

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

SUMMER 2019

The Crisis in Organic Dairy

Consumers Unite!

BY MARIE BURCHAM, JD,
AND MELODY MORRELL

Family-scale organic dairies are struggling to make ends meet. Many have already lost their farms and businesses, some of which have been in the family for generations.

At their biannual meeting in April, the National Organic Standard Board (NOSB) heard from multiple family-scale dairy farmers about how their businesses are failing due to the inconsistent application of organic principles during certification.

For example, a small number of very large “organic” dairies are disregarding the origin of livestock rules by continuously cycling conventional livestock into production. Industrial organic operations, whose cows spend most of their lives in the feedlot, also struggle to meet even the most modest pasture requirements.

Authentic organic dairy farmers easily exceed the pasture requirements for organic livestock: 30% dry matter intake (DMI) and a minimum 120-day grazing season for each individual animal.

What’s more, the grain being fed in industrial operations may not actually be organic. In 2018, Cornucopia Director of International Policy Anne Ross, JD, exposed a network of fraudulent grain



importers from overseas (read more about Ross on page 8).

Available data shows the U.S. is importing more than they can possibly be growing. This grain is cheap and abundant compared to real organic grain, making it an attractive choice for livestock factories.

Several dairy farmers shared emotional stories at the spring NOSB meeting in Seattle—about their families losing their homes, about financial ruin, about watching other dairies break or bend the organic rules without consequence, while their own ethical practices put them further and further into debt.

These farmers noted that the lack of an origin of livestock rule allows some organic dairies to get rid of their calves and, instead,

buy conventional heifers that are transitioned to organic over one year. This practice gives dairies a financial leg up because it allows them to sell the organic milk produced, instead of feeding it to baby calves.

During the meeting, it became clear that the National Organic Program (NOP) is unwilling to push

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THE CORNUCOPIA FARMER PROFILE

Renaissance Family

The Prevailing Winds of Weatherbury Farm

BY RACHEL ZEGERIUS

Nestled in the tightly woven hills of the Washington Valley, 35 miles southwest of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, rest the rolling pastures of Weatherbury Farm, purchased by the Tudor family in 1986. Historically a sheep farm, in the mid-1800s this region produced one-quarter to one-third of all of the wool in the U.S. The Tudors still keep a small herd of 10 to 15 lambs in homage to this agricultural heritage.

It took only one season at Weatherbury for the Tudor family to decide that they wanted to seek out alternative farming practices, in contrast the high-input methods being advocated for by extension.

Both Dale and Marcy came from multigenerational farm families. They remember the days: their parents didn't spend a lot of money on fertilizers; they spread manure and made hay—an approach that may be considered “regenerative” farming today. So, in 1988, they stopped using chemical inputs altogether.

Over the next several years, the Tudors raised a family on the farm, built a successful cow/calf operation, and ran a rewarding agritourism business—all while also hosting an on-site, farm education program. Weatherbury offered farm vacation stays as a bed and breakfast for 25 years, from 1992 until 2017.

In large part, the Tudors have kept the farm economically viable over the years because of their unique proclivity to adapt, evolve, and grow access to new niche markets.

This continuous innovation sets Weatherbury Farm apart and is



From Left: Nigel, Nancy, and Dale Tudor exhibit flours in the mill room at Weatherbury Farm.

personified earnestly by their son, Nigel. His decision to move back to the farm opened the door for their expansion into grass-fed beef in 2007.

An architectural blacksmith, not only does Nigel employ his metalworking skills to repair the farm's machinery, but he has also devoted himself to diversifying Weatherbury's small-scale processing capacity. With help from a SARE grant, Nigel designed and built both a compost turner and a spelt dehuller, also used for emmer, einkorn, and other hulled wheats.

The Tudors began to grow their own grains as their consumer market for grass-fed beef flourished and the on-farm demand for more hay and bedding increased (resulting from keeping calves on the farm for an extra year). Their grain outputs quickly grew as the local distillery

market took off and, again, after they purchased their own flour mill in 2014.

Today, Weatherbury is a highly successful, vertically integrated, 225-acre farm. At home, they keep the majority of their 102 acres in rotating pasture—food for their grass-fed cows, lambs, and certified organic laying hens. The Tudors additionally manage four satellite farms, where they grow grains—five winter varieties and five spring-planted.

The Tudors sell certified organic grain wholesale. But it's not always easy to compete with the efficiencies of larger organic grain farmers. This distinction has inspired the Tudors to focus on diversifying their value-added products.

Larger farms are typically found in less contoured areas or more arid regions, where one contiguous field may surpass the size of the Tudors' whole farm.

But the main challenge at Weatherbury is precipitation. In particular, the farm fields are sloped with heavy, silt loam, prone to compaction when wet. This agricultural landscape limits both the size of the equipment that can be used and the number of days they can get into the field to work.

Last year, the Tudors milled nearly 35,000 pounds of organic flour for their direct-to-consumer market. More than a dozen types of flour are custom ground on the farm. And what isn't sold on-farm, Weatherbury markets to individuals and restaurants through a cooperative CSA, Penn's Corner Farm Alliance, as well as distributes to bakeries, markets, and grocers with the help of Three Rivers Grown.

It hasn't been simple, but creativity has enabled the Tudors to weather the changes in the grain market. Within the last five years, they have witnessed, first-hand, how fraudulent organic grain imports have suppressed the market and begun to limit what price ethical farmers can get from some buyers.

For example, distilleries are fairly price-sensitive, as Nigel notes, and if they can source cheaper organic grain elsewhere, they will. This limits the price the Tudors can charge for their product.

Nigel remembers the every-other-day calls from the grain brokers looking to buy wholesale. They slowed around 2014 or 2015, eventually stopping altogether. This is the litmus Nigel uses for measuring the impact of grain import fraud on domestic, organic farmers. Now, once a month, they get a call.



Planting oats in one of Weatherbury Farm's fields.

Demand for organic grain has grown in recent years and the volumes of grains being imported are copious. If the problem of fraud had been fixed by regulators and/or at the policy level, the resulting restrictions in the market would surely have impacted domestic brokers, who would be clamoring to buy up as much domestic grain as possible.

"That's the conundrum," says Nigel. "You create a successful niche market and, eventually, the bigger operators or supermarkets come along and look for a way to tap into the market that you've created." In the absence of enforcement by the USDA, fickle markets drive domestic farmers toward value-added production.

Grass-fed beef is the most recent example of emerging market fluctuation. Weatherbury Farm is currently shrinking their cattle operation in response to a saturation of the market by grass-fed beef imports, mostly from Australia and Ireland, as well as an increased supply by other farmers in the area.

The Tudors are looking forward to finding their new niche and evolving. They are currently learning to integrate a buckwheat huller into the production line; they are dialing in their skills on the extruder, while experimenting with homemade pasta recipes using eggs from their organic hens; and, finally, they are looking to add a wood-fired oven on the farm in the next year or so.

Pittsburgh eaters should keep an eye out for Weatherbury Farm's bread CSA, yet another example of the Tudors' uniquely innovative approach. Their efforts will result in one of the first grain-to-bread (or seed-to-loaf) on-farm bakeries in the country.

If you are not lucky enough to live in the greater Pittsburgh area, don't worry—you can order any of Weatherbury's amazing, stone ground, organic flours on their website.

What's more: you can scan the QR code on the bag to learn more about where and how your grains were grown using Weatherbury's new Grain Tracker program!

