

Current Status of U.S. Organic Livestock Production with a focus on Swine

W. Red Tomahawk, undergraduate research intern,
and M.S. Honeyman, associate professor,
Department of Animal Science

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Summary and Implications

Organic agriculture is expanding rapidly in the United States. North Dakota led the United States in certified organic field crops acreage in 1997 (3). Iowa ranked fifth in the U.S. in certified organic field crop acreage with 30,000 acres in 1997. "U.S. producers are turning to organic farming as a potential way to lower input costs, decrease reliance on non-renewable resources, capture high-value markets and premium prices, and boost farm income, (especially as prices fall for staple commodities)". according to the USDA (3).

"Organic farming relies on ecological based practices such as cultural and biological pest management, and virtually prohibits synthetic chemicals in crop production and antibiotics or hormones in livestock production. Under organic farming systems, the fundamental components and natural processes of ecosystems, such as soil organism activities, nutrient cycling, and species distribution and competition, are used to work directly and indirectly as farm management tools. For example, organic farmers provide habitat for predators and parasites of crop pests, calculate plant/harvesting dates and rotate crops to maintain soil fertility, and cycle animal and green manure as fertilizers. Organic livestock production systems attempt to accommodate an animal's natural nutritional and behavioral requirements. Livestock standards address the origin of each animal and incorporate requirements for living conditions, access to the outdoors, feed rations, and health care practices suitable to the needs of particular species", according to the Economic Research Service, USDA (2,3).

Introduction

Labeling for certified organic meat was not available until February 1999. The February 1999 USDA label was provisional. Labeling by the USDA has helped the market for the organic meat industry expand. Once organic livestock production develops, the need for organic feeds will increase and organic field crop acreage will expand even more.

Organic meat markets are expected to develop because of the USDA efforts to define National Organic Livestock Productions standards. The USDA standards were proposed in March 2000. Final rules are expected by

fall of 2000 with immediate implementation. Both crop and livestock standards are included and can be accessed at www.ams.gov.

"The proposed livestock standards apply to animals used for meat, milk, eggs, and other animal products represented as organically produced, and provide details of the following:

- animals for slaughter must be raised on an organic operation from birth, or no later than the second day of life for poultry;
- producers would be required to feed 100% organically produced feeds to livestock but could also provide allowed vitamin and mineral supplements;
- organically raised animals could not be given hormones or antibiotics;
- preventive management practices, including the use of vaccines, would be used to keep animals healthy;
- producers would be prohibited from withholding treatment from a sick or injured animal; however, animal's treated with a prohibited medication would be removed from the organic operation;
- all organically raised animals would have access to the outdoors, including access to pasture for ruminants, and animals could be temporarily confined only for reasons of health, safety, or to protect soil or water quality" (3).

"Obstacles to adoption include large managerial costs and risks of shifting to a new way of farming, limited awareness of organic farming systems, lack of marketing and technical infrastructure, inability to capture marketing economies, insufficient numbers of processors and distributors, and limited access to capital. State and private certifier fees for inspections, pesticide residue testing, and other services represent an added production expense for organic producers. Farmers can't command certified organic price premiums during the 3-year required conversion period before crops and livestock can be certified as organic. Several states in the U.S. have begun providing financial support for conversion to organic farming systems as a way to capture environmental benefits of these systems. Several of the state-run programs in the U.S. charge nominal or very low fees to encourage organic production." (3)

State incentive payments may be helpful for growers who are already interested in organic production. Europe has converted to organic agriculture more rapidly than the United States. Most European countries have provided direct financial aid for converting farmers for the past 10 years.

Results and Discussion

The organic livestock standards are brief and simple on the surface, but pose major challenges to organic livestock producers. There are several challenges to organic swine production.

- Certification. Farms and handling operations that sell less than \$5,000 per year of organic agricultural products are exempt from certification, but must still abide by National Standards for organic products and must comply with labeling requirements. Retail food establishments that sell organically produced agricultural products but do not process them are also exempt from certification. They must also wait the 3-year grace period that it takes for completion of the process to be tagged certified organic.
- Inspection. Before livestock and crops can be labeled as organic they must be inspected.
- Health of animals. Treatment can't be denied to a pig that is enrolled in an organic operation, but the treated pig must be removed from the organic livestock operation, so the producer must be willing to take a few losses.
- No growth promonants/antibiotics. Commonly used promonants such as antibiotics will not be tolerated.
- Knowledge. Information and knowledge about how to take care of the organically raised pigs is not well known or documented, especially to new producers.
- Feed. Where would you get the feed? Organically grown feeds are uncommon, Producers may have a difficult time locating them and there may be increased costs in shipping. Feed costs will be higher.

There are several implications of expanded organic swine production.

- Feed. Organic feed supplies will expand. Separate organic feed storage and milling facilities may be needed.
- Purchasing feeder pigs may be difficult because they must come from organic breeding herds.
- Greater risk from disease may inhibit large numbers of producers from becoming organic. The industry may be slow to expand.
- Farms will need to separate nonorganic pigs from organic pigs.
- There may be major changes in housing systems, i.e., less confinement, more open space and more ventilation may be required.
- There may be smaller farms and fewer pigs per farm because of disease risks.
- Cost of production will be higher for organic livestock (1) because of poorer feed efficiencies, slower gain, and higher cost feeds.

Conclusion

Organic swine production is all-natural. Organic swine producers try to accommodate an animal's natural nutritional and behavioral requirements. Organic swine production may improve organic farms with crop rotations that include forages and a ready supply of manure. Organic swine production may expand in the future if the challenges and implications discussed can be addressed.

Acknowledgements

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References

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