

Nationwide demand for organic milk opens door for Oregon dairies

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Across the United States consumer demand for organically produced milk regularly exceeds supply â€” a shortage has created a financial incentive for dairy farmers to explore organic production in their operations.

Oregon is a nationwide leader in organic milk production, and more farmers are converting to organic production all the time, said Mike Gamroth, an Oregon State University Extension dairy specialist and researcher in the Department of Animal Sciences.

â€œDairy has seen unprecedented growth in the organic market, and its success has helped a lot of farmers stay in business,â€• said Gamroth, â€œIn Oregon, one of the few limiting factors on determining an organic dairyâ€™s profitability is its ability to grow its own forage.â€•

OSU researchers have developed numerous management guides to help farmers manage their dairies for increased feed production and more productive grazing, resulting in increased milk production, said Gamroth.

Management techniques designed to extend the grazing season are one way farmers can increase the availability of feed for their animals, said Gamroth. Using manure as a nitrogen-rich fertilizer in late winter and early spring can increase early plant growth and decrease cost to farmers.

As of last year, there were more than 65 farms in Oregon producing and selling organic cow and goat milk, an increase of almost 50 percent since 2002. The majority of these farms are relatively small operations, said Gamroth, who added that these farms may stand to benefit more from organic production than larger dairies because of the smaller profit margin associated with them.

For a dairy to be certified organic it must meet guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Certification requires that cows not be treated with bovine growth hormone, a hormone that stimulates milk production; cows not be treated with antibiotics; cows must have access to pasture; and feed, including grass and grain, must be grown without the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

The requirements sound cut-and-dried, but there is a lot of confusion surrounding organic certification, Gamroth said, and farmers need to be prepared to make changes in how they operate their farms to be certified. To help farmers undergoing the process he is working with researchers in OSUâ€™s College of Agricultural Sciences and eXtension, a nationwide network of land grant university extension services, to develop a tiered information center focusing on organic certification.

“We want to help make the transition as smooth as possible and keep dairies productive and profitable in Oregon,” Gamroth said. “A large part of ensuring success is making sure farmers have the information they need when they need it. We’re able to take field research and put it on the web where people across the state can access it whenever it’s convenient.”

On average, farmers receive about 21 cents per pound for organic milk compared to about 14 cents per pound for conventional milk. The price for organic milk has remained relatively stable compared to the market fluctuations of regular milk, said Gamroth.

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