

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CHECKING IN WITH OUR MEMBERS

Compiled by Nora Owens, NODPA Field Days Coordinator

I can easily imagine the conversations that would be taking place at the 20th Annual NODPA Field Days if we were all gathered together this year. Alas, we are not, so we asked a wide variety of NODPA members to share their experiences during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. What follows are personal accounts and observations of the past 6 months, and some predictions for the future. Everyone was asked whether they'd like their names to be published or not, so as you will read, an equal balance chose to remain anonymous. My sincerest thanks to everyone that sent in these thoughtful responses; I suspect that this is what we'd all be sharing with one another in the hallway, the parking lot, around dinner, and on our farm tours if we were together.

What have the last 6 months been like for you, your family, and your work?

Henry Perkins "*I live in a small town in central Maine; I'm retired and disabled due to a non-boring lifestyle.*"

Well, for me it has altered carefully thought-out plans. Had my plane ticket to visit my son in Colorado in March; cancelled. Haircuts; postponed. Tried to cut it myself- not too good. Gym-cancelled

Shopping- facemasks- I don't mind. Lots less traffic on the roads- don't mind that either. Spending time with my family-no change. Interacting with other people- social distancing, (it's really anti-social distancing) is fine with me, I'm not fond of "close talkers". My regular day-to-day routine has changed very little, lots of days I don't talk to or see anybody anyway, I just do my stuff and if I drop something or bang my finger or stumble there's no difference in the amount of cursing or the words I use. (Unrelated to Covid 19, in January I dropped a log on my foot and broke 7 bones in it; that may have had something to do with my social interactions and cursing).Doctors' visits- The foot thing was normal due to the time, except for the follow-up visits to the foot surgeon, that's when the "shit hit the fan". Facemasks, guards at the door, cancelled visits, irritable staff, etc.

A member of my family went to Quebec for their Winter Festival. When she came home she came down with pneumonia and needed medical attention, as soon as she felt better she visited me and spewed her germs all over me. I didn't feel well a few days later but didn't think much of it, felt normal after 2 days, but a while later my hands hurt badly enough for me to get an appointment with a doctor, this was during the lockdown period, whole different procedure! I was met outside the door by the doctor herself dressed in body armor and sanitizer and some stuff for me to wear. There was no staff, just the doctor. I told her about my family member and the pneumonia thing, and out of caution she sent me to get an x-ray of my lungs. They diagnosed me with pneumonia by reading the x-ray and put me on antibiotics and tested me for Covid 19. Test came back negative, all good except that I didn't go in because I was short of breath nor had

a cough, MY HANDS HURT! She did nothing for my hands. Went home and told my daughter about it and she came up with a homeopathic remedy for me, sulfur. Took it and within half an hour my hands felt better.

Fay Benson, Cornell Cooperative Extension, supporting small dairies: The unknown brought a lot of fear to me in the beginning. Watching the story unfold in China and having been an organic dairy farmer I knew how dangerous a respiratory virus could be to a herd. My wife and I are both in the at-risk population with age and Farmer's Lung/ COPD and asthma, which heightened the fear. As I learned more about it and even though it was still dangerous that wasn't as bad as the unknown. I am much more comfortable with the situation now than I was at the beginning.

A NODPA Advertiser: Ever-changing.

New York State Organic Dairy Farm Family: We have been very fortunate and extremely insulated from the pandemic. Our daily life remains relatively unaffected. We are/become aware mostly when we go into town and need to remember to bring a mask, however we don't go very often.

Maine Organic Dairy Farm Family: For us on the farm it has been business as usual the past 6 months. Thankfully the organic dairy market has not been compromised by the pandemic so far. OV is taking our milk and apparently is not suffering from a typical spring flush oversupply. Unfortunately we are still seeing the \$2/cwt inventory reduction charge in our milk checks as OV returns to profitability.

Our family and employees are taking the possibility of contracting the virus seriously. Our small crew operates like a family bubble, we don't wear masks at work here on the farm but we do in town.

Forrest Stricker, PA Organic Dairy Farmer: Retail sales at the farm almost doubled. We couldn't keep eggs and beef in stock. We rationed eggs to one dozen per customer. Customers came to the farm in masks. We ship to Natural Dairy Products who lost their market in New Jersey and New York. They absorbed the loss of sales. They had to dump skim milk and turned the remaining cream into butter. Our grandchildren's school work was done via computer. My wife works at a local hospital, and continued to work every day with a mask.

Organic Dairy Farm Couple ('He' and 'She') (slightly abbreviated for space): He: Not much difference. We miss our grandkids. I was made for physical distancing. She: COVID is definitely interfering with our social lives being around family and friends. The usual schedule of pasture walks and other farmer gatherings have been put on hold. Otherwise it hasn't been a huge big deal, just some inconveniences and added stress. Since my elderly mother has comorbidities, I'm extra careful and avoid places (like a big farmers market and local Agway) where people are not adhering to face mask and social distancing requirements. I go to the small

farmers market and supermarket earlier in the day when there are less people around (and hopefully less touching of produce), and theoretically after the overnight disinfection. We have a computer and (slow) internet, which has helped me stay connected to some people and events that have switched to online format – like the Organic Valley Regional Meeting. Being home and more isolated has left me more time for my garden and food preservation, which I'd been missing. My husband spends a lot more time on Facebook, which has helped him keep in touch with local friends he used to visit with regularly. COVID-related demand for organic dairy products has actually helped our milk price and the performance of our milk cooperative, both of which have been in decline for the past few years.

What has the last 6 months been like for your community?

Henry Perkins: This is a quiet town and leans republican, Trump signs all over the place, so not too many get excited about masks and the 6 foot distance, except at the town office and town meeting where masks were required. Lots of strong feelings about the political situation, and that may have something to do with Covid19, plus the George Floyd murder; seems to be a lot of QAnon followers here. Talk about loose cannons! Shouldn't surprise me, lots of people still believe the world is flat.

Fay Benson: I am surprised by members of my community that don't trust news sources. Granted, news is unbalanced since it has always followed the mantra "If it bleeds it leads" so they highlight the negative but the supporting science of what is happening I believe is sound and informative. The stories about how Covid was a conspiracy or some method for hospitals to make money were hard for me to understand.

NODPA News Advertiser: Surreal with all the cancellations. However, it is an opportunity for people to show good leadership and innovative ideas to be resilient and persevere.

New York State Organic Dairy Farm Family: Again, our local community has been quite lucky, we have had 0 COVID deaths in our county, and currently there are no reported positive cases. Many local events and regular community activities were canceled which I think was hard on many due to the lack of socialization. However, many of these organized gatherings are beginning to reopen.

Maine Organic Dairy Farm Family: The last 6 months has been a marvelous opportunity to get to know our neighbors. Almost all the yard signs for the upcoming election support the incumbent president as most of the local towns folk go about their business without masks, smiling and shaking hands like always. We have had very few cases of Covid-19 in our community thus far.

Forrest Stricker, PA Organic Dairy Farmer: My neighbor had to dump 2 days' work of milk—about 8000 lbs., because his conventional local dairy could not obtain the plastic bottles to

bottle the milk. The local chicken farmers were asked to come to the plant to help process the chickens due to sick employees and employees who were afraid to go to work. Churches were shut down and found new ways to provide services through YouTube. Grocery stores and Walmart counted customers and had specific doors to enter and leave. Weddings were cancelled and birthday parties were drive-by.

Organic Dairy Farm Couple: He: I don't know. The (organic) farming community hasn't changed much. Most of the businesses around here are essential, so that hasn't changed much.

She: I know a lot of people in our area are having a difficult time, most especially those with family and friends in nursing homes and hospitals who they could not visit. We're fortunate that there haven't been a lot of cases of coronavirus in our region of the state, but we have family, friends and neighbors who have been stricken - some of whom died. Conventional dairy farmers took a real hit, as all had to dump milk and reduce production for a while. Families with school age children and those where one or both parents are out of work have been challenged - although we keep learning about more people where unemployment brings them more income than being at work, so it has not been all bad. We see a lot of new vegetable gardens in our neighborhood, and many children are enjoying having more time home with their families. There seems to be a lot of stress about what is or will happen with the public schools this fall (both by parents and the many people employed by the school districts). A number of people we know will not be sending their kids to school, with concerns ranging from health and safety to the punishingly long periods students must stay seated all day. Politically-speaking, this is Trump country, so there is a lot of whining and complaining about our democratic governor and all the business shutdowns and executive orders – even though they have been incredibly effective at controlling the coronavirus.

What are your thoughts about the future from where we are now?

Henry Perkins: When this first came out I didn't take it very seriously but now I do, it did not just go away and is not going to. We are going to have to deal with it for the foreseeable future, and it should be dealt with by all states and countries working together, not competing with each other and pointing fingers at each other and looking for scapegoats to blame.

Fay Benson: I think it's wonderful that the shutdown has so affected how people eat. They seem to be putting more thought into the source and how the food was produced. So far it has been a positive for the small farms that are closest to their communities. I hope that continues.

I do miss interactions with my community. I want to take some chances to be with some but I need to be careful since I want to visit my wife and grandson every month or so.

A NODPA News Advertiser: Undetermined and that we all need to be flexible.

New York State Organic Dairy Farm Family: We hope events and businesses will continue to open back up. I personally think the harmful effects to individuals and society of shutting everything down, mandating quarantine, and disallowing hospital visitors aren't considered enough when the risks and benefits are weighed to make policies. I hope the guidelines shift more towards considering the whole person and come from a place of compassion instead of fear.

Maine Organic Dairy Farm Family: I am worried that this winter may turn out to be a disaster for America. Maine and OV may be significantly affected by the pandemic.

Forrest Stricker, PA Organic Dairy Farmer: We have not seen a drop off in customers coming to the farm. They want to eat healthier food. We hope to continue to see new customers but hope to soon be able to throw away the masks.

Organic Dairy Farm Couple: He: Hopefully the changes that people have made in their food buying habits will stick. It seems like a lot more people are doing a lot more cooking. I hope they remember that when things go back to a more normal routine (post-COVID). Seems like a lot of people have started a garden and are raising animals for meat. Locally produced meat sales are up and so are organic milk sales.

She: Ditto. Also, we hope the “COVID lift” in sales of organic dairy will help organic milk cooperatives and companies’ bottom lines, and consequently organic dairy farmers. Our milk coop took a huge hit due to mismanagement several years ago, and its dairy members have been paying the price. Coupled with new leadership and direction, the unanticipated spike in sales may be enough to push the coop back into profitability this year.

Do you have observations or stories about this time that you’d like to share?

Fay Benson: My wife retired on January 15th from Cornell. She wasn't that thrilled about her retirement and was unsure of how she would spend it. On her last day at work our daughter called from Baltimore that she and her husband were taking our 5 month old grandson to the hospital for Respiratory Syncytial Virus. The child eventually ended up in the ICU but then recovered quickly. My wife stayed on to be a nanny for the little tyke and then the pandemic hit and she has been there since. We are both amazed at how life works out. Like everything is as it should be. Even though it may not feel good at the time it is probably going to work out for the best. Living alone except for when my son lived with me for 7 weeks (which was great) has been an interesting and enjoyable experience as well.

A NODPA News Advertiser: Everyone has very different points of view for very different reasons depending on their experiences. Patience and understanding need to be practiced now more than ever.

New York State Organic Dairy Farm Family: None come to mind (although we had not realized how difficult it can be to recognize people in masks!). We feel very grateful to be in the organic dairy market and know that is a large part of why we have been insulated!

Forrest Stricker, PA Organic Dairy Farmer: Customers told us they did not want to go to grocery stores and wanted to come directly to the farm to buy their food. They did not want to be around people who might have the virus. The government payments have added additional income to the farm.

Organic Dairy Farm Couple: She: Times of hardship typically bring people together, but it seems by politicizing COVID, the president is polarizing and killing ever growing numbers of people. Our country needs leadership and hope for the future, something the current president is incapable of delivering.