



TAILS AND TASSELS

January 2009 Vol. 11, No. 1

Welcome back to the newsletter by and for members of New York Certified Organic, Inc..
We are a group of New York farmers formed to meet the educational needs of non-chemical crop and dairy farmers.



ANOTHER GREAT NYCO MEETING !

Tuesday January 20 10 AM – 3 PM
Jordan Hall Auditorium, NYS Ag Experiment Station, Geneva

**** COME ENJOY THE SECOND ****
**** NYCO MEETING OF THE 2008-9 SEASON. ****

SOIL HEALTH - ANIMAL HEALTH - HUMAN HEALTH **Jerry Brunetti**

In conjunction with the NY Organic Dairy Initiative, the meeting
is simultaneously held at 3 additional sites around
New York by video connection



- * As always, bring some good food to share with your friends for our *
* always bountiful and delicious dish-to-pass lunch. *
- * All are invited - you DON'T have to be a member of NYCO to attend! *
* We just want to see YOU! *

WHAT IS NEW YORK CERTIFIED ORGANIC (NYCO)?? -

New York Certified Organic is a group of organic grain and dairy farmers in New York that has been meeting together since 1994 for daytime meetings during the winter months. NYCO meetings focus on practical information and expertise on organic weed control, soil fertility management, pest control, crop production, dairy issues and grazing, alternative crops, marketing and pricing, machinery and grain storage. We are a group of farmers, led by farmers, with topics designed for and by farmers, with more time for open discussion than for 'expert presentations'. We are not associated with any certification agency, or other organization. There is no cost for attending the NYCO meetings. We just ask you to bring a dish of something good to share with everyone at our potluck lunch.

JERRY BRUNETTI works as a soil and crop consultant primarily for livestock farms and ranches, assisting these operations as they transition away from petrochemical inputs and adopt the practices necessary for organic certification. In addition, he works towards improving crop quality, livestock performance and health on certified organic farms. Jerry was an animal science major at North Carolina State University, prior to running a cow/calf operation in West Virginia. He was a marketing director, who also supervised milk quality at the National Farmers Organization in the Northeast for five years. In 1979, Jerry founded Agri-Dynamics with a vision of providing a line of holistic animal remedies for farm livestock, equine, and pets. After witnessing first-hand the devastating results of conventional, chemically dependent, grain-based rationed farming practices, he has embarked on a crusade to educate and consult for farmers who made the wise choice to transition to ecologically responsible and sustainable farming.

In 1999, Jerry was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and given as little as six months to live without aggressive chemotherapy. He instead chose a holistic path of nutrition, detoxification and immune modulation and applied his vast experience with farming and animal nutrition to his own health. The links between healthy soil, truly nutritious food, and profitable, sustainable farming are clearly evident in his personal and professional experiences and his skill for communicating this with people has won him extensive praise from holistic health professionals, sustainable farming organizations, and many farmers and consumers. As a result of healing himself, Jerry often speaks to audiences about the relationship of "Food as Medicine" and "Farm as Pharmacy", bridging natural and scientific understandings of plant and animal "ecosystems", such as digestion in soils (decomposition), foods (fermentation) and animal/human G.I. tract health; plant immunity originating from mineral derived pigments (e.g. carotene) called phytoalexins, which in turn contribute to the strength of animal/human immune systems.

Jerry is a regular speaker at numerous conferences throughout the United States, Australia, and Europe on topics that include soil fertility, animal nutrition and livestock health. His "connect-the-dots" systems approach is to assist farmers and ranchers to understand and then implement practices that demonstrate the health of people and communities is linked to healthy land, healthy animals and healthy humans. His DVDs include "The Keys to Herd Health", "Holistic Veterinary Care" with Dr. Hue Karreman and "Cancer, Nutrition and Healing".

Jerry serves on the Lower Mt. Bethel (PA) Township Environmental Advisory Council and is active in other community based organizations devoted to rebuilding local food systems and local democracy. In 2008, Jerry received the Leadership Award from the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) and the Eco Award from Acres USA.

To attend one of the sites please contact one of the following:

- **Jordan Hall, Geneva Experiment Station**, North Street, Geneva, NY. No need to sign up, but please bring dish for the potluck after the presentations and stay for the NYCO meeting afterwards.
- **SUNY Morrisville campus, Presidents Room in Charleston Hall**. Contact Van Bartlett 315-481-8231 or Karen Basse 315-684-3001.
- **St. Lawrence Co, CCE office, Canton**, contact Stephen Canner, 315-379-9192 x233
- **Mt Morris, CCE office**. contact Nancy Glazier, 315-536-5123.

FUTURE UPCOMING 2009 NYCO MEETINGS WILL BE -

February 10, Tuesday - Financial Risk Management in Challenging Times. Representatives from FSA, Farm Credit, Crop Insurance, and local private banks to discuss financial planning, crop insurance and FSA programs to talk about risk management in 2009. Farmers are encouraged to share their own risk management strategies.

March 17, Tuesday - Farm Energy Conservation and Alternative Sources including Biofuels and Oil Seed Crops. Also covered this meeting will be strategies and equipment for effective organic weed control.



RISK MANAGEMENT IN CHALLENGING TIMES - Part 2

With the arrival of 2009, dire economic predictions are everywhere. In the organic community, it seems like we're all asking "will this recession change the buying habits of our customers – and if it does, how will that affect me? "

Pro-active risk management and planning have never been more important. In the December issue, we described a generous grab-bag of risk management strategies – from crop rotation, equipment choices, and input purchases, to record keeping, financial and employee management. This month, we're not feeling quite as creative or eloquent. So we turn to a favorite resource for a little inspiration.

In our opinion, one of the more varied and interesting books we own is called "The Encyclopedia of Country Living" by Carla Emery (Sasquatch Books, 2003). This book primarily covers the growing and preserving of vegetables/fruits and grains, and the raising and butchering of animals, but there is plenty of other information on many different topics relating to country living and sustainability. While much of this is geared to the smaller-scale homesteading farm, this is still a highly useful resource. The "Principles for Making Profit on the Farm" provide an interesting template for a daily attitude of risk assessment/management. Now we've adapted and expanded them to more typical circumstances and farm types found in our NYCO group.

1. When starting a new farm or expanding an existing one, as much as possible, save your money until you have enough to buy something worth having. Borrowing may be unavoidable, but use debt carefully, don't be tempted to over-extend yourself. Interest is expensive, and getting out of debt is much harder than getting into it. Use as much of your own money as possible and use only modest estimates of likely production to determine how much debt you can comfortably repay.
2. Each year, accurately calculate how much money you will need for the essential 'core' costs and then how much you will have left over for improvements and emergency reserve. Whenever possible – anticipate your costs, and make sure your core costs are covered before buying non-essentials.
3. Raise a crop of something uncommon with solid market potential. Such products will usually sell easily and bring a good price. Some experts call this 'niche marketing'. But as organic farmers, this really is what we're doing when we produce organic soybeans, milk, chickens, or cucumbers. Putting some of your acreage into some food-grade or direct-marketed products can add diversity to your farm potential. Often food-grade products bring higher income than feed-grade products, but the risk is higher, the labor/equipment demands may be expensive, and high quality is much more important.
4. Try to hit the market with your product in a way that takes advantage of scarcity. For vegetable farmers, this may mean producing extra-early sweet corn. For grain farmers, it can mean putting up grain bins so you don't have to sell everything out of the field at harvest. Even in organics, the rules of supply and demand apply. Be very aware of the over-production or shortage status of your product in the current marketplace and try to determine whether that will change when your crop is ready to sell. It is possible that organic supply will sometimes exceed demand, especially if consumer buying patterns change due to the faltering economy. If that happens, what will you need to do to adjust?
5. When harvest comes, you've only just begun. Work just as hard and creatively at marketing it as you did at raising it. Educate yourself on the market, learn what buyers want and need from you. Figure out what you can do to become a more valuable supplier to them. Ask not (only) what your buyers can do for you, ask (also) what you can do for them – cooperation and mutual benefit are important for stable long-term marketing relationships.
6. Determine how much you need to save from the profit on your crop for future operational costs. Sometimes it is hard to remember that the income from this fall's corn must be saved for next spring's corn, but that should be the goal. Always keep your equipment in good repair – breakdowns at inconvenient times are almost always more costly than keeping up with routine maintenance.

7. Whenever possible, buy quality. Some bargains are 'good deals' but many are not – learn how to tell the difference. Are you tempted by cheap livestock? Cut-rate inputs? Real steals at the auction? Ask the right questions, look things over carefully, and avoid impulse purchases. For animals, demand disease and parasite tests before buying. Try to determine whether you are really looking at a bargain, or at someone else's problem they're trying to unload.
8. Take excellent care of your plants and animals, daily - day and night if necessary. Unless they survive and thrive, you have no profit. Selling low-quality products doesn't get you repeat customers. The old adage that 'the best fertilizer is a farmer's footprint' is still true, both for crops and animals. That means your footprints, not just your employees. Be attentive to detail and to quality.
9. Constantly learn about your product field. Subscribe to periodicals, read books, study resources online. Join farmer and trade associations, attend meetings, take classes, keep learning! Consult your banker, insurance agent, vet, nutritionist, seed/feed/fertilizer supplier and other professionals for advice, before there is a crisis. Learn all you can from their expertise and experience.
10. When you have questions, talk to others who are farming like you are. In the organic world, there are many people who are eager to help and encourage. Don't stumble in the dark or repeat mistakes – there are lots of people who would be happy to help you.
11. Keep close track of your expenses and income so you can see exactly how you're doing and what you need to change. Pay all your bills on time so your credit-worthiness is top notch. That way, when you need a line of credit, loan or just a little extra time to pay, you can more easily get it.
12. Enjoy your profession! Farm with real interest and enjoyment. Stay interested and connected.

One of Klaas' favorite phrases about farm management “Do what is free first, do what is cheap second, and do what is expensive last”. Some of examples of this are –

FREE!

Clean up piles of manure, such as areas around round bale feeders, mixed with wet mulch hay and spread on fields instead of buying expensive fertilizer. There is a lot of fertility in good hay but even poor hay can improve soil. In wet years, frustrated farmers sometimes will give away a field of blackened rained-on hay to get it off the next cutting – that would make a great soil amendment or compost.

Drying corn is expensive and hiring a combine is not cheap either. Picking and cribbing ear corn is the cheapest way to dry corn, especially for your own animals. After you get the corn picked, the drying is essentially free. Snow fence inside a kicker hay wagon makes a great instant and portable crib for corn under 24% moisture. Forage wagons can do double-duty as corn cribs if the moisture is below 22%. An empty hay floor in the upstairs of a barn can store corn that is near 20%. The cobs are free too!

Intensively-managed rotational grazing with the polywire moved twice a day increases both yield and quality of forage from pastures. Grazing corn stalks and other crop residue in the winter provides free feed, spreads manure, gives the cows valuable exercise, and saves on bedding. Need to consult a nutritionist for your livestock? Cooperative Extension, NRCS and even your local vet may be willing to formulate rations for free or at nominal cost.

Time spent adjusting equipment, picking stones, fixing things before you need to use them, and carefully observing crops can pay well. Careful timing of field operations, proper planting depth, using the right seeding rate, and operating machinery at the correct speed often increase crop yields more than a fancy fertilizer mix.

Every summer, organic livestock farmers are frustrated by the lack of organically-approved sufficiently effective fly sprays during 'fly season'. The available products only repel the flies temporarily, they do not kill them. Spending \$50-60/gallon for something isn't effective enough adds up quickly. It is more important to find the areas where the flies are breeding and aggressively clean up damp areas, spilled feed, wet hay, unspread manure, blocked drainpipes etc. Improving barn ventilation also helps, as does reducing muddy areas and dragging a pasture periodically to break up cow pies.

The farmer's footprints truly are the most potent crop fertilizer that anyone has ever applied, and a farmer's eye is the best ways of 'putting fat' on livestock and catching expensive animal health problems early.

CHEAP!!

Good soil conservation practices improve yields in many ways and make a farm become more productive for years to come. Installing drainage tile, putting in diversion ditches, strip cropping, improving fences, building improved cattle lanes, seeding soil-building cover crops, taking soil tests, and reseeding run-down hay fields are all relatively cheap compared to the returns they will yield. Many of these practices can be cost-shared by NRCS or local conservation districts so that the cost to the farmer is minimal – often largely covered by labor and equipment use.

Always consider the cost per unit of fertilizer before buying it. High price does not always insure high quality nor does a low price guarantee a good deal (or even lower quality). Consider the likely value of the crop you plan to grow when you look at the cost of a fertilizer. There are high quality fertilizers and other amendments that cost more than the value of the crop. While they may indeed be effective and ‘do’ what they promise, the increased crop/production may not pay back what you’ve invested.

It’s important to have a soil test before buying fertilizer. Be sure to get a soil test that analyzes micronutrients as well as major nutrients. Often only inexpensive lime or gypsum is needed to improve nutrient availability. Applying something that you don’t need not only wastes money, it may actually hurt your crop yields.

Many organic fertilizers contain a variety of different minerals. For instance, most layer manure contains about 10% very available calcium. Each ton of chicken (layer) manure can replace a ton of lime in the year applied. Wood ashes are free from some wood-fired power plants. They also contain a lot of calcium plus potassium, phosphorus, boron, and other trace elements – but your certifier may require a test showing heavy metal levels. Shop around and ask questions!

Mineral supplements are an expensive ingredient in feed rations that often make good sense. However, minerals needed to compensate for poor quality forages cost much more and are less bio-available than the minerals cows get in hay or pasture. Putting needed fertilizer on your pastures and hay fields may seem expensive until you compare it to the cost of buying mineral supplements for your cows or having serious herd health problems. Where herd health is at stake, it’s often a case of pay now or pay more later. Remember, many livestock minerals ‘embed’ other services in the cost of the mineral, such as ration balancing, nutritional, animal health and farm consulting, and reduced forage test costs. If you’re buying livestock minerals, make sure you’re taking advantage of all the services you are already paying for!

EXPENSIVE!!

If something sounds or looks too good to be true, it probably is. Beware of products that cost so much that you must get a huge crop or very high milk production to justify the extra expense. To be fair, there are times when it pays to make a major investment in restoring or building fertility in a field. If you’ve had a great year and you are current on all the free and cheaper inputs, it may pay to invest in some more intensive (and expensive) soil building. This is especially true when you will be paying a lot of income tax unless you spend some extra money by the end of the year! If you do invest in expensive inputs, target them to the crops that will provide the highest returns.

We have found that many of the fancy fertilizers, bio-stimulants, and other high-end inputs will generate the best profits on farms that have already covered all of the basics. The bottom line - those boring simple basic (cheap) things should be taken care of before we can successfully make use of the ‘fun’ stuff.

When crop prices are high, it pays to aim for a higher yield than when prices are lower. We always need to keep the value of the crop we are growing in mind when we consider inputs. A vegetable crop that is worth \$10,000/acre will certainly justify much higher input costs than a grain crop worth \$600/acre. Each farmer has to consider their own situation when making such decisions. Even different crops on the same farm will merit different levels/types of inputs. We need to think of intensively managed pasture as a high value crop. There is no other crop on a dairy farm that has a bigger impact on cattle health, production, and profit. When good hay costs \$200/ton and 16% dairy feed costs \$600+, we should then compare how much an acre of top-quality pasture (6+ tons dry matter/A) worth? That’s high value!

HOW CAN I TELL IF SOMETHING IS CHEAP OR EXPENSIVE?

Of course, that’s the BIG question. In some cases, the answer may not be fully apparent until after you spend/don’t spend the money. However, most costs are pretty straightforward. Ultimately, all comes down to

using our resources wisely so that we put our money where it is most likely to produce us a good return. With things that are free or very cheap, it's often a no-brainer to know that they are very likely to pay back for the cost of doing them. When they are expensive, then you really have to think about which of your available choices are the most cost effective.

Do you have other ideas for valuable Risk Management ideas? Let's pool our ideas and include them in future Tails and Tassels issues. Send us your ideas by email (kandmhfarm@sprintmail), by mail (Box 361, Penn Yan, NY 14527) or by phone (315-531-1038) and they will be included in future issues!

OTHER IMPORTANT REGIONAL UPCOMING EVENTS

Jan 23-25, NOFA-NY ANNUAL CONFERENCE: "Meals Without Wheels – Revitalizing Our Local Organic Foodshed" Rochester Riverside Convention Center, Rochester, NY This year's NOFA-NY conference features wide ranging topics, covering the interests of all members of the New York organic community. Workshop topics include organic grains, vegetables, fruit, biodiesel, seed, meat and dairy animals, homesteading/cooking, and self-sufficiency, plus social issues, CSA's, and organic certification and more, with farmers, processors, researchers, community organizers, and consumers. Keynote speakers include Fred Kirshenmann, longtime leader and visionary in organic agriculture, Brett Malone and Florentino Collazo, on community food development in Southern California, and Sherry Sherrod, Federation of Southern Cooperatives /Land Assistance Fund on minorities in agriculture. A special Saturday day-long workshop for organic dairy farmers on organic dairy management and homeopathy with Dr. Edgar Sheaffer, DVM, and a day-long intensive grazing workshop with Sarah Flack on Friday. A terrific children's conference, great meals of local donated organic food, live music, ice skating and much more. For information, call Mayra Richter or Kate Mendendall at 607-652-NOFA. Many NYCO members will be presenting and participating – this is our New York organic community!

Feb 5-7, Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) Farming for the Future Conference, State College, PA. This year's PASA conference will be packed with workshops on grains, livestock, fruit/vegetable production, marketing, health, on-farm processing, and policy, all with a uniquely Pennsylvanian spin. Other events include a full pre-conference program with intensive sessions on cheesemaking, policy, vegetable production, and grassfed beef. Keynoters include Raj Patel on food systems, and Bernard Sweeney on water issues. A children's program, terrific meals of local donated food, a really classy benefit auction, a huge trade show, and a nightly entertainment event round out the fun. For information, contact Lauren Smith at 814-349-9856

Feb 14-15, NOFA-VT ANNUAL CONFERENCE, "Innovations Toward Local Food Sovereignty", Randolph, VT. Over 60 workshops by and for farmers, gardeners, researchers, homesteaders and consumers with live music, lots of food, and the truly special atmosphere of the Vermont organic community. Keynoters include long-time organic leader, Eliot Coleman, and community organizer, Andrew Mayer. For more information, contact NOFA-VT 802-434-4154

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- **Composted poultry manure fertilizer**, Brett Kreher, 716-759-6802.
- **Fertrell fertilizers and animal minerals**, Justin Jeanroy 518-993-3452
- **Gypsum**, John Saeli, 315-585-9826
- **6 fine Red Angus replacement heifer calves** out of calving-ease registered Red Angus Glacier Chateau bull. Organically raised but not certified. 315-595-2523 or brooksidefarm@frontiernet.net

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