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UNH leading research into organic farming

By Anne Saunders, Associated Press Writer



LEE, N.H. --Jersey cows, with their sandy brown fur and molasses eyes, are among the bovines who've quietly produced organic milk for decades in New England without much interest from the academic world.

That's finally changing. The University of New Hampshire has 48 pregnant Jerseys at its Burley-Demerrit Farm, the nation's first organic dairy farm at a major land grant college.

The research comes as more dairy farms, especially in New England, switch to organic production -- either for philosophical reasons or to benefit from the better prices organic milk can fetch. More farms are also meeting the growing market for organic fruits and vegetables.

Now a few researchers at the nation's premier agriculture schools are taking notice and a handful of colleges are adding courses in organic techniques. A few, including Washington State and the University of Florida, launched majors in organic farming this fall.

"They've gone from tilting at windmills to being a major component of agriculture," said Ned Porter, Maine's assistant

commissioner of agriculture, where 20 percent of the state's dairies are now organic.

For decades, organic dairy farmers have shared information among themselves and learned by trial and error. At an open house this summer at the Burley-Demerrit Farm, these farmers were quick to make their opinions known.

But few of those opinions have been scientifically tested. In a short northern growing season, how can farmers best supplement pasture feeding by planting grasses, grains or corn for later use? How long should calves be allowed to nurse for optimum health? Are organic cows healthier, as their owners have long asserted, and by what measures? What therapies work best to treat infection and disease in an organic herd? Can milk production be affected by how people touch or handle their cows?

As farmers raised their questions, researchers from New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont listened and took notes.

That's a change, according to many organic farmers. Until recently, agriculture professors, who get much of their research

funding from chemical and biotechnology companies, ignored the organic market.

"This is not happening in all but a very few land grant (colleges) around the country," said Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, which funds research into improving organic techniques and has been monitoring trends around the nation.

"New Hampshire's project has the possibility of being the gold standard for what we'd like to see in other parts of the country," he said.

Charles Schwab, the UNH professor who spearheaded the organic dairy farm project, said he is interested in studying farming as "a biological system, trying to work with nature, not against it."

Schwab initially met with resistance from colleagues and agribusiness leaders, he said. But persistence, encouragement from organic farmers and milk producers -- and a major contribution from Stonyfield Farm, which makes organic yogurt -- moved the dairy forward.

The universities of New Hampshire and Maine also landed an \$829,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to fund the farm's first major research project.

Over the next four years, researchers will be planting different rotations of grains, legumes and grasses on organically certified fields to feed the UNH herd and cows on several farms. Researchers will collect data on costs, effects on the soil, and milk production. The goal is to help organic dairy farmers in New England reduce their reliance on expensive organic grains grown elsewhere.

Bob Parsons of the University of Vermont said his school also is looking at potential partnerships with UNH. About 10 percent of Vermont's dairies are organic and another 10 percent are in transition, he said.

In the latest round of grants for 2006, the USDA awarded a record \$4.5 million for organic research projects, from developing wheat varieties and

raising organic shrimp to improving farm profitability by growing small fruits off-season.

"So many principles of organic have been shown to be practical and work very well," said Bill Duesing, head of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association.

Still, most of the success stories are anecdotal.

"Any research is valuable," said Steve Morrison, president of the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Association, whose switched his dairy farm in Charleston, Maine, from conventional to organic in 1997.

"People really want answers, a better understanding of organics," said Nancy Hirshberg, vice-president of natural resources at Stonyfield Farm.

Pressure from students is leading more and more agriculture schools to add classes and to set aside a portion of their acreage to be certified organic.

In January, Michigan State University will start a one-year certificate program in organic farming. New Hampshire started an organic food production course two years ago, now described as "wildly popular," and others are following suit.

"These are people who would not necessarily be going to agriculture school. It's a different population," said Cathy Perillo, who teaches at Washington State, which started a new undergraduate major in organic growing.

The trend also stands to revitalize agriculture schools long relegated to the wings of academia, several researchers said.

"We may be the first," notes Bill Trumble, dean of New Hampshire's College of Life Sciences and Agriculture, "but we're already late for the industry."