

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Maple Shade Farm Morven Allen Sheffield, MA

by Lisa McCrory

Morven Allen has been farming in Berkshire County, MA for over 20 years; starting with just a couple cows and a few calves and today he has a herd of just under 250 dairy cows. Morven grew up in England on an organic dairy farm and came to the US to pursue a career in farming as there was no way to get started farming in England due to limited farmland. He has been renting land all of those 20 years and 4 years ago, had the opportunity to purchase a 155-acre farm from the State Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program.

About the Home Farm

The 155-acre farm contains the house, dairy barn and permanent pasture for his milking herd and the remaining acreage that he uses (1045 acres) is rented under long-term lease agreements. One of the challenges for Morven is not having a block of contiguous land. He has to travel to 3 different pieces of rented land to grow his forages and two different pieces to raise his heifers. All of the rented land is no more than 12 miles away, but interestingly, some of the land is in NY, some is in CT and some of it is in MA. The total acres farmed is 1,200; 50 acres of land is in corn (first year growing corn) and the rest is harvested as haylage or dry hay.

The milking barn consists of a double-ten pit parlor and a free stall barn for the milk cows. The milking facility was rebuilt 4 years ago when the farm was purchased; doing much of the renovations themselves. Young calves stay on the main farm until weaning age and then they move to one of his rented farms in Alford, MA for their first winter and then to another farm in NY for the final period from breeding age to calving.



Being that pasture is limited, only the milkers stay on the home farm, which is used primarily for their intensive rotational grazing system.

Aside from himself, Morven has 2 full time employees working for him along with several part time employees helping out with cropping, relief milking and other livestock chores. His son Ian (9 years old) helps out a lot and proudly states that he is 'definitely going to be a farmer' when he grows up.

Organic Transition

Transitioning to organic was a 3-year process for the land and the livestock transitioned under the 80:20 rule during the final year of the land transition. Morven started shipping organic milk to Horizon Organic in December, 2006 and is certified by OCPP out of Canada.

Organic dairying has always been a way of life for this farmer, but the biggest challenge was farming organically on rented land that is renewed each year. Once Morven owned his own farm and secured some long-term leases on other properties, he knew that taking the leap into organic dairy production was the next step. Having grown up on an organic farm in Britain, it was not hard familiarizing himself with the organic standards (there *are* some differences between EU and US standards) and he has always rotationally grazed his livestock.

Preventative Health Strategies

Morven's management has always been based upon preventative strategies and providing a low stress environment for all his animals. He does not push his cows for production and saw no change in his milk production when he transitioned to organic.

Getting cows outside as much as possible is Morven's primary strategy for preventing health problems. Other things he incorporates into his management are dry cow vaccinations used to build up antibodies in the colostrum to fight calf scours and respiratory illness. Newborn calves are also vaccinated. He has a closed herd, so does not have to worry about problems arriving on

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his farm via purchased livestock. His veterinarian, Dr. Wayne Hassinger, is very supportive of Morven's switch to organic dairy production and is interested in learning more. Most of Dr Hassinger's visits are for pregnancy checks and other management consultations and occasionally for an injury or a difficult calving.

To avoid pneumonia with his calves, Morven gets them out in paddocks as early as possible. Mastitis cases are rare and the SCC (Somatic Cell Count) decreases once his cows go out to pasture.

Some of his current challenges are with dry cow management and maintaining a low somatic cell count. He recently started using DHIA for monthly 'hot sheets' so that he can identify the chronic high count cows and ultimately cull them from the herd.

Breeds and Breeding

Cows are bred naturally, using a Jersey bull for the heifers and a Holstein bull for the rest of the cows. As a result, Morven's herd consists of Holstein/Jersey crosses. The majority of his animals freshen in the spring, taking advantage of the high quality pasture early in the season and making sure the cows are bred back before it gets too hot. He does not freshen any cows from December to February.

Pasture Management, Winter Management and Supplemental Feeding

Morven has been rotationally grazing his dairy herd ever since he can remember; cows are moved to new pasture after every milking and water is provided in every paddock.

The 155 acre home farm provides lots of pasture for his milkers, but Morven feels that his animals are a little over-stocked and hopes to reduce his cow numbers to better match the acreage available. The organic pay price should support this shift, but it is too soon in the game to make that move right now.

He has worked closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) receiving cost-share money for setting up a fencing and watering system, laneways, manure handling and storage system and has received additional funds for transitioning his land to organic production. Morven is impressed with the support that he has received from Kate Parsons (local NRCS District Conservationist) and hopes that more

farmers will be motivated to get involved in the various NRCS cost-share programs once they see what he has implemented on his farm.

To complement his pasture, Morven feeds a TMR of haylage, dry hay and 10 lbs of 11% protein grain. In the winter time, he changes his grain to an 18% protein grain and adds some baleage and corn silage to the TMR. He is a little concerned about the condition on his cows and is growing corn silage this year with the hopes that the corn silage will offer some extra energy

in the ration and have a positive effect on body condition.

Resources

There is a long list of individuals and organizations that have supported Morven through his transition: OCPP, his certifier, has been very supportive and knowledgeable; they have worked more as an ally than 'certification police'; Rick Dutil from



Green Mountain Feeds carried Morven through tough times when he owed GMF money and continues to provide support taking forage samples and balancing rations for his herd; and Rick Segalla, a long-time organic dairy farmer and neighbor has been there to answer questions and share his insight and experience.

Being a NODPA Representative has also been a great experience. Morven feels like he is part of a group that is really going somewhere; discussions are positive and forward-thinking.

What really captures Morven's attention is when discussions turn to supporting and mentoring the next generation of farmers. Morven started farming with just two cows and built his enterprise to the size and scale it is today – and he has very little debt. He never could have bought the farm he now owns if it wasn't for the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program. The eligibility process to be a candidate to purchase the farm was very competitive; Morven had to show 4 years worth of milk receipts, a business plan and provide a full business history. Ultimately, he was the one they chose. Morven is grateful for the opportunity that was given to him (though by the sounds of it, he earned it) and wants to make sure other farmers or prospective farmers have similar opportunities, keeping sustainable agricultural enterprises going and growing.

Moren Allen will host a tour of Maple Shade Farm on the second day of the NODPA Field Days♦