

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Viewpoint Organic Acres

Dan & Darlene Coehoorn, Rosendale, WI

Interview conducted via email by Kathie Arnold

Please tell us about your farm.

We farm 450 acres in Fond du lac County in East-Central Wisconsin near Rosendale. Our land is mostly clay loam soils and is for the most part very productive with little wasteland. Crops grown are hay, pasture with alfalfa/grass mixes, soybeans, corn, wheat, oats, peas/barley, BMR (brown mid rib sorghum sudan grass), canning peas, and rye for cover crops.

We have 55-60 cows and 50-60 heifers. We milk in a tie stall barn (comfort stalls, most with cow mattresses).

We also raise dairy steers. Presently we have about 30 head ranging from hut calves to almost finished fair steers. All of the steers are certified organic, but most of them are sold privately. We have no certified slaughter plant so they are sold as organically grown and the buyer knows that the slaughter is not organic. Usually our buyers select the slaughter plant. We have also sold some to CROPP.

Dan and Darlene are our main work force. We do take all the help our children can give. Our oldest daughter is a CPA. She is married to a schoolteacher; they live a half hour from us. She doesn't help with the physical farm work much any more as she is gearing up for a marathon she is running in to raise money for cancer research and patients. Our oldest son is a diesel mechanic and he is in the army reserves. He helps out driving tractor or whatever when he can on the weekends. Our third child is attending college and working so she is not available to help out much either but she does what she can. Our youngest will be a senior in high school this fall. He is doing a youth apprenticeship in engineering so he also works off the farm. He is our main assistant driving tractor and feeding when he is not at school or work.



*Robert, Dan, Darlene, Ben, Danielle,
Doralee Coehoorn*

How did you get started in farming?

Dan grew up on a cash grain/steer farm. After we were married, we did relief milking for many farmers and we decided we would like to dairy. So we started milking on halves. In our case our landlord owned the land, one-half of the cattle, and paid half the expenses. We owned half the cattle, all the machinery, and provided all the labor. The income was also split in half. It was a great way to start without all the debt load. We did this for a number of years, building up our equity and looking for a farm of our own. We purchased our present farm in 1989 and some additional acres in 2001.

Tell us about your transition to organic?

We were headed toward organics when we bought our farm, although we were thinking only sustainable farming. We never used insecticides and only lesser rates of herbicides when needed. We converted our acres gradually with our first certified crops about 10 years ago; we sold off our organic grains until we had enough acres converted and until CROPP was ready for our milk in 2000.

Ours was a slow transition for the cattle, with elimination of most all drugs long before we became certified. We did a lot of experimentation--like using dry treat on X number of cows and not on X number of cows, all dried off at the same time. We discovered as many cows coming in with mastitis that were treated as were not treated. We decided then never to dry treat again. (We didn't tell our vet what we were doing until we were sure it was working.) Darlene's cancer increased our desire to do without chemicals and thus go organic. It has not always been easy; we have hit our share of speed bumps along the way.

What are your basic farm guiding philosophies and management strategies?

Quality sells its self. We aim for the best quality, working with improving our soil, crops, and cattle in the attempt. We would like to leave our mark on our farm, making sure it is at least as good as when we

(Continued on page 14)

(Continued from Feature Farm, page 13)

got it but hoping to leave it much better for our attempts. We feel the better the quality at our end the better the quality of the finished product and the easier it is to sell for higher value.



Your farm has been the Organic Valley Midwest Milk Quality Award Winner for the past three years in a row, with a SCC average of 79,000 in 2003. What production and management techniques and procedures do you have in place to have achieved such a consistently low somatic cell count?

Our cell count is something we are always working on. It has been a high priority for many years. No milk goes in the tank unless we are willing to put it in a glass and drink it as it comes from the cow. We have an NFO systems analyst go over the whole milking system at least annually. Inflatons are changed every 50 to 60 days, air tubes are checked and changed at least every third inflation change. We pre and post dip with an iodine based teat dip. We fore strip enough milk to adequately evaluate each quarter. We use individual paper towels for drying. Darlene wears milker's gloves for milking.

We try to eliminate as much stress as possible for the cows. We get heifers in at least two weeks prior to freshening--longer if possible to acclimate them to the barn, milking noise and being handled by people. Our cows are trained to use the same stall all the time. We feel the calmer the animal, the less stress and the better the milk out. We work hard on preventing problems; it is much easier than addressing them when things are out of control.

As a rule we never milk a dirty or wet teat, especially the tips. We dry off the teats before we strip them. Typically our highest cell count milk is fed to calves. We test owner-sampler with DHIA and are on monthly somatic cell tests and have been for more than 20 years I think.

Over time it has become easier to keep a lower cell count, although every milking can have its new challenges. I think some of this is because we have culled some of the problem cows so we are constantly improving our genetic line in this area.

When we dry a cow off we quit milking her and leave her in the barn to somewhat restrict water and feed intake and keep her clean and dry for 5 days, then milk her out again. If all quarters are okay at that time she is put out in the dry lot. According to some of the other farmers who have tried this, it alone has lowered

their cell count. If a quarter doesn't look okay, what we do depends on the cow, how the quarter is, and what the milk looks like. At times, we will keep her in and strip the quarter and treat with garlic and homeopathy; other times we will let her out and keep an eye

on it. We usually treat with homeopathy. You need to know your cows well enough to know how aggressive to treat them.

I don't think we have all the answers by any means, we are just never afraid to question and try something new. I feel that you have to apply what works for your situation, you need to constantly evaluate how you are doing things and if something is working, research why it works and make doing things the right way your habit. If you do this it will be easier to achieve the results you are looking for. Sometimes, as it is with organics, the hardest part to change is your mind and if you make up your mind to do it, it can be achieved.

Describe your nutrition / feeding program.

Our cattle are on pasture, supplemented with a TMR consisting of haylage, corn silage, hi-moisture corn, oats and barley, balanced off with minerals supplied by KOW Consulting (Weaver Feeding & Management). We also feed some dry hay to keep a rumen mat. Rations are balanced and KOW tests feed. Minerals are used to balance feed and cow needs. Cows are on a high forage diet. Soils are tested by KOW and fertilizer is applied according to needs. We have been using Mid-Bio Ag program for many years.

Describe your herd health strategies.

We work to minimize stress on cattle at all levels, especially the cows. The barn has tunnel ventilation, long day lighting, and most of the comfort stalls have mattresses. The rear of the stalls are limed daily and fresh straw is added over mattresses every day when the cows are in. We have tiled the manger to help keep it clean and improve feed intake. We are always working on improving our present facilities.

We don't very often have mastitis flare-ups but frequent stripping and homeopathy address them when we do.

What challenges do you face?

These days our greatest challenges come from the weather--rain, rain, and more rain--and our shrinking work force.