

Dairy Cattle Symposium

Thursday November 15, 2007

Hotel Universel Best Western, Drummondville



My Choice is Organic

Serge LECLERC

Organic farmer (milk, grain crops)

Ferme Serjean, inc.

Saint-Édouard-de-Lobtbinière

Presentation prepared with the collaboration of:

Sonia GOSSELIN, d.t.a., extension agent, Valacta



Centre de référence en agriculture
et agroalimentaire du Québec

Dairy Cattle Committee

My Choice is Organic

Background

The Ferme Serjean is located in Saint-Édouard-de-Lotbinière. We are the sixth generation of farmers on this farm, which was purchased by my father in 1980. The farm I acquired was in sound financial health.

Initially, there were 80 hectares of land and 35 dairy cattle. Today, the farm has 181 hectares of cultivated land (we purchased the land of 3 neighbours) and 65 cows, for a total of 105 heads of cattle. We grow our own forages, mixed grains, dry and/or silage corn and soybean.

Aside from myself, my daughter Marie-Andrée also works on the farm, as well as Alain Daigle, a long-time (20 years) employee. Alain is more than just an employee: He is a reliable partner who has always supported me in my work and in practising organic agriculture. It is important, during the transition phase to organic management, that everyone working on the farm be supportive and comfortable with the transition.

A look at our farm in numbers

Dairy production (kg)	8,965
Fat (%)	3.80
Protein (%)	3.13
Somatic cell count	132,000
Linear score	2.4
Calving interval (days)	400
Dry period (days)	69
Average age of the herd	4 years, 7 months
Number of cows	63
Percentage in 3 rd lactation and higher	49.7
Replacement rate (%)	32
Herd weight (kg)	639
Heifer weight (kg)	621
Protein/fat ratio	0.83
Forage milk (kg)	3,033

Motivations for changing to organic

My project began in 1990. At the time, my management advisor had taken an introductory course in organic agriculture and his subsequent comments stirred up my interest. I decided to take this course myself. The class consisted of approximately 15 milk producers from my region.

Initially, we were somewhat sceptical and we all questioned the teacher's theories. Ultimately, however, we were astounded and utterly convinced! Through my discussions with other farmers in the group, I realized that the trend towards healthy eating and organic food was not a passing fad and held some potential for the development of the agricultural sector. We decided that we would grow organic food to supply the domestic market.

Our group started a series of courses that lasted over three winter seasons. We attended classes to learn how to grow our crops under organic management. The group environment was instrumental in the learning process as it created a sense of security for me and allowed me to talk to other farmers that were in the same situation.

In those days, farmers who chose to go the organic way usually were left to themselves. Input suppliers, magazines, information seminars, none of these resources could meet our new needs or answer our new questions. We had to turn to other sources of information.

Today, however, there are more resources and services to support us: the CDA Club agroenvironnemental, the Lait Bio Club, the Groupe conseil en gestion, to name a few, along with all the suppliers who are adapting their products more and more to our specific needs.

To make the transition to organic agriculture, I was prepared to change my work methods, but unwilling to accept a drop in revenues. A smaller milk production was not a problem for me if my bottom line was unchanged. The follow-up provided by the Groupe conseil en gestion was of considerable help to me because they helped me distinguish between perceptions and the actual economic situation of the farm during the transition period and afterwards, when organic production started.

Challenges of transition

We initiated the transition process of the fields in 1991 and gained organic certification in 1996.

Most of the fundamental principles that I had learned in school had to be revisited. The most difficult transition for me was learning to do without chemical fertilizers. I was afraid this would produce very small yields, that nothing would ever grow in my fields. So I gradually reduced the doses of chemical fertilizers over a period of 3 years and, lo and behold, my crops are still growing!

Before initiating the transition, manure was considered a type of waste that had to be disposed of. Now, it is a valuable source of fertilisation.

On the other hand, eliminating pesticides and herbicides was not something that frightened me. In the very first year, I got rid of these inputs without producing any major detrimental effect on my crops. We replaced herbicides by weeding, different soil and seedling preparation, crop rotations, fallow, green manures, etc.

Spring sowing and weed control is stressful and a lot of work. It is our busiest period of the year. When I look at my conventional neighbours' fields, once they are done with sowing, most of the work is done, whereas I have to monitor my fields and remove weeds at strategic periods. I need to stay focused and in good shape!

Each year, weeds are a challenge, but year after year, we manage to obtain acceptable yields that compare with those of other farms in our region. I have learned to live with weeds and I don't try to eliminate them completely.

The most challenging crop is corn. It is very sensitive to climate conditions, to fertilization, to soil preparation and weeding. To obtain adequate yields, we have to pamper it and be very thorough. Some years are not good for growing organic corn in our region. But other regions in Quebec do much better with organic corn.

The herd and their milk were certified organic in 2001. With regards to the herd, my biggest concern was with health care. How were we going to treat sick cows while respecting organic principles? My daughter started working on the farm around that time and took over alternative health care with the help of our veterinarian. Luckily for me, my vet was very open to new methods and proved to be a great collaborator. The fundamental feeding and management principles in organic milk production are such that cows usually stay in good health and are less prone to disease.

In 2000, we joined the Lait Bio Club. They helped us rethink the herd's diet using feed produced by the farm while respecting the animals' nutritional needs and ensuring they receive healthy feed. The Club also helped us create a network with other organic milk producers to exchange information. Since 2003, the Club is affiliated to the Valacta advisory services, so we benefit from two services from the same person.

Disease prevention is a priority. Often times, a cow's health condition is affected by husbandry, nutrition and comfort. Feeding and breeding were not a problem in my case. It was quite easy for us to abide by organic specifications in this area.

Herd nutrition

Summer: Group 1

First cut dry hay:	5 kg
Pasture.....	50 to 60 kg
Corn silage.....	7 kg
Mixed grains (oats, wheat, peas)....	3.9 kg
Dry corn	3.9 kg
Roasted soybean	0.5 kg
Minerals	0.420 kg

Winter: Group 1

Dry hay:	5 kg
Haylage.....	27 kg
Corn silage.....	7 kg
Mixed grains	3.4 kg
Dry corn	1.7 kg
Rye.....	2 kg
Roasted soybean	1.5 kg
Minerals	400 g

Impact on the farm

Organic agriculture is not a religion to me. My priority was ensuring the financial success of my business. I have achieved more than I expected as my farm is profitable and I am comfortable with this type of production.

The future

For me, the future is the transfer of my farm. My son Simon, who is a fantastic collaborator and a believer in organic agriculture, will be taking over. The transition will be easy. For now, Simon is working on another organic dairy farm, and Marie-Andrée and her husband are responsible for managing the herd on our farm. They will be taking over her husband's family dairy farm in a few years.

Conclusion

To gain respect from others in our capacity of organic farmers, we must respect other farmers around us. I too was once a “conventional” farmer. There is no doubt in my mind that organic farming was the right choice for me, but I also respect the choice of others. I am quite comfortable with my agricultural business and I have good relations with my neighbours and community.

This report was originally published in French by CRAAQ. The Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada (OACC) gratefully acknowledges CRAAQ for permission to publish the report in English.

Le présent rapport a été publié à l'origine en français par CRAAQ ([“Biologique, c'est mon choix”](#)). Le Centre d'agriculture biologique du Canada (CABC) remercie CRAAQ de lui avoir accordé la permission de publier ce rapport en anglais.