

What a Farm Can Teach: The UNH Organic Dairy

Thursday, March 8, 2012

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LISTEN UP! AT THE UNH DAIRY RESEARCH FARM, STUDENTS PUT WHAT THEY LEARN TO WORK, PRONTO. HERE SUPERINTENDENT TRENT SCHRIEFER MAKES A FEW KEY POINTS.

New course teaches the latest in organic farming techniques and research.

“Walk around the farm. Dream. Think about what you would do if this were your farm.” That’s what Trent Schriefer, superintendent of the UNH Organic Dairy Research Farm since 2009, encouraged his eight students to do last fall. “Explore. Let yourself imagine it.”



JERSEY HEIFERS, LIKE ALL THE COWS AT THE ORGANIC DAIRY RESEARCH FARM, LIVE OUTSIDE WITH ACCESS TO SHELTER YEAR ROUND.

The organic dairy farm is a place that gets you dreaming. There’s a gentle roll to the 50 acres of pasture, woodlands comprise 120 acres, and another 140 acres are in crops. For about a mile, the Lamprey River borders the farm. The Jersey cows are almost deer like and the milking herd of 45 is sizeable. If you can’t think of what to do, you at least want to feed a cow.

By second semester, students in the yearlong course known as TEAM-Organic have, indeed, dreamed up some ideas. And they’re putting some of them into action with business and marketing plans that will be realized before the end of the semester.



WEATHER PERMITTING, EVEN CLASSES ARE HELD OUTSIDE.

TEAM-Organic stands for Team Experience in Agro-ecosystem Management and the organic—well, that’s fundamental at the dairy. The course is part of the new major,

Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems (SAFS). As Schriefer emphasizes, it takes teamwork and thoughtful planning to manage an organic dairy farm as a closed system—the only imported items here are grain and wood shavings for bedding. Additionally, the students are also well aware of and help support the many significant research projects underway at the farm, which is part of the New Hampshire Agricultural Experiment Station and College of Life Sciences and Agriculture. For example a study on cow nutrition examines how flax seed added to forage might increase omega-3s in milk; another looks at how nutrition might also reduce the amount of methane produced by cows, a major greenhouse gas; and a study monitors groundwater quality.

Learning curve

Of the eight students, only one has had prior farm experience, but all eight have risen to the challenge.



GÉRALDINE WALKER, A DUAL MAJOR IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS AND ECOGASTRONOMY, HELPS FEED COWS IN THE NUTRITION STUDY.

First of all, they learned how to work around cows and do chores basic to an organic dairy farm. Then, as part of the routine, they've raised seven steers for beef—scheduling care for them through midterms, Thanksgiving, the holidays, and all sorts of erratic weather. This spring, they plan to market their grass-fed beef to the UNH community (they are not allowed to compete with local producers).

As the students present their business plan to market the beef, Géraldine Walker, a dual major in SAFS and ecogastronomy, declares, "I'm going to stand up and make announcements in all of my classes."

Everyone nods. Word-of-mouth marketing for small farmers with this kind of product makes absolute sense. One of their big challenges will be to convince buyers who are used to buying off the shelf to buy "gate to plate."

“What about creating an information packet with some recipes for grass-fed beef?” Schriefer suggests. “Maybe a wine list?”

They will also do sales calls to various dining halls, advertise, and distribute flyers.

Diversify

While steer beef does provide much-needed extra cash to dairy farmers, in order to keep their balance sheets in the black, most need to raise other animals and crops throughout the year. It’s a nimble sensibility that Schriefer always strives to instill and one he’s advocated during a long and varied career as a 4-H extension specialist for N.H. Cooperative Extension, farming consultant in South Africa, senior researcher technologist at Penn State, Farmers Home Administration contractor, and as a farmer himself for 10 years.

The students have developed business plans for two other projects. “We discussed raising vegetables and honeybees, but the timing wasn’t right,” says Luke Perry, an environmental conservation major and UNH Organic Gardening Club member. “So we settled on pigs and meat chickens.”

The chickens, day-old Cornish Cross chicks, are due to arrive in a week or so. The students will set up heat lamps and a feeding schedule. Once the birds are big enough, they’ll get the chicken tractor into gear. The tractor will transport a chicken house around the property so that the birds will be free-range, safe with portable fencing, and able to fertilize the fields.

“We surveyed six farms at the Seacoast Farmers Market. All told in 2011, they sold 5,100 chickens for an estimated total of \$26,900. Prices ranged from \$3.89 to \$6 a pound. Next year those farms hope to sell 6,100 or more,” says Emily Cooper, a dual major in wildlife ecology and ecogastronomy major. In short, the market for organic and naturally raised chicken is robust.

Additionally, the students plan to raise two Hampshire Duroc crossed pigs, growing them from about 80 pounds to market weight at 240 pounds.



(L TO R) EMILY COOPER, A DUAL MAJOR IN WILDLIFE ECOLOGY AND ECOGASTRONOMY, FEEDS THE JERSEY STEERS ALONG WITH LISA ILSLEY, A DAIRY MANAGEMENT MAJOR. With livestock generating about \$21 million in the state according to the N.H. Department of Agriculture—these ventures are lucrative for a small farmer.

A way of thinking

Not all of these students plan to become farmers. For many, it's a way to gain a foothold in the new niche markets either as chefs, nutritionists, or marketers. Others are interested in research. As Cooper, who will graduate in just another year, notes, "The average age of a farmer in New Hampshire today is 55. But now so many young people are getting into farming. It's really an exciting time."

Lisa Ilsley, a dairy management major, plans to work full-time on her family's fourth-generation farm after graduating in May. "I love how everything connects here—the cycle of manure, crops, and grazing methods," Ilsley says.

Recently she bought 8 registered Holsteins to add to her family's milking herd of 18. This summer she plans to expand sales to include other nearby farmer's markets.

She says, "This course has helped broaden my perspectives. We all have different interests, and we've learned a lot from each other."

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Originally published by:
UNH Today

Written by [Carrie Sherman](#), Editorial and Creative Services. Photos by [Perry Smith](#), UNH Photographic Services.



University of New Hampshire

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