

Presentation to Francis and Susan Thicke by Jennifer Steffen*
2009 Spencer Award for Sustainable Agriculture
December 5, 2009

Francis and Susan Thicke own and operate a grass-based dairy farm near Fairfield, Iowa. Their farm's organic milk is processed and marketed under the Radiance Dairy brand through local grocery stores and restaurants. The couple's commitment to resource conservation, successful grazing management, and economically profitable dairy production led to their selection as the 2009 winners of the Spencer Award for Sustainable Agriculture. They operate the dairy as a partnership, work together on all their farm enterprises, and make their farm management decisions as a team.

This dedicated Jefferson County couple has given many community tours of their 236-acre farm, where 60 paddocks are used to feed their herd of 80 Jersey milk cows. The herd is rotationally grazed, moving to a new paddock twice daily. In their on-farm processing plant, they produce skim, low-fat and whole milk, as well as yogurt and cheese, all of which are sold locally.

"We don't really own the land, the land owns us," says Francis Thicke. Using ecological systems as their model, they converted their farm landscape from corn and soybean production to perennial grasses and legumes. These changes have helped restore the hilly fields to lush pastures with healthy soil. The perennials have deep root systems, which easily absorb rain. The Thickets have planted walnuts, hybrid hazelnuts, white pines and a variety of fruit trees as an investment in future land health.

In one of the nomination letters, a local resident said, "Francis and Susan have been a constant, ongoing inspiration to so many for several years." Another praises them by saying, "Francis and Susan are also great supporters of our community. They volunteer, co-sponsor events and play an active role in making our community a better place." An NRCS staffer refers to Francis as "a responsible steward of the land and an educator of the public as well."

The Thickets' farm was included on a "Fairfield Tour of Sustainability" and the organizer reports that that "the people on the tour were absolutely fascinated with what they learned. For most of them, sustainability was something that they were hearing about, but did not quite understand. They were able to show farming is part of the ecology."

Francis grew up on a dairy farm in Minnesota and has more than 20 years experience in grass-based animal agriculture. Off the farm, Francis was chosen as a Policy Fellow for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Food and Society program, and before he returned to farming in 1996, he was the National Program Leader for soil science for the USDA-Extension Service in Washington, D.C. He currently serves on the board of directors of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. He is also a member of the State Technical Committee where he serves as chair of the Conservation Stewardship Program sub-committee. Francis has also worked with the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service, the Scientific Congress on Organic

Agriculture Research, the Iowa Food Policy Council, and the Iowa Environmental Protection Commission. "Francis is currently a candidate for the office of Iowa Secretary of Agriculture."

He has received numerous professional awards, including the Activist Award from the Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club, the Outstanding Pasture Management award from the Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Friend of the Earth award from the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition in Washington, D.C.

Susan has been active in helping promote the arts community in Fairfield, by working on art shows, curating art exhibits, and helping to plan events that combine art walks with samples of local food, including Radiance Dairy products.

I'm fortunate to have shared time with Francis and Susan on several occasions. One such time was when I was coordinating a Master Conservationist program for Iowa State University Extension. Francis and Susan kindly agreed to host our students and speak about sustainability and their organic dairy operation. The students were treated to a complete tour of the farm, including the rotational grazing paddocks, milking parlor, and the on-farm processing facility. Francis offered thoughtful conversation on different organic practices he has tested in his attempt to keep his Jersey cows comfortable and productive. He mentioned using free ranging chickens to pick through fly larvae in the manure of the paddocks leading to the milking parlor; and of using a soy-derived natural fly spray applied to the cows when they come in for milking. He allowed that some ideas work well. And others he continues to tweak.

But the thing that inspired me most was a question one of our students asked a young Radiance Dairy employee who had been helping with the tour. He was asked if he liked his job at Radiance dairy and his response was, "I love my job, because Francis is such a good teacher."

So, on behalf of the Leopold Center, it is my great pleasure to present the Spencer Award for Sustainable Agriculture to Francis and Susan Thicke.

Jennifer Steffen owns a 522-acre farm in Van Buren County, which has been farmed with continuous no-till since 1980. She represents the State Soil Conservation Committee on the Leopold Center Advisory Board, which helps select the Spencer Award recipient each year. Currently, Steffen is chair of the board.

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Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Ames, Iowa