

## Chapter: The Big Picture

Google Earth is a popular internet tool used to get a digital photographic view of any location on Earth. Most users begin far above the planet with a satellite view and then zoom in to investigate a particular address. One can enjoy in minute detail photographs that can include individual animals in a field or windrows of hay. While it is fun to get a close-up view of a residence or farm using this tool, it is possible to lose the forest for the trees, or in this case, the farm for the cows.

To get the big picture of organic dairy farming, let's begin by stepping back and zooming out from the typical organic dairy. When one does this and pauses about a half-mile above the Earth, what is most striking is the land. Geographically, it becomes readily obvious that organic dairying is mainly about pasture and grass.

Zooming in, it becomes apparent that organic dairying is more than land and pasture. Other major, integrated components include people, animals and crops. They are interrelated and inextricably entwined. Let's begin with the people who run the farm. There is a saying that "Everything happens through people." This is extremely true in running a farm of any type, including an organic one.

Assembling a team of dedicated, qualified and experienced people is the most important factor in the success of an organic dairying enterprise. Team members must understand and believe in organic farming and animal husbandry practices. There is no room for skeptics and phonies. The trust that the public invests in the purity and integrity of organic products mandates a high degree of commitment to the organic ethos.

Team members must be devoted to a constant learning process. Much of successful organic husbandry is based on trial-and-error, on techniques learned through word-of-mouth or online. Published manuals and guides on organic health and management are scarce, hence my motivation in authoring this book. Many of the strategies I share are the result of much blood, sweat and tears on the part of dedicated organic dairy teams with whom I have had the pleasure of working.

On a dairy farm, everything really happens through the cows. In a pasture-based production system, we optimally desire to work with cows that graze well. This may seem obvious, but using genetics and conformations that have been developed for show or TMR (Total Mixed Ration) or component fed situations on a grazing dairy is like putting a square peg into a round hole.

Grazing dairy cows need to walk, sometimes long distances, to harvest nutrients. It should be evident that her conformation must be favorable to efficient grazing; consequently, she must have sound feet and legs. It is essential that a cow be able to survive on the dairy long enough to reimburse the cost of raising her, to generate replacements and to produce an adequate return on investment. Her productive life must

be maximized. To accomplish this, she must breed back efficiently, resist mastitis and disease in general, and convert feed efficiently to ultimately produce fluid milk and components that are sold at a profit.

Let's look more closely at pasture. Current organic standards require that dairy animals have access to pasture for at least 120 days a season and consume at least 30 percent of their daily dry matter intake from grazing. While meeting this requirement can be daunting, accomplishing or exceeding this goal is the highest expression of the grazer's art.

To generate and harvest maximal nutrients in a grazing system, pastures must be of the proper amount and composition to meet the cow's needs. An example is a mix of species of grasses and legumes that is well managed through techniques such as rotational grazing, clipping, and routinely measuring nutrient quality by portable NIR (near infrared reflectance) or box methods.

Organic crops fed in addition to pasture pose a particular challenge to the producer. While pasture can be adequately managed without the use of herbicides with clipping and rotational grazing, controlling weeds in crops such as corn silage or barley may prove to be difficult and limited to cultivation and organic herbicide application. Weed content can be high as a consequence. Lots of organic feeds tend to also be smaller than conventionally grown crops. It's been my experience that organic crops and commodities tend to vary widely in quality and nutrient composition.

Successful organic dairy farming is as much an art as a science. In the following chapters, I intend to blend the ancient art of physical diagnosis with the modern science of diagnostic medicine, the art of animal observation with the science of quality control, and the art of nursing with the science of using medications backed by evidence.