

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Journey's Hope Farm Jonathan and Beverly Rutter, Bridport, VT

By Lisa McCrory

How it all Started

In 1980 Jonathan and Beverly Rutter started their first herd of milking cows in a town called Bovina Center, NY. Farming was in their blood as both sets of parents were farmers - Jon's with ponies, Beverly's with a dairy farm. In 1985 they moved cows, equipment and family to Bridport, VT where they are presently milking 180 mixed breed cows.

The Rutters have moved through tremendous evolutions of change on their farm and continue to make changes; nothing is static on this organic farm. When they first started dairy farming, Jon and Beverly had a confinement dairy using a tie stall barn and comfort stalls. All the feed was brought to the cows and their focus was raising quality forages and high producing registered Jerseys.

The Switch to a Grass-Based System

In the early 1990's, it was getting harder to make a profit with the system that they had in place. They had committed to farming for another 10 years and after that were open to doing something else if farming proved to be less than profitable. They knew that they needed to make some dramatic changes if they wanted to stay above water, so Jon and Beverly decided to manage their forages in a different way; they were going to let the cows do the harvesting by switching to a management intensive grazing (MIG) system. With the help of Jeff Carter, their local Extension agent, and Bill Murphy's Pasture Management Outreach Program (out of UVM), Jon and Beverly jumped into grazing with both feet. Cows, heifers and calves switched from confinement feeding to 'feed yourself' in no time flat. Needless

to say, there were some stressful times ahead with both the farmers and the livestock having to get trained to a whole new system. In the end, MIG proved to be a very positive stepping stone for Journey's Hope Farm. From there, Jon and Beverly dabbled with ideas of seasonal dairying and grazing genetics. It was no longer important for them to have a registered breed and they started looking into the kinds of cows that do well on a grass farm. They are now a 'partial-seasonal' herd, calving in the spring and the fall with windows of time when they don't have to worry about calving or breeding (though when they **are**, it is intense).

Transition to Organic Production

In 2001, with the help of Travis Forgues, the decision was made to become an organic farm. It took a bit of convincing at first, because though they saw a lot of organic dairy farms in their neighborhood doing a wonderful job, they were also aware of other farms that they were not very impressed with. They also had a lot of fears weighing them down such as; how do we handle Coccidia under organic management? What will happen if we don't worm our heifers? How will we dry off our cows and will they freshen in good health without dry cow treatment? These fears turned out to be just that – fears. "We did all these things



Journeys Hope Farm: L-R Marcellos Hermendez, Manuel Hermendez, Zoila Sequara, Jon Rutter, Beverly Rutter (missing from picture is Tom Ferguson)

[conventional treatments] because we thought we had to", said Jon. "With good air, good feed, and a clean and dry environment, most of your problems are over". The Rutters believe in the concept that mother nature must always be worked with and not against. With this philosophy in place, the transition to organic health practices for the cows and for the land was more in line with what they believed. The network of support within the organic dairy community was, and continues to be, very strong and the resources and information on animal health and land management was more than adequate for them to hop on that learning curve; Jon and Beverly knew that they were not alone.

Their Management Today

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Today, Jon and Beverly raise their cross-bred livestock (Jersey/Holstein/Brown Swiss crosses) in an out door heavily grass-based system with a calving season in the spring and another one in the fall. This leaves the hotter part of the summer and the cold winter months with no calves to raise and 6-week breeding windows at times of the year when cows are not too stressed by extreme temperatures and more likely to settle. This spring they had 65 cows and 35 heifers calve and expect to have 100 cows and 35 heifers calving in the fall. The hot summer months are a bad time of year for producing high quality feed on pasture. Pastures on their farm tend to dry out in July and early August and feed quality can drop. With the majority of their herd in late lactation, dry or in mid lactation, their herd is not affected as much. This system allows them to be managing their livestock at stages of lactation and development that actually compliments the feed available.



Jon and Beverly Rutter with their Brown Swiss/Holstein/Jersey cross

Housing, Husbandry and Feeding

Housing in the wintertime consists of a bedded pack for one group of up to 40 milkers; those who have just freshened or may need some extra attention. The remaining 140 milkers are kept in a freestall barn. Both groups go through a parlor to be milked twice a day. All animals are out on an intensively managed grazing system from May until the end of October. Dry cows stay out on pasture until the end of November and heifers are kept outside year round using round bales as wind breaks. All the animals are fed pasture, grass haylage and small amounts of purchased concentrates.

Calves

Calves are kept with their mothers for 24-48 hours. The calves are then moved to individual pens with a nipple feeder from which they get fed a gallon of milk two times a day. Calves are weaned at 12 weeks and are then moved to groups of no more than 10. (a group of weaned calves? How to deal with sucking? Is that an issue? Jon and Beverly used to raise their calves in groups of 10 then they decreased the group numbers to 5 in a group, then to three and now the current system of individual pens. They like this system the best as it allows them to monitor each individual calf ensuring optimum health. Mortality rate is about 1 calf out of every 60 calves.

Breeding

Cows are bred during two 6-week windows using AI and an aggressive Tail painting system. Different colored paints will indicate if the animal is open, bred, bred one time or bred two times. An AI breeder comes once a day during the 6-week breeding windows. They have not used a clean up bull for a year now. If a cow does not breed back within their window of time, the cows is either culled or, if they are young, sold as freezer beef from their farm. None of the cows leaving for this reason are sold to the dairy market because they feel like these cows are not that fertile and they don't want to sell that genetic trait to their neighbors. Jon and Beverly use a New Zealand style breed-

ing system where they breed their cows to Jersey, Holstein or Brown Swiss, constantly switching within those three breeds. If a cow is more Holstein and Jersey in quality, then the breeder will choose a Brown Swiss sire. Like many organic dairy producers, production is NOT one of the top three qualities they breed for. Traits that they breed for are reproduction, temperament and udder.

Now and into the Future

John and Beverly feel blessed with their team of employees. Tom Ferguson has been working for them for 2 years and 1 year ago, they hired Marcellos and Manuel Hermendez, Zoila Sequera joined the farm two months ago and is involved with some diversified projects on the farm such as raising meat birds on pasture (their first year doing this). An added bonus to having Marcellos, Manuel and Zoila joining the farm has been the cultural exchange and enthusiasm and appreciation for one another. Jon and Beverly have been very active over the past 15 years in various grazing discussion groups, act as mentors for beginning graziers and were active Board Members for the Vermont Grass Farmers Association up until a couple years ago. Beverly has been a NODPA Representative since 2004 and participates in many email and phone conference calls keeping NODPA on its course. The Rutters realize that there is an opportunity for them to develop a beef market on their farm and that may be one of the next projects that they take on. For now, however, it is staying on top of the day to day and *getting that second cut in.*