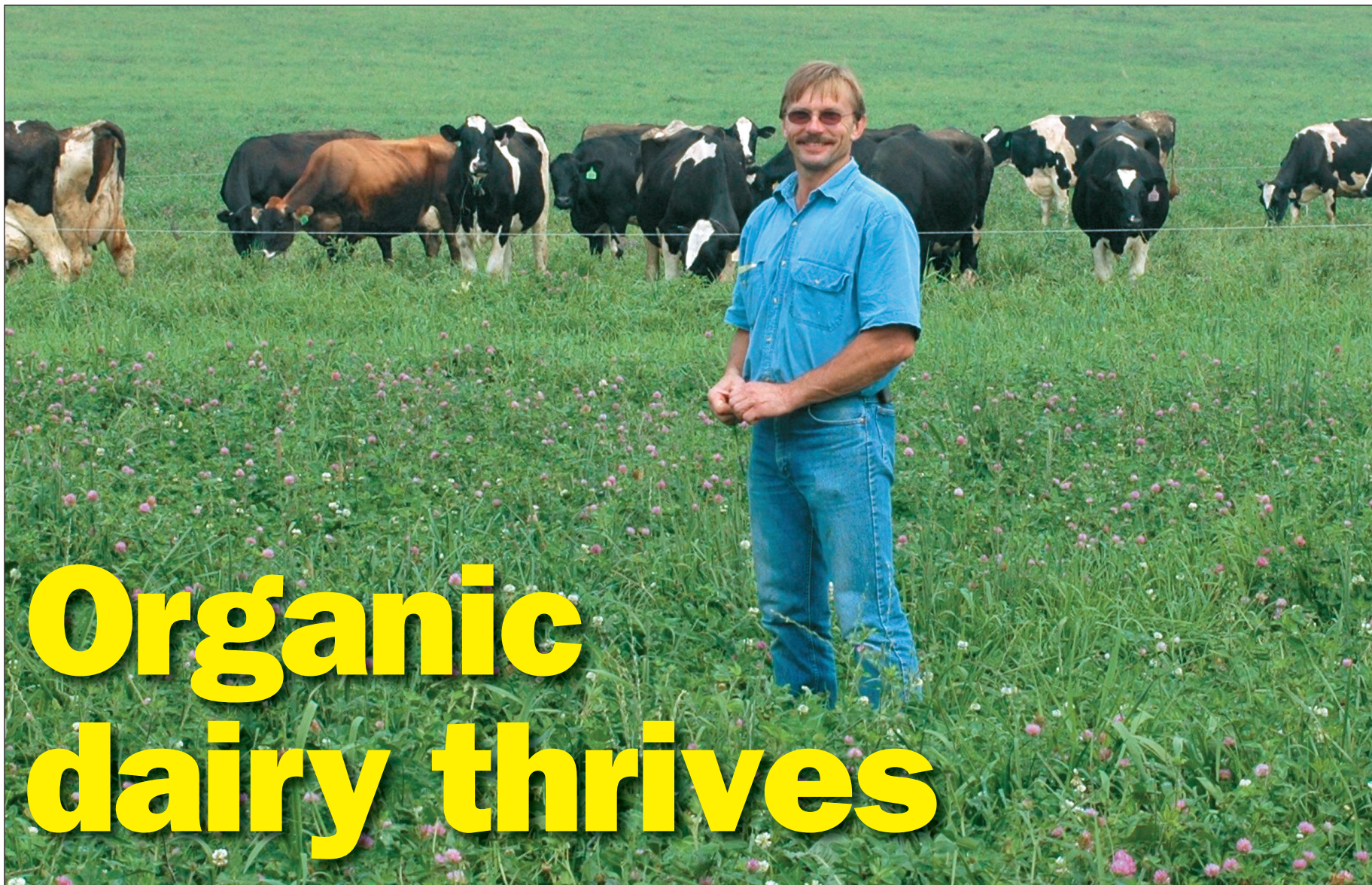


# NewsWatch



## Organic dairy thrives

PHOTO BY MATTHEW O'LEARY

**THE SWITCH** to organic milk production is helping Tom Miller, his two brothers and his two cousins continue farming their family's fourth-generation dairy farm near the Dane-Columbia county line.

By **FRAN O'LEARY**

**T**HE Miller family decided to start producing organic milk in 1993, and they've never looked back.

Today, Tom Miller, his brothers Gary and Ron, and their cousins Jim and Steve milk 370 cows, raise 350 heifers and farm 1,600 acres near East Bristol on the Dane-Columbia county line.

"When we went organic, the rules stated that you had to go three years without any chemicals on the crops, and then we had to go one more year feeding organic certified feed to the cows before we could market milk to Organic Valley Cooperative," Tom says. "That was a four-year commitment for us. We started selling organic milk in 1997."

Tom says the milk price was — and still is — a big factor in the family's decision to produce organic milk.

"The base price for organic milk is \$22 per cwt.," he explains. "With quality and milk solids premiums, we are getting \$23.50 per cwt. The price doesn't fluctuate much, which makes budgeting a lot easier because you know pretty much what your price is going to be."

But how much does production suffer? "Our rolling herd average has actually increased since we went organic," Tom says. "We were around 18,000 pounds when we went organic. It dropped a little during the transition, but we're at 18,500 pounds right now."

### Crop program

Because they can't use chemicals or commercial fertilizer, crop yields have dropped, but not drastically, Tom re-

### Key Points

- The Millers sell their organic milk for \$23.50 per cwt.
- They began selling organic milk in 1997 after a four-year transition period.
- Organic milk production involves a lot of paperwork.

ports. The Millers manage 550 acres of alfalfa, 300 acres of corn, 280 acres of oats, 200 acres of soybeans and 20 acres of rye. They also intensively graze their cattle on 250 acres of pasture.

"Our corn averages about 120 bushels per acre, and our soybeans average about 40 bushels," Tom says. "Organic corn and soybeans sell for about double what conventional crops bring. We do sell some soybeans and corn to a couple of organic dairy producers."

This year, the Millers experimented with growing 30 acres of soybeans planted into rye.

"We put the rye in last fall and seeded the soybeans no-till into the rye when it was waist-high or higher in May," Tom explains. "We knocked the rye down to form a mulch, and we had very few weeds. It will be interesting to see what the yield is. They're looking pretty good so far."

The Millers rely mostly on manure stored in a 1.2 million-gallon in-ground concrete pit for fertilizer for their crops. They also spread gypsum, which has sulfur and calcium, potassium sulfate and lime on their fields.

Haylage, silage and high-moisture corn are stored in bags. Soybeans are stored in a bin and are custom roasted

four times a year on the farm.

### Cow care

Cows are fed a high-forage diet. According to Tom, high producers receive only 15 pounds of high-moisture corn and 2½ pounds of roasted soybeans in addition to forages.

"Our heifers don't get any corn silage or corn until two weeks before they calve," he says. "There isn't even any corn in the calf-starter mix. We use oats, whole roasted soybeans, organic molasses and an organic starter pellet."

Calves are fed pasteurized whole milk because there is no organic milk replacer.

During the summer, cows are rotationally grazed during the day in groups of 50 to 100 on various-sized paddocks.

"We use polywire and make the paddocks as big as we need and move them every day or two," Tom explains.

At night and during winter months, cows are housed in two freestall barns and are fed a total mixed ration.

The Millers didn't start grazing until four years ago when it became required by the national organic program. But Tom says they like grazing their cattle.

"Cows are a lot healthier on the pasture," he reports. "We don't have a problem with fat dry cows or heifers."

Cows are milked twice a day in a 30-stall rotary parlor the Millers installed in 1990. Because they are organic producers, they cannot use antibiotics on cows that come down with mastitis.

"We get one or two cases of mastitis a month," Tom says. "We can give a cow aspirin for swelling or pain, we can boost her immune system with aloe

vera, and we can give her probiotic boluses to boost her appetite. That usually gets them over it."

If a cow doesn't get better, the Millers cull the cow.

### Worth the work

According to Tom, a lot of paperwork is involved with organic milk production.

"It's understandable because you have to certify that you're doing it right," he says.

However, despite the extra work involved, Tom believes it's worth it.

"But if you're considering going organic just so you can get more money for your milk, that's probably not enough," he says. "You really need to believe in the system."

## Defeating weeds

**T**OM Miller says the biggest challenge in growing crops on an organic milk farm is controlling weeds because no chemicals can be used. Thus, the Millers rely on crop rotation. Fields are in corn the first year, then soybeans, then corn again, then oats, and then are fall seeded to alfalfa. After three years, they start the rotation over with corn.

"We rotary hoe almost everything and cultivate corn and beans," he says. "We also flame weeds. We burn the weeds in the corn rows before the corn gets to the fifth leaf with a machine with an LP [liquid petroleum] mounted tank. The weeds die out and the corn grows back because the growing point is still in the ground."