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# The Oregonian

## How now, organic cow?

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M ONMOUTH -- Jon Bansen unleashes a long call into a biting wind, his eyes scanning across rolling green hillsides dotted with bare oaks.

For long seconds he has no answer. Then they come: curious Jersey heifers by the dozen, trotting toward him over wet spring grass.

It's a pastoral scene common at his organic dairy near this small college town, where the milking cows carry names rather than numbers, flies are kept in check by swallows instead of pesticides and fresh, green grass is a regular -- Bansen believes necessary -- part of the diet.

Small farmers such as Bansen, committed to producing organic milk, are a small but increasingly important part of Oregon's \$600 million dairy industry. But many find that they're fighting for their economic lives as national market chains and mass-production dairies sell ever-larger amounts of organic products.

Some, battling against the bigger and better-funded competitors, say the struggle is about more than economics -- it's about what it means, fundamentally, to be organic.

"This is just a healthier way to treat the cows," Bansen said, explaining why he allows his cattle to graze in pastures rather than keeping them confined in pens most of their lives.

The most recent fight, which has been brewing for years, is about whether organic dairy production requires cows to be regularly put to pasture that way.

The National Organic Standards Board, which has proposed that organic dairy cows be required to spend at least 120 days each year on grass, will take testimony this week in Pennsylvania as federal agriculture officials prepare to set new rules on the subject. The standards board advises the U.S. Department of Agriculture and is taking the testimony as it considers what the rules should be.

Although current federal rules state that organic dairy production includes "access to pasture," the requirements are ambiguous enough -- and not enforced, anyway -- that critics say large factory farms routinely skirt them.

### Contented cows, consumers

Bansen, who intends to be among those giving testimony at the Pennsylvania hearing this week, and other small dairymen are pushing for a definition of "organic" that goes beyond making products free of synthetic pesticides and growth hormones. In their minds, it's about business practices that embrace the natural world.

Some of the country's biggest dairies counter that a 120-day grass rule would be too restrictive, and

ultimately anti-consumer by preventing supply from keeping up with rising demand.

But the nuances of the debate fail to resonate with many of those who consume organic milk the dairies produce.

"If it's going to make the cow's life better to be on pasture, I'm happy," Beaverton resident Jenny Anderson said on a recent day as she shopped for organic milk at a Whole Foods store in Portland. "But I'm not super worried about that as long as what they're eating is not being treated with pesticides."

What she is sensitive about is price, and, at \$5.99 a gallon, organic milk at Whole Foods costs 43 percent more than regular milk.

That's where the big organic dairies enter the picture.

Aurora Organic Dairy in Colorado, the nation's largest such operation with 7,800 milking cows on two sites, has adopted as its motto, "We make organic goodness affordable."

But Aurora, which supplies organic milk for the private labels of a number of grocery chains, has also become a lightning rod for critics on the pasture issue.

Critics view it as the antithesis of the organic family farm -- an industrial-size operation at which cows spend most of their lives in pens.

The Cornucopia Institute, a Wisconsin nonprofit group that has taken a lead in pressing for strict organic standards for dairy and other products, filed a legal complaint with the agriculture department over Aurora in November. It alleged, among other things, that the dairy was using cows that had not been allowed to graze.

Clark Driftmier, Aurora's senior vice president for marketing, said that the Cornucopia complaint was unfounded and that the dairy's cows are allowed on pasture "several months a year."

Aurora is developing a new dairy, expected to open this fall, at which cows will be pastured "every single day," he said.

Nevertheless, Aurora has opposed suggested rules that organic cows spend at least 120 days on grass, saying there is no conclusive evidence that cows will be healthier as a result.

### **State of Northwest dairies**

Although Oregon has an undetermined number of smaller organic dairies such as Bansen's, it has no large-scale organic operation like the one in Colorado. In neighboring Washington, however, Watts Brothers Farms and Frozen Foods announced plans earlier this year to establish a 2,000-cow organic operation in the Tri-Cities area. (The average Oregon dairy -- organic or not -- has about 450 cows spread over 300 acres, according to the state's dairy council.)

Mark A. Kastel, the Cornucopia Institute's co-founder, said the agriculture department has dragged its feet in setting a pasture standard. In the meantime, he said, consumers are being misled in believing that organic milk is being produced by contented, grass-munching cows.

" 'Pasture' is not a worn-out muddy lot where you throw out some hay bales," he said of some of the confined-lot dairies.

Joan Shaffer, a spokeswoman for the USDA's organic program, said the department doesn't think the current pasture rules are specific enough to allow enforcement.

Kastel contends that they are and that new guidelines wouldn't be needed if the agriculture department would enforce the existing ones.

While the agriculture department wrestles with how to establish new pasture rules, the companies that market and sell organic brands recognize that consumers are attempting to make healthy choices about what they buy.

For example, on a carton of milk from Horizon Organics the question is posed: "How do you raise an organic cow?"

The answer: "Give her wholesome certified organic food, fresh air, and access to pasture that's not treated with dangerous pesticides."

Among Horizon's milk suppliers are dozens of family farms, but also larger dairies under fire over the pasture question. Horizon had bought milk from Aurora, but recently dropped the dairy as a supplier.

Last June, Perry D. Odak, chief executive of Wild Oats Markets Inc., one of the country's largest natural food chains, wrote the National Organic Standards Board in opposition to more stringent pasture rules.

In his letter, Odak said that the chain and its customers believed the current standards were working and that enforcing a minimum number of days on pasture would limit organic milk supplies because dairies in dry climates couldn't comply.

Odak also said there was no "compelling evidence" that cows given access to pasture were more healthy than penned animals.

Steve Pierson, a St. Paul organic dairyman who switched from a confined operation to a pasture-based one 10 years ago, said he gets all the evidence he needs every time he lets his herd loose on grass.

"Cows were not meant to be confined on concrete or dirt lots," he said.

"I watched one yesterday, and she's about 8 years old, and she runs out there like she's ready for the Kentucky Derby," Pierson said. "That alone tells you where that cow is supposed to be."

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