

Organic Dairy Health Care Panel at the NODPA Field Days

*By Nat Bacon, NOFA-VT
Dairy and Livestock Advisor;
Materials from Ann Wells
contributed to this article*

How do I keep my organic livestock healthy?
How do I dry off my cows without antibiotics?
What do you do about foot rot?

As I talk to organic and transitioning dairy farmers, these are the types of questions I hear on a daily basis. Animal health care is the single biggest concern to most organic livestock farmers. Managing your herd without relying on most conventional medicines can be quite challenging, especially for farmers new to organic certification. At the NODPA field days on August 23rd, attendees heard from 3 women who have extensive experience with alternative livestock health care: Dr. Ann Wells, Dr. Henrietta Beaufait, and Anne Lazor. Following is a summary of their presentations.

Ann Wells is a veterinarian and livestock technical specialist with ATTRA. She noted that health has been traditionally thought of as the absence of disease, but that way of thinking doesn't really tell us how to keep animals healthy. A better definition of health would be 'an animal in balance with its environment'. How does a farmer accomplish that? By reducing or eliminating possible stresses to that animal. Stress kills the rumen microbes, which slows or stops rumination. This reduces dry matter intake which means the animal has to use its body reserves to meet its energy requirements. If the stress is short-term, the animal will be able to overcome these affects on its own with no apparent problems. If the stress is longer lasting, chronic, returns in a short period of time, or if there are multiple stresses on the animal, this may throw the animal below that threshold between health and disease.

The major stresses are poor nutrition, heat or cold stress, lack of clean water, overcrowding, inadequate bedding, and parasites. Parasites can be a symptom of disease as well as a cause – livestock are much more susceptible to worm infestations when they are stressed, and may be able to fend off parasites by themselves if they are provided with a good environment. This would include well-managed pastures, which are periodically "rested" from having animals on them i.e. hayed, not grazed for 12 months. This

breaks up the parasite cycle, since the worms cannot survive without living inside the animal.

When looking at a sick animal, it is important not only to treat the animal, but also to figure out what went wrong. When we treat the disease and cause the signs to disappear but don't take care of the underlying stress, we will have a less vital animal. In this case, the animal appears healthy, but isn't. So then, health should be divided into profitable health and unprofitable health. The animal's vitality has to be brought up to a level that achieves profitable health. Treating sick or otherwise unhealthy animals, even successfully, makes no money for the farmer. It is a salvage operation.

Most health problems have a nutritional basis. It is crucial to address the mineral and fiber levels that the animals are eating. Cows need digestible fiber especially when they are on lush spring pasture where protein levels are very high and out of balance with energy levels. Good sources of digestible fiber include soy hulls, wheat midds, cottonseed, oats, and of course quality hay. Some of these feeds may be difficult to source organically, but their addition to the rations will improve animal health.

Henrietta Beaufait is a homeopathic vet and organic dairy farmer in Albion, ME. Henrietta suggested tracking disease trends in cow families over time, since some diseases may be transmitted genetically. In the long run, these cow families can either be culled out of the herd, or bred to improve poor genetic traits that are causing disease. As Ann Wells noted, 80% of a herd's health problems come from 20% of the animals – culling those chronically affected animals will improve herd health over time.

Henrietta also emphasized the importance of recognizing disease symptoms in an animal quickly, especially when using homeopathic treatments. The major common symptom is swelling, or inflammation. This occurs when fluid leaks out of damaged cells, and presses on lymph nodes or other internal organs.

Attention must also be paid to the cow's behavior; for instance, if a cow is unusually nervous during milking time, she should have her temperature taken and given an appropriate remedy right away (such as aconite to reduce anxiety). Too often, we wait too long - until the cow is obviously sick - to treat her, and then it is much more difficult to deal with the situation. The only time cow behavior should change

(Continued on page 13)

(Continued from page 12)

is when the cow is in heat. Otherwise, any change is symptomatic of a health problem. Many times, major changes in the weather will cause stress, and cows will show early disease symptoms. Cows should be monitored especially carefully during very hot or cold weather.

Henrietta also addressed how to deal with hoof problems in organic herds. She stressed the importance of regular hoof trimming, as this allows toxins built up in the foot to escape. When dealing with foot problems, the key is to eliminate the root cause. For instance, stony laneways cause increased bruising, so work to make lanes smooth and clean. Wet environments cause heel warts, so drain wet spots and keep barn alleys dry. Some treatments she has found successful are:

Bruises: trim out the bruised area, and soak the hoof for a period of several hours in an Epsom salt bath for several days

Abscesses: drain the abscess, and treat the animal homeopathically with Silica

Heel warts are difficult to deal with; there may be a genetic or metabolic aspect to cows' susceptibility to warts. Arden Landis, a Pennsylvania dairyman, told the group that he had increased Boron levels in the cows feed to between 45 and 60 ppm, and had not seen any new heel warts since doing so.

Anne Lazor has managed a dairy herd organically for many years at Butterworks Farm in Westfield, Vermont. She spoke about her experience in drying off cows while avoiding mastitis. Anne believes in drying cows off naturally and gradually. 1 week before drying off a cow, she stops feeding her grain entirely. After she stops milking the cow, it goes into a well-bedded dry cow lot, and is fed low-quality hay for at least 10 days so that milk production is minimal. Sometimes she will give a cow a specific mastitis nosode, such as Staph, to ward against mastitis developing during the dry period. Anne also talked about how crucial it is to provide good nutrition, and



extra minerals (especially Selenium) in the 2 weeks before cows freshen to avoid problems in early lactation.

The take-home message from the panel: spend your time and money on preventing health problems, not treating them.

Note: More information on organic livestock health care can be obtained by contacting: ATTRA: Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas, PO Box 3657 Fayetteville, AR 72702, Phone: 800-346-9140, 501-442-9824

The 2004 NODPA Field Days will take place somewhere in Vermont. If you are a producer in Vermont and are interested in hosting next years event, please let us know! You can contact Lisa McCrory at her home office (802-234-5524).

*Lastly, we would like **THANK** all our sponsors who made this event possible.*

Gold Sponsor: John Merck Fund

\$500 Sponsors: Bull Ridge Farm, Horizon Organic, Morrisons

Custom Feeds

\$250 + Sponsors: Agri-Dynamics, Butterworks Farm, Helfter Feeds, Inc. , Homestead Organics, Liberte-Vermont, Maine Department of Agriculture, MOFGA, National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT/ATTRA), NOFA-VT, Organic Valley/CROPP, Stonyfield Farm, Vermont Agency of Agriculture

Other Sponsors: Are You Ready to Party??, Brookfield Ag Services, Cabot Creamery, Inc, Crystal Creek, Fertrell, Floating Bridge Organics, IMPRO Products, Lakeview Organic Grain, Natural Dairy Products, Corp, Nature's Best Organic Feeds, New Trends Publishing, NOFA-NY, North American Kelp, Pennsylvania Certified Organic, Van Beek Scientific.