

Livestock

Dairy offers public a 'share' of cow

By RHONDA DEDYNE

FOR producers involved in cow-share operations, the concept is simple and straightforward: They're providing a product — in this case, fresh milk — to individuals who have ownership in its source, a dairy cow.

But like anything in today's world, it's a bit more complicated. John and Patti Warnke can attest to that fact.

The couple and their six children raise dairy cattle and hogs on 70 acres of land located near St. Johns in Clinton County. Milk produced by the Jersey cows — and one Holstein — on the certified organic farm is distributed via a cow-share program.

"People get to choose a cow or cows, help establish their diet, and obtain fresh milk produced in a good, safe way. There's a real connection between the consumer and the product," Patti said during the couple's presentation as the 2007 Farm Family of the Year at the 2008 Michigan Organic Conference, coordinated by the Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance.

In a nutshell, cow-share works as follows: An individual buys a "share" of a cow from a herd manager for a specified amount. The one-time payment is good for the life of the cow. The new cow-share owner also pays a set monthly fee to board their cow or cows. In return, the herd manager agrees to maintain the cow and provide the owner with a specified amount of fresh milk on a weekly basis.

Contractual documents provide a legal foundation for both parties entering into a cow-share agreement.

"That's an important piece of the program because it offers protection for everyone involved," Patti told MOFFA guests, adding that dairy producers in Michigan can give away fresh milk; they just can't sell it.

Legislation in Michigan and a number of other states prohibits the sale of fresh, nonpasteurized and nonhomogenized milk to consumers. Those statutes do not apply to individuals who actually

Key Points

- Program creates connection between consumer and producer.
- Consumers buy a share of a cow and receive fresh milk in return.
- Testing is a key component of a quality cow-share program.

own a cow and obtain that fresh milk for their personal use.

While it's difficult to accurately project how many cow-share programs are operated in Michigan and across the country, the consensus by MOFFA and other similar organizations is that the concept is growing. Greater awareness by consumers about fresh products and a subsequent increased demand is a key factor in the public's inquiry about food options like cow-share.

"People can go to a farm, see the operation and buy products direct. More and more, people want to see and know where their food is coming from," said Les Roggenbuck, an organic producer from Sanilac County who was at the presentation. "We can be small and be profitable, local and sustainable."

Add value

Like others attending the annual conference, Roggenbuck was interested in learning about options he might use on his 400-acre farm to "add value" to his organic products that currently include beef cattle, hay and vegetables.

"I've known the Warnkes for a number of years and am impressed with what they've done with their organic operation," he said. "Dairy, as compared to other types of organic products, takes a large capital and labor investment."

For the young couple and their children, growing organic "works."

"It's our vocation," Patti said, stating the key role that each family member plays in the operation. "Our goal is not to become a large operation; we don't market ourselves aggressively. The aim is to provide safe, quality products."

Testing is a key component of a quality cow-share program, as is making certain that individual owners understand the daily routine at cow-share operations like Warnkes' Our Farm & Dairy LLC.

"All of our testing procedures were in place before we moved forward with the cow-share program," John said.

The Warnkes' herd of 25 cows has tested free of brucellosis, tuberculosis and Johne's disease; no antibiotics or growth hormones are used. The fresh milk is tested on-site with each bulk tank for total plate count, salmonella and general coliforms.

Each cow is tested during each milking with a subclinical mastitis detector. In addition, off-site testing is done on a monthly basis for raw bacteria count, somatic cell count, antibiotics and coliform count.

"We want the people who own a share of their cow to understand how testing is done here and even require them to visit the farm before signing on to the program," Patti said. "It's important for them to see their milk, how it's handled and stored, and the entire farm — and, it's important for us, too, to get



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FAMILY DEDICATION: The Warnkes are recipients of the 2007 Farm Family of the Year award from the Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance. Pictured from left are (front row) John, Patti holding Emerson, Gabriel and Allison, and (back row) Vincent, Bethany and Elliott.

to know the people who are buying a share of a cow."

Maintain profitability

Establishing a price per share is determined by each operation, John said.

"It's really dependent upon what the producer needs to be profitable. For our family, we're about at the maximum with 25 cows. That's about all we can handle and still do everything ourselves."

Currently, the Warnkes work with about 150 families who own about 200 shares. Each share provides 2 gallons of fresh milk per week for the owner.

Cow-share participants are responsible for picking up their milk, or making arrangements for other owners to collect and deliver the weekly allotment.

"People are also responsible for bringing their own bottles," Patti said, adding most owners prefer glass containers rather than plastic. A Warnke family member is always present when owners come to pick up their milk from the farm's secure bulk tank.

"We'd recommend that sort of pick-up arrangement for producers who are considering a cow-share program

as part of their organic operation. It's another safety precaution that serves both the producer and the owner."

Surplus milk is given to dairy calves, and fed to the Warnkes' hogs. Customers can place orders for a whole or half hog whose diet consists of organic grains, milk and forage from the pasture.

"If we didn't have the whole family working together here, we'd never be able to do this," Patti said. "It fits our lifestyle and works for us."

Dedyne writes from St. Johns.

Warnke fast facts

- John and Patti Warnke were both raised on family farms in Clinton County. They transitioned from conventional dairy production to a cow-share program in the past five years.
- The Warnkes own and lease 70 acres of pasture; all certified organic.
- About 150 families own approximately 200 shares in the 25-cow herd. Cows, certified organic, graze rotationally from April to November.
- For information, visit www.ourfarmanddairy.com.

They said it



"Being organic allows producers to operate on a smaller scale than conventional farming and still be profitable. People are inclined to purchase products that they know are locally grown."

Les Roggenbuck, Snover

"Consumers are demonstrating that being able to purchase local, organic products is becoming more and more important, both in terms of environmental resources and health-wise. It's a life-style change."



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