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Despite the Snow, Farmers Say Organic Cows Need to Graze Pasture

LA CROSSE, WIS.: What's the connection between record snowfall and green grass? One association is that organic dairy farmers from across the country braved Wisconsin's biggest snowstorm in years to affirm that the green grass of pasture must be a significant part of the diet of organic cows that produce organic milk for American consumers.

Organic dairy farmers from Maine to California met in LaCrosse, Wisconsin on February 23rd and formed FOOD Farmers (Federation of Organic Dairy Farmers), a national group of organic dairy farmers. "As dairy farmers, we are committed to providing a wholesome product from happy organic cows, said California dairyman Tony Azevedo".

FOOD Farmers unanimously supported adding additional federal regulatory language to clarify that production of organic milk requires that organic dairy animals must consume at least 30% of their food needs (dry matter intake) from pasture for the entire growing season, but for no less than 120 days. "Most regions of this country where organic milk is produced have their cows out on pasture for far longer than 120 days," stated Steve Pechacek from Wisconsin. "A key principle is to maintain the land/animal connection that is central to organic production."

The USDA's National Organic Program is currently in the process of more clearly defining the current standard that requires all ruminant animals, which includes dairy cows, to have access to pasture. The addition of feed and time requirements will result in a verifiable nationwide standard unlike any other organic standard in the world.

What is obvious and natural to farmers, who spend their lives caring for their animals and their land, needs to be firmly implanted within the USDA National Organic Program regulations to ensure that the Organic Seal remains the most reliable third party certified standard. New York dairy farmer Kathie Arnold, a member of the newly minted organization, said "In addition to no use of hormones, antibiotics, or pesticides in organic dairy production, organic consumers have made it clear that they expect and want organic dairy cows to be immersed in their natural environment—pasture."

Scientific studies have shown that higher consumption of pasture leads to elevated levels of beneficial fatty acids such as Omega 3s and CLA and vitamins such as A and E in the milk of grazed dairy cows—compounds that are believed to help protect against such maladies as heart disease and cancer. Pasture has long been called 'Dr. Green' because of its health giving benefits to animals.

"Consumers expect that the organic seal on organic dairy products means that the animals have been given the opportunity to behave in a natural manner, and that the quality of the product reflects this benefit of organic production", said Robynn Shrader, CEO of the National Cooperative Grocers Association.

The organic dairy farmers at the La Crosse meeting expressed their gratitude and thanks to the multitude of consumers who choose to purchase organic dairy products for their families. "We wholeheartedly thank the families who purchase our products and provide our families with a living wage. As farmers, we are committed to developing and maintaining strict federal standards that will ensure that the organic seal reflects the consumers' interests and we thank you for your support" added Steve Morrison, dairy producer from Maine.

For more information contact Ed Maltby, NODPA Executive Director, at 413-772-0444 or 413-427-7323 or by email: ednodpa@comcast.net and at www.nodpa.com or www.organicmilk.org

About FOOD Farmers:

Federation of Organic Dairy Farmers (FOOF Farmers) is a national organization formed by the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA), the Midwest Organic Dairy Producers Association (MODPA) and the Western Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (WODPA) who represent over 850 organic dairies across the USA. The organic dairy farmers have many different production methods including seasonal grass based dairies and more traditional production methods that combine pasture, conserved forage and grain. They also market their milk in many different ways, selling to the major brands including Horizon Organic, Organic Valley, Stonyfield, Humboldt Dairy, as well as through smaller cooperatives including Upstate Farms Cooperative, Organic Choice and LOFCO, and independent manufacturers of organic dairy product and direct to the consumer.

Steve Morrison, NODPA President, Charleston, Maine

Kathie Arnold, NODPA Policy Chair, Truxton, NY

NODPA's mission: "to enable organic family dairy farmers, situated across an extensive area, to have informed discussion about matters critical to the well being of the organic dairy industry as a whole and to do so in an independent farmer-driven mode" with particular emphasis on:

1. Establishing a fair and sustainable price for their product at the wholesale level.
2. Promoting ethical, ecological and economically sustainable farming practices.
3. Developing networks with producers and processors of other organic commodities to strengthen the infrastructure within the industry.
4. Establishing open dialogue with organic dairy processors and retailers in order to better influence producer pay price and to contribute to marketing efforts.

Steve Pechacek, MODPA President, Mondovi, WI

MODPA's mission is to promote communication and networking for the betterment of all Midwest organic dairy producers and enhance a sustainable farmgate price.

Tony Azevedo, WODPA President, Stevinson, CA

WODPA: "Integrity" the Backbone of Organics

NODPA is a member of the National Organic Coalition.

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