

Some of you may recognize this title as being used elsewhere –the August 25,2000 issue of *Hoard's Dairyman*, in an article by Gerald R. Anderson. I'm borrowing it. Gerald's article was subtitled "*This option certainly has some appeal to both producers and consumers. But there are some drawbacks.*"

Having consulted organic farmers for several years on production management, I think I can write with some level of authority on the topic. It's easy to look at a limited number of examples and come to the wrong conclusion –that *successful* organic production is nigh impossible, no more profitable, and out of reach for the average family farm. Unfortunately there are still many prejudicial ideas about organic in our dairy industry –and, *unfortunately*, many of these ideas are not totally without reason.

To be quite frank about things, after my experience, it is my *considered* opinion that some of the prohibitions and claims in organic *really are* down right kooky! Yep, I too wonder what's wrong with deworming cattle and limited, *vet prescribed*, antibiotic use, etc.

However, before the rest of the dairy industry gets feeling too high and brilliant, we should remind ourselves of all the *kooky* ideas of the conventional non-organic system –there's no small list of failures. Mr. Anderson asks in his article "How many certified organic herds have you seen on the auction block lately" (The rhetorical answer is *none*. A *negative*, in light of finding replacements to purchase.) Without listing the reasons for failure, let me ask: how many *conventional* herds have you seen on the auction block lately? Maybe the reasons behind the answers to both of these questions should cause us all to stop and think *for a change* –in place of allowing someone else (who may have a conflict of interest) frame and answer our questions for us. Is the conventional mindset of get big or get out the *only* answer?

**The greatest thing about organic is it is an example of a *consumer driven* market that the *farmer, by his own initiative, gained access to.*** Mr. Anderson noted "there appears to be no doubt that consumers are generally interested in the safety of their food supply" and "they (CROPP-Coulee Region Organic Produce Pool) diversified into dairy *starting with only seven producers.*" (Emphasis added.) While there are some interests that would like to see you focus on the negatives and *kooky* part of organic production, I would like to encourage you to focus on the success story.

KOW has clients that *really are getting* \$17.60/cwt base price. CROPP *really did* start up because a *small group* (not all the dairy farmers in the country) of like-minded dairymen got together.

Can you think of anyone who might not want this *farmer to consumer* thing to catch on? Go ahead and pick on your organic neighbors for taking a different path, but I think the most gullible bunch are the dairyman DUDs (duped useful dummies!) who are out publicly expressing concern for the future of *processors / retailers* while swallowing – and even repeating the mantra that "Nothing can be done about the price of milk." We all know who I mean, "Don't worry, be happy –don't be so negative –think positive about our industry. The money will eventually *trickle down* to us." So they *give their milk away* to be sold for \$3.69/gal in Chicago and the like. I keep thinking that these farmers *have to* be getting paid *under the table* to do this! But I guess all you have to do is put 'em on a board or committee, make 'em *feel* important –add a couple dinners and overnight trips and ya got 'em. Unbelievable. Sorry for being so negative.

The organic production negatives can be turned positive. **There is no rule in organic that one must have low producing, poor doing crops or cows.** This *system* of management we call *dairy nutrition from the soil up* could help successfully deal with some of the negatives

brought up by Mr. Anderson:

Negative 1: Organic grain. This is not so difficult to grow or buy as one might think. A good rotation plan coupled with today's technology and tools can make controlling weeds in row crops without herbicides possible. Don't take my word for it, ask for references and give one of our clients a call who can *show* you how it's done.

Additionally, we shouldn't forget small grains. They too can supply starch with no need for herbicides, tech fees *or cultivation*. The greatest profit potential for small grain is when double cropped with a forage (BMR sorg-sudan). The best small grain would be *de-hulled oat*—twice the protein and higher in energy than corn.

Negative 2: "Corn silage raised cannot have herbicides." Ditto #1 on weed control and consider the fact that corn silage is the lowest nutritional value forage you can grow which requires the highest inputs (especially to feed). Organic or not, **there are better options**. For more on corn silage, read the KOW position paper "How Much Corn Silage Is Too Much?" A *little* corn silage is *not so bad*—but a lot is not better.

Negative 3: It might take additional acres to raise the same tonnage. This is a common myth of organic fueled by the *organic by neglect* crowd who put forth little effort to learn and implement best management practices and try to go *zero input* on fertilizers. The myth is perpetuated by those who feel threatened by the non-chem-bio-tech approach. If you care to get out to *see and learn for yourself*, you'll find it's a myth that we'll all starve using organic methods. Even high yielding corn can be grown on organic farms with a proper (frequent) crop rotation (including legumes) and manure management practices—nitrogen need not be the limiting factor.

Negative 4: No hormones. Yes, it does seem silly to ban the occasional use of oxytocin, but it is an obstacle that appears to be easy to

overcome by management practices to prevent edema in heifers and a little patience and TLC. As for BST—could you give it up for a better price on your milk? Has it *really* paid off? Well, yes, maybe it has—if you consider it responsible in part for the success of the *organic* market!

Negative 5: "Most dairy farmers could live without hormones, but what about antibiotics?" Often we are thinking about *treating mastitis* with antibiotics. However, most of our mastitis *bugs*, according to some authorities on the subject (FDA data from 1998, etc.), are resistant to the antibiotics we're using anyway. Yes, it would be nice to dry treat a cow occasionally, but many organic farmers are discovering alternatives. Fact is, *prevention is the best cure*; milking equipment and procedures, clean cows, proper nutrition, etc. In the *Hoard's* article, Mr. Anderson was concerned about what would happen "if you lose too many animals" (due to not using antibiotics). I have watched *professional organic* farmers sell heifers every year because there's no room for them in the barn. If we as the dairy industry *really* want to reduce the rate of culling in herds, we would change the *way we're feeding cows*. We know *so much* about making cows comfortable and giving them good veterinary medical care—all the while we're killin' 'em with corn and concentrates! I guess it's the least we can do. Sure are a lot of herds out there using a lot of antibiotics *and still turning through a lot of cows*.

To be or not to be organic? Whether it's called *organic*, *even if it's called crazy*—and it connects you with the consumer, helps you to maintain your *financial independence* and family friendly lifestyle—*isn't it worthy of serious consideration?* Our industry needs CROPP and **many more consumer serving** new generation Co-Ops. If not *organic*, start your own niche—or simply become a serf under contract for one of the few big processors left to choose from.