

Keeping an organic herd healthy

By RICHARD DAVIS

ONE of the concerns Southeast producers and researchers have had as they considered organic dairy production was how they would be able to keep organic-producing cows healthy without resorting to the arsenal of medicines they had become accustomed to over the years. They've been pleasantly surprised, says Marti Day, North Carolina State University Extension dairy specialist.

"The theory we were taught is seeming to come into play," Day says. "That theory was that the organic cows would have less sickness to deal with since they would be healthier in the first place.

"The organic cows really are a much hardier and healthier strain — on anybody's farm."

The reason for that, Day surmises, is that organic cows are eating more grass, and that is what the cows' digestive systems are best designed for.

"As we work on the digestive systems, all their other systems sort of get into better order, too," the expert says.

Near Gibsonville, N.C., George and Cherry Teague are transitioning their Reedy Fork Farm from conventional to organic dairy production. On the road to organic, with limited medicinal tools allowed under the system, they have a new focus on cattle nutrition.

The first step is getting nutritive elements into their pastures. When they were running a conventional dairy, the Teagues used to take soil samples and follow recommendations for nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Now they focus as much on micronutrients.

"Now we realize all the other ingredients in the soil are there for a reason and need to be replaced, too," George says. "Calcium is the king. That makes

Key Points

- Robust immune systems help organic dairy cows.
- Specialist says organic-producing cows don't need as many medicinals.
- Nutrients and micronutrients in soils play a role in cows' health.

sense for dairy and has to be good for calcium-enriched milk.

"It is also true for the other micronutrients — sulfur, boron and so on. These all have to be in balance. In fact, if you add calcium but the other micronutrients are out of balance, the calcium won't work as well as it should, either."

The Teagues now concentrate much more on building up the soils in pastures than they used to.

"Everything starts from the soil," George says. "Instead of thinking, 'We'll add some minerals for our cows later,' we put the minerals in the forages, and in that way into the soil. Then the forages have more minerals in them and is better feed for the cows."

The Teagues have also discovered allowable medicinals, often nutrient based, really do work. They use garlic to correct a number of maladies, including mastitis. There are vitamins, medicinal herbs, tinctures and more.

Needed resources

One of the difficulties for the Teagues was the lack of sources and infrastructure when they began their transition from conventional dairy into organic. Organic Valley, the cooperative buying their milk, has an on-staff veterinarian who was a great help to them. Locating a company like Lancaster Ag Products that offers animal health products was also a big help. Company representatives offered up a lot of answers and



NUTRIENT BOOST: George Teague keeps a supply of Custom Dairy Mix from Lancaster Ag Products on hand. He uses a variety of organically certified minerals and supplements that he believes work to boost his cows' health.

held the Teagues' hands through much of the process. George has now become a representative for Lancaster.

Now, as their herd is about to go totally organic, the couple is more and more optimistic.

"We were thinking about going out of business before the organic came along," Cherry says. "It is just too tough

for conventional dairy farmers now, with all the regulations, the low price of milk, and the price always going up and down, up and down.

"Since we've been transitioning over to organic, we feel like we finally have a future in dairy farming. We feel like maybe this is something to pass on to our children."

Making the transition to organic farming

ORGANIC is a legal term. To qualify as organic, a dairy must meet USDA requirements.

However, most organic dairies in North Carolina are having their milk purchased by Organic Valley cooperative, which not only meets USDA requirements but adds some stricter rules.

For example, USDA says an organic dairy cow must have some access to pasture. Organic Valley requires more — that 30% of the cows' intake be from organic pasture during the summer.

In order to meet USDA requirements of organic farming, a farm must undergo fundamental operation changes. The farmland itself has to go through a three-year transition where no chemicals and no disallowed substances are applied to the land, explains Marti Day, N.C. Cooperative Extension specialist.

"The recordkeeping is pretty intense," she says. "The farm is inspected yearly, and the inspection is very thorough."

Besides the land, the cows also have to make the transition.

Some producers transition all their cows at the same time. "The cows fall



TWO ROUTES: Some dairy producers transition to organic by running "split herds," qualifying only part of the herd for organic. The Teagues, Gibsonville, N.C., decided to go another route, transitioning the entire herd to organic at the same time.

into a program where they have to eat organic feed for one year," Day says. "Then, regardless of their origins, they are deemed organic cows and from that

point on, for that farm, anything that will be put into that herd and be considered organic has to be managed organically from three months prior to birth."

Once a dairy has gone through the whole herd transition, Day adds, the managers have to manage everything in the herd organically to keep the designation.

Some farmers, Day says, prefer a different approach of transitioning their heifers; they milk a "split herd."

Producers keep rigorous records so they know that their heifers have not had any organically disallowed substances for one year prior to their calving. "Then, when they calve, they begin to produce organic milk," explains Day.

"This way the producer still has his conventional herd during the process of transitioning, which will take one year of the cows not having anything but organic feed.

"Again, no disallowed substances are used or fed to the cows for that year. Then, the traditional herd will also be producing organic milk," she adds.

During this process, producers have two separate "strains" of cows. They treat their two herds differently, have separate organic and conventional milk tanks, and a clean up between milkings.