



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.

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More details:

www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/grants/2009-1/D2007-02.pdf

The project generated data about farmer attitudes, practices, and concerns, as well as more information about CLA content in milk from grass-fed herds. It 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.

What was done and why?

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. 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. Objectives of the project 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 among 10 existing organic dairies and provide educational and support materials to approximately 220 conventional dairy producers.

What did we learn?

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.

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. 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.