

A Natural Niche



Greg and Aimee Gould gather cattle on their Montana ranch. Their main goal is to raise and market organic beef with improved genetics, not chemicals.

Consumer, environmental and economic forces have opened the door of opportunity for producers of organic beef. Still, at least two obstacles block their way — conventional thinking opponents and the lack of federal government labeling standards.

BY JERILYN JOHNSON

There's a revolution going on today in the minds of cattle producers. A growing number realize that if they want to remain in the cattle business they have to become better managers of their natural resources, and better understand and meet consumer demand.

Organic beef and crop production is one area of interest that has intensified as a result of a number of interacting forces. Consumer demand for healthy food products, the worldwide loss of biological diversity, rising agriculture in-

puts costs, dependence on fossil fuels, and the continued strength of the environmental movement has spurred interest in a more sustainable and diversified agriculture. Economic forces have also attracted innovators and entrepreneurs who see potential in raising and marketing unconventional ag products such as organic beef.

Greg and Aimee Hachigain-Gould embrace an alternative philosophy of agriculture which includes organic Angus beef production. The Goulds manage 7 Bar Heart near Ulm, Mont., a ranch that has been 100 percent organic certified by the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA) for all phases of plant and livestock production.

"Organic in this context," explains Greg Gould, "means that no synthetic inputs may be used on or in any of the fields, foods, feeds or forages under stewardship of our ranch."

The Goulds must follow a rigid set of guidelines set forth by OCIA. Their bible is the OCIA handbook, which is the size of a small novel. They maintain an extensive paper audit trail of all products and field histories from conception/planting to consumption, and are required to be inspected on a yearly basis by an independent inspector.

To produce organic beef, the Goulds have to graze their cattle on certified organic pastures. These pastures can have no application of synthetic fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides for at least three years prior to harvest. Likewise, any feeds or forage that the cattle consume must have been raised on ground free of synthetic inputs for at least three years prior to harvest.

A normal herd health program is maintained at 7 Bar Heart Ranch. Cattle may receive vaccinations to promote their natural immune system. Vitamin and mineral supple-

ments are also permitted. Not allowed, however, are antibiotic and synthetic growth promotants. If an animal receives any antibiotic, whether to treat a specific disease or at subtherapeutic levels as a feed additive, it cannot be organic certified.

Organic crop production is ahead of organic beef production when it comes to labeling standards and national marketing avenues. "We are eagerly awaiting the National Organic Standards for meats," the Goulds say, "Presently, we market certified organic beef under a state approved label, but cannot use the word 'organic' on the label. That would be in violation of federal statute as USDA standards for organic meats do not exist at this time."

They point out that many plant derived foodstuffs already have federal standards in place and can be labeled organic, which places beef producers at a distinct disadvantage.

"This disparity has made it all but impossible for the seven certified organic Montana ranches involved with us in this marketing endeavor to find out-of-state markets for our branded beef product," Aimee says.

The Circle of Life

For the 7 Bar Heart Ranch, organic food production is simply part of the larger system of sustainable agriculture. After years of study and lengthy discussion with other ranchers and experts who follow this practice, the Goulds have made it their life's work.

The Goulds faithfully practice and have been recognized for sound environmental stewardship. They have come to understand that grass, not cattle, is the raw material of their beef operation, and that their real business is converting this sunlight-powered resource into marketable pounds of meat and by-products.

What is Sustainable Agriculture?

The term sustainable agriculture was introduced in the early 1980s and is slowly but surely gaining recognition and respect in the U.S. agriculture industry. Other common terms for this concept are: alternative, low-input, regenerative and organic agriculture.

This concept is really not new to our country. Native American Indians, many early day pioneers and even President Thomas Jefferson practiced sustainable agriculture in one form or another. The industrial and farming revolutions of this past century, U.S. farm bill legislation, and farmers' noble call to "feed the world" changed that way of thinking. The result is dominance of large, commodity-based, single crop operations and factory farm-style livestock operations in today's agriculture industry.

Sustainable agriculture is used to convey the concept of a system of agriculture that is ecologically, economically and socially viable. It represents the end-goal of developing a food production system that:

- Yields plentiful, affordable, high-quality food and other ag products.
- Does not deplete or damage natural resources, such as soil, water, wildlife, fossil fuels or the germ-plasm base.
- Promotes the health of the environment.
- Provides a good livelihood for farmers/ranchers.
- Depends on energy from the sun and on natural biological processes for fertility and pest management.
- Can last indefinitely.

Source: ATTRA



Healthy soil is required for healthy forage and healthy cattle, says Greg Gould.

Tom Elliott of N-Bar Land & Cattle Co., Grass Range, Mont., describes it as taking a holistic approach.

"Sustainable agriculture is a gradual process," Elliott says. "You don't just wake up one morning and say you're going to do it. It takes careful planning and understanding of all aspects of your ranching operation. Most of all, it takes knowledge of your soil, plants, livestock and natural re-

sources and how they interact with each other."

Elliott believes sustainable agriculture can also help you control your own destiny. "It's a way of declaring independence from purchased inputs and integrated markets, and at the same time, build trust and a sense of community with other ranchers who share this belief. That sense of community and re-connection

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to your neighbors and the land are an important part of agriculture's culture that has been neglected in recent times."

Sustainable beef production methods focus on maximizing the use of forage while reducing the use of grain feed. Management options other than the feedlot include finishing beef on forage. To maintain profitability, purchased inputs, particularly feedstuffs, are reduced in a grass-based operation.

Imagine how things would change if petroleum were no longer available at its present low price. Sustainable agriculture experts point out that since fertilizers and pesticides are petroleum-based, the price of feed grain would increase, along with the price of fuel for farm machinery.

Organic ranchers like the Goulds believe there are even more important benefits to eliminating dependence on non-renewable resources such as petroleum and its petrochemical by-products.

"By using crop rotations, green manure techniques, extensive cover crops, and completely eliminating synthetic inputs, we reduce contamination of the soil and groundwater. The half-life of some agricultural chemicals is as long as 250 years — a long time to have to worry about their effects on us and our descendants," Aimee says.

Going Against the Grain

Perhaps the toughest challenge organic beef producers face is that of producing an unconventional product in a conventional industry.

Most organic beef producers say they are only trying to follow advice from industry leaders to produce a beef product based on consumer demand.

"We need every niche market we can get," says Jim Munsch, an Angus breeder who raises organic beef on his Wisconsin farm. "If there are people who want and think they need beef raised without adding growth hormones or small doses of antibiotics, why don't we raise beef without these practices and charge more for it?"

"On a much larger scale, this logic should be used to give us access to the European Union (EU) What happens if Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico or Canada introduces a hormone-free certification program to satisfy the EU customer?" he asks.

Ibm Elliott of N-Bar Land & Cattle Co. raises Angus cattle for both regular and organic beef markets. Elliott has partnered with the Goulds in their branded or-

ganic beef marketing program and says it's an outgrowth of N-Bar's goal to produce a high quality, wholesome product.

"Not to imply that regular beef is not safe," Elliott adds, "I just feel our marketing cooperative can serve a niche market. We're in the business to provide a group of highly selective consumers what they want — a natural, hormone-free beef product."

Other producers, like Aimee, personally question the safety of beef which is raised with growth promotants and antibiotics and exposed to chemical residues.

An orthopaedic surgeon and sports medicine specialist as well as a rancher, Aimee says she has studied the effects of synthetic steroids on human physiology. She knows that proponents of synthetic growth promotants often refer to a USDA study which showed only a difference of 0.3 nanograms (billionth of a gram) of hormones in a given amount of implanted vs. non-implanted beef

"This was deemed insignificant and not harmful to humans by USDA and other beef scientists," Aimee says. "Yet, that 0.3 billionths of a gram is capable of adding 25 to 50 pounds of muscle to a calf by weaning. Pretty potent stuff.

"If 0.3 nanograms has that effect on a 1,200-pound steer, what will it do to a 180-pound man or your growing 30-pound toddler?" she asks.

Aimee says similar questions can be raised about antibiotic, pesticide, herbicide and fertilizer residues in our food and water. "These are the kinds of questions and concerns raised by our organic beef customers. They are demanding a choice and are not taking any chances with their health," she says.

Natural Selection

The Goulds have set their sights on producing more pounds of beef genetically, rather than chemically. As Angus breeders, they say they can take advantage of the most extensive records and statistics of any beef breed organization to select for pounds of beef and carcass quality.

At 7 Bar Heart last fall, heifer calves weaned at 654 pounds and bull calves weaned just shy of 700 pounds, without creep feed. The Goulds say this was made possible by dam selection through the Angus Herd Improvement **Records** program and using top Angus bulls, selected by their expected progeny differences. Cows are expected to wean 60 percent of their weight. No calves are castrated until after weaning, when initial seedstock selections are made. The steers then go into a feedlot until they reach marketable weight. Because they retain ownership of



ATTRA Offers Resources To Sustainable Ag

ATTRA, which stands for Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas, is a national sustainable agriculture information service for farmers and ranchers. Headquartered at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, it is funded by the Department of Interior and managed by the National Center for Appropriate Technology. Its staff includes technical specialists in horticulture, agronomy, livestock production, agriculture and wildlife management, as well as information specialists.

ATTRA also offers technical assistance and free information to Extension agents, agricultural support groups, researchers, educators and agribusiness.

If you have a specific question or topic, the ATTRA staff will research, summarize findings in writing, and compile supporting literature into a complete report which is mailed back to you.

In addition to providing customized research, specialists at ATTRA occasionally offer workshops and field days. A "Profitability on Pasture" workshop was held last month in Fayetteville, Ark., for livestock producers interested in learning more about grazing systems, soil science and environmental stewardship.

ATTRA offers three types of standard materials which are often updated. They cover a wide range of agriculture enterprises, including sustainable livestock production, fruit and nut crops, vegetable crops, alternative field crops, farming systems, marketing and soils.

1. Information Package — Contains a 5- to 20-page topic review written by ATTRA specialists and may also include enclosures, bibliographies and supply sources.
2. Current Topics in Sustainable Agriculture.
3. Resource Lists — Designed to make networking easier for individuals, organizations and companies interested in sustainable agriculture.

To order these materials, call ATTRA's toll-free number 1-800-346-9140.

their steers, carcass data is obtained directly from the packer.

"I think we have shown, through production records and customer satisfaction, there is a lot more to this organic stuff," Aimee says.

