



Creating the Ideal Organic Dairy Nutritionist

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Here are some of the email responses that came in over the organic dairy email forum and in discussions with other organic dairy farmers this weekend when asked to 'design the perfect organic nutritionist'.

The responders were mostly those who are doing a really good job at organic dairying, those that graze their cows intensively, buy little from off farm and have very healthy cows. Obviously there is the whole range, we certainly sell feed to many different types of farms, some of which are very marginal in success and cattle health, and some of which are buying lots of grain feed and lots of minerals.

However, when I posted this summary (below) on the forum last night, the response I got was that this summary really clarifies what determines profitability on an organic dairy farm - a strong emphasis on grazing/forage management, and changing the emphasis from making milk to making money and supporting animal health using as many internal resources as possible.

SO, when considering the 'ideal' - that is, what organic dairying should be aiming toward, this is what the responders felt was most important:

1. An organic nutritionist should strongly be a grazing specialist – they should be able to advise on soil fertility management, and be able to evaluate the nutritional value of the pasture/forage as it changes over the course of the season, even over the course of a few weeks, and be able to advise on pasture management along with other nutritional information.

A good nutritionist should be able to help farmers make the important, but often overlooked, connections between specific soil nutritional characteristics and animal health issues/production, and advise how to (short term) supplement the cows nutritionally and (long term) supplement the soils to provide better quality forage that supplies as many of the missing nutritional requirements as possible. Micronutrient nutrition (Cu, Zn, Se, Mn) and its apparent connection of certain health issues came up as being not adequately evaluated and addressed. In effect, the 'perfect nutritionist' would be much more a farm consultant than a salesperson.

Dr. Hue Karreman, a vet in Lancaster County that works with lots of organic dairy farms, also points out that just grazing, without supplementing the right amount and kind of energy at the right times, causes problems on a number of the organic farms he sees.

2. That the measure of success on an organic farm is different than on most conventional farms. The measure of success is often not to maximize milk production, but instead to maximize profits while maximizing animal health. Also maximizing the return from the farm's internal resources rather than purchasing off-farm inputs.

Making money and making milk are NOT necessarily the same thing. Many organic farmers are very aware that cows that convert lower quality feed into adequate milk can often be more profitable than cows that need expensive 'racecar' feed to achieve top production.

People called attention to the fact that cows produce three types of income - milk, calves and meat. Focusing on milk production, at the expense of reproduction, fertility and health, especially if the overall costs exceed the overall income, isn't a positive long-term goal on many organic farms.

Often a farmer can make more money with lower production from more of their cows with more moderate quality feed, especially with more forage. The stress on the animals will be lower, lower vet bills, and perhaps longer longevity for the animals - and therefore producing more calves per cow.

Without the option of antibiotics, many organic farmers realize how important it is to identify and minimize animal stress, both internal (nutritional, chronic health issues, parasites) and external (physical facilities/pasture/handling). Dr. Ann Wells, vet in Arkansas, has a very useful method for evaluating the stress load per animal in a grazing herd, and then identifying the different causes. I have a CD of 2 of her talks on animal stress evaluation if you would be interested in hearing them. Her perspective on acute Johnnes as being often a stress-related condition is really thought-provoking.

The need for nutritionists who have a full understanding of the requirements and the intent of organic standards was mentioned frequently. 'Input substitution' or simply replacing prohibited materials with approved materials while changing nothing else is a recipe for failure on organic farms.

Also mentioned was the need for nutritionists who understand the unique demands of seasonal herds.

There was a lot of discussion on the value of silage and whether silage predisposes cows to health problems. Also that silage feeding requires additional expensive protein feed and therefore questioning whether silage pays because of this, and at what points during the year (summer on high protein pasture vs winter supplementing with soybeans).