

Organic Production

Feature Farm - /

Engelbert Farm

Kevin & Lisa Engelbert, Nichols, NY

By Kevin Engelbert

My forefathers came from Germany in 1848 and began our family tradition of farming in the southern tier of New York. At present, we have 140 acres of pasture and 150 acres of crop land of our own plus rent an additional 400 acres of ground suitable for row-cropping and 150 acres of grass hay ground.

My father attended Cornell in the 1940's, and was entrenched in 'high production per acre' philosophy. Our land, while very fertile, is also very prone to flooding. My dad was the first farmer in the area to use chemicals extensively. They allowed him to keep the low-lying fields in continuous corn, while keeping the higher elevation ground in continuous hay/alfalfa production. He irrigated, fertilized heavily, sprayed for pests with abandon, and grew some incredibly high-yielding crops.

I graduated from college in 1979, and by that time some serious problems were surfacing on our farm. Our soils, hard as a rock, plowed up as blocks of compacted, lumpy, lifeless, dirt. We could no longer grow high yielding, weed-free crops, even though we rotated chemicals and used them at their highest recommended levels. We were spending over \$25,000/year on chemicals of all kinds, and also spending \$1,000 month on vet bills. My dad was the first to start a weekly herd-health check due to the increasing health problems we were encountering. We no longer made culling decisions--we simply kept the cows we could keep alive, get bred back, that didn't lose quarters, that could keep their feet and legs under them, etc.

The key event that got me thinking seriously about the shape of our farm, and the direction we were headed, was the purchase of 20 bred heifers in the summer of 1979. I was quite proud of the fact that we were doing so, because up until then we had had a closed herd, and I thought purchasing heifers was a sign of progress! My grandmother opened my eyes when she learned of our need to purchase heifers to maintain cow numbers by saying "Well, we al-

ways had extra heifers to sell--sure helped our bottom line. Just think how much better off you would be if you were selling heifers instead of buying them!" And she was, of course, right.

I spent that winter doing a lot of thinking, and came to the obvious conclusion that there had to be a connection between the amount of money we were spending on chemicals and all the problems we were having. As an experiment in 1980, we used oats as a nurse crop for our alfalfa seedings, instead of clear seeding with Eptam, and

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surprise, surprise - we had a good crop of oats and a nice stand of alfalfa. Who would've thunk it?

That was all the success I needed. In 1981 we quit using chemicals cold-turkey, and haven't used any since. Seven years later, after our herd health checks had gradually been reduced to an as-needed basis, I finally had the confidence to sell all of our spraying equipment. In spite of all the nay-sayers, we have seen with our own eyes the truth about soil health, plant health, animal health, and,

in turn, human health. We have learned that the more you work with Mother Nature, the more successful you will be in the long run, and that's what we try to do with our crops and our animals, as much as our location and facilities allow.

A huge step in that direction was rotational grazing, which we began in the late 1980's. Getting the cows out of the barn and off concrete was another eye-opening experience. It didn't take long to realize that managed grazing was also going to be a key in our long-term sustainability. Our herd's health had been continuously improving since we converted to organic crop production, and it improved even more once we started pasturing again. (By the late 60's, in an effort to push milk production even higher, my dad had stopped pasturing the milking cows, and by the middle 70's, he had stopped pasturing dry cows and bred heifers.)

Our feeding program evolved to the point that we feed only 8-10 lbs. of high moisture ground ear corn per



Engelbert Family: Front row, left to right: Lisa, Angela Hill (Kris' fiancée) Deidre Jacobus (Joe's fiancée), Maggie (Joe and Deidre's daughter). Back row, left to right: Kevin, John, Kris, Joe

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milking cow per day, along with pasture, supplemented with baleage as needed throughout the year. We feed kelp at a rate of 2 oz. per cow per day, and offer some free choice during stressful times of the year.

By and large, we have moved to seasonal milk production, to time our peak milk production with peak pasture production. We do milk all year, but the majority of our cows freshen in the spring and early summer, and we don't normally freshen any animals from December thru February. Our herd health strategy basically involves keeping our soils healthy and in balance as best we can.

We also don't push the cows for production and we keep them outdoors all the time, which helps them stay healthy. There has never been a barn designed and built by cows. They are meant to be outdoors. We don't have a cow in our herd that has ever had her feet trimmed, or that has ever been examined by a vet for anything other than a pregnancy check. We spend less than \$2/cow/year on purchased feed (kelp), and less than \$2/cow/year on vet expenses (dehorning calves). We did not reach these numbers overnight, but gradually as our soil health continued to improve over the years.

We became involved with NOFA-NY in its early years, and obtained our first certification in 1984/85. We had hoped to put in our own processing plant, but were unable to convince a bank that organic farming was not simply a fad and that demand for organic dairy products was sure to increase dramatically at some point. In the early 80's,

there were no set organic standards for dairy operations, since all organic farms then were small vegetable or fruit farms. We explained our entire operation to the NOFA-NY Administrator at the time, she came to see our farm, and then declared we were organic! I served on the NOFA-NY Standards Board for a number of years, and our farm helped serve as a role model for NOFA-NY's dairy standards.

The biggest challenge we face now involves trying to increase our land base and our income level so that we can support two more families--our oldest sons have

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both decided they want to farm. We have decided that milking more cows is not the direction we want to go in, and doesn't lend itself to true organic production in my opinion. We are going to try to expand our cash crop sales, and we have begun to diversify into beef, veal, and pork production.

To be truly sustainable though, farmers need a fair price (namely, parity price) for their products, and I'm hopeful that organic dairy production can help achieve that worthwhile goal. As our sons take over more and more of the workload, I would like to devote more of my time to helping maintain the strict organic standards that have enabled small, family farms to survive. The past 25+ years have been very enjoyable watching the organic movement grow and develop, and I hope more and more people come into the fold!