attitudes, practices, and concerns, as well as more information about CLA content in milk from grass-fed herds. The study provided a unique view of the farming and agricultural milieu of the Amish and Mennonite communities. Results from the study will help area producers better position their products for sale and distribution to health-conscious consumers. The number of grass-fed dairies in the Kalona area has increased from 17 to 33, a significant expansion in the total number of these enterprises in southeastern Iowa, showing the need for more information on how to position their products.

## Education and outreach

Project results will continue to be publicized through area media and the web pages of the Farmers' All Natural Creamery ([www.farmersallnaturalcreamery.com](http://www.farmersallnaturalcreamery.com)), Kalona Organics ([www.kalonaorganics.com](http://www.kalonaorganics.com)) and the Iowa Valley RC&D ([www.ivrcd.org](http://www.ivrcd.org)).

## Leveraged funds

The Iowa Valley RC&D leveraged in-kind resources from ISU Extension, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farmers All Natural Creamery. Additional funds for organic producers were leveraged from Frontier Natural Products Co-op, with additional funds pending from the Ben and Jerry's Foundation.

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