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## Organic dairies test organic feed supply

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YAKIMA, Wash. --

It comes as no surprise to anyone that the number of organic farms is booming to meet consumer demand for healthy food. In Washington, a state known more for its apples than any other crop, there are 45 organic dairies. Five years ago, there were just two.

The challenge has been feeding all of those cows.

Acreage of organic forage, such as hay and alfalfa, has grown 40 percent in the past two years, yet isn't keeping pace with demand. In particular, high-protein crops like soybeans that are necessary feed for dairy cows are in short supply in some regions, forcing some companies to import them from as far away as China.

Given the recent problems with food and ingredient imports from China, in which a slew of products have been turned away by U.S. inspectors amid claims they are tainted, one might wonder if organic feed is actually organic.

"That's a legitimate concern. We do have organic standards, which apply even to producers overseas if they want certification," said Bill Freese, the Center for Food Safety's science policy analyst in Washington D.C. "But I think the oversight of organic standards to be sure there's compliance is generally better in the United States than overseas."

Organic products are grown without pesticides, fertilizer, hormones or antibiotics. They make up only a small slice, about 3 percent, of the nation's food market, but increasing demand is pushing more farmers to make the switch in hopes of higher returns.

Dairy farmers are no exception. Demand for consumer organic dairy products has grown by more than 20 percent each year, a trend that is expected to continue at least in the near term.

The federal government also encouraged conventional dairy farmers to convert to organic operations by easing organic certification to reduce feed costs. Under a federal rule, the farmers could feed their cows 20 percent conventional feed, which is less expensive, in the first nine months of operation. However, the rule expires June 9, and dairies across the country made the switch to beat the clock.

"So many people came on board at once, and the system didn't know they were all going to go on board," said Lynn Clarkson, board member of the national Organic Trade Association and president of Clarkson Grain Co. in Cerro Gordo, Ill. "You have to start with feed a year ahead of time or you're not going to have it."

Clarkson estimated that demand for organic feed is growing 20 percent each year, while U.S. production of organic row crops, such as corn and other feed, is growing only by as much as 4 percent.

Add in the "ethanol tsunami" that is encouraging more farmers to grow corn for biofuel rather than feed, he said, and the shortage could continue for organic growers "for a long time."

Shannon Andrews, a Portland, Ore., feed ingredient trader for San Francisco-based agricultural commodities distributor Wilbur-Ellis Co., said she, too, can't meet demand.

"I have customers that are looking for six railcars a month of corn, and I can't get that quantity coming from anywhere in the U.S.," she said, adding that the harder-to-find, high-protein feed is coming from China and other countries because "it's where you can get it."

Imports from China have come under increasing scrutiny amid a series of scandals concerning tainted or unsafe food, medicines and other Chinese exports. Products that have been banned or turned away by U.S. inspectors include wheat gluten tainted with the chemical melamine that has been blamed for dog and cat deaths in North America, and monkfish that turned out to be toxic pufferfish.

Soybeans are among the highest protein crop for feed when ground into soymeal. The United States is the world's largest producer of soybeans. China is fourth, but is a net importer as well, much of it coming from the U.S. in the form of genetically-modified soybeans.

Wilbur-Ellis in Portland imports about 120 tons of organic soymeal from China each month, or roughly enough to feed 2,000 cows. But Andrews stressed the feed is tested and certified organic.

"Every single load that we do is tested up to FDA regulations. Every single container that comes in is tested," she said. "We don't have any worries on that."

Others raise questions about the viability of such tests when so many other unsafe products from China have slipped into the country.

"I think the concerns should be for real. You have to wonder what organic means in China. It's certified, but how credible is the process there?" asked David Granatstein, Washington State University sustainable agriculture specialist.

In the Northwest, shipping feed from the Pacific Rim can cost about the same as hauling it by freight from the Midwest.

Jay Gordon, a dairy farmer and executive director of the Washington Dairy Federation, believes more feed crops need to be planted to meet local demand. He grows sunflower, canola, and safflower on 700 acres in western Washington's Chehalis Valley to feed his 104 organic cows.

The price for conventional canola meal runs between \$150 and \$170 per ton, while organic prices can reach \$480 per ton. Crop farmers should recognize the potential in organics, he said.

"There's a lot of dairies that have decided they would not be in the business if not for organic," Gordon said. "This is a nice niche that's fit well for dairy farming. We just have to go talk to our crop farmers."

Agriculture officials in Washington state have already taken notice. State officials held two seminars in the spring to encourage more farmers to become certified as organic growers, including Jim Arvidson, a hay grower in Sunnyside, Wash.

"You lose some production because of the lack of ability to use commercial fertilizer or maintain weeds the way I normally would," Arvidson said. But at the same time, he said, "There's probably a 25 percent, maybe 30 percent increase for the organic feed. It's good."



Jackie Johnston / AP Photo

Jim Arvidson explains that he sees a lot more weeds like these on his hay farm because of his organic growing methods in Sunnyside, Wash., Tuesday, June 5, 2007. It comes as no surprise to anyone that the number of organic farms is booming to meet consumer demand for healthy food. In Washington, a state known more for its apples than any other crop, there are 45 organic dairies.



John Froschauer / AP Photo

Jay Gordon, an organic dairy farmer and executive director of the Washington Dairy Federation, poses for a photo before feeding cows on his farm in western Washington's Chehalis Valley near Elma, Wash., Tuesday, June 5, 2007. Gordon believes more feed crops need to be planted to meet local demand among organic farms. He also grows corn, sunflower, canola, and safflower to feed his dairy cows.



John Froschauer / AP Photo

Cows graze on Jay Gordon's organic farm in western Washington's Chehalis Valley near Elma, Wash., Tuesday, June 5, 2007. Gordon, executive director of the Washington Dairy Federation, believes more feed crops need to be planted to meet local demand among organic farms. The fields behind the cattle are planted with corn, sunflower, canola, and safflower to feed his dairy cows.

- <http://www.wilbur-ellisfeed.com/>
- <http://www.ota.com>
- <http://www.wadairyfederation.org/>
- <http://www.clarksongrain.com/>