

Questions & Answers
Organic Agriculture Symposium: Fundamentals for Professions
October 28, 2008

Rupert Jannasch

Q: Are there any recent studies about the cost of transition?

A: Many studies on the cost of transition have been done around the world, especially in those areas where conversion studies exist. Googling “cost of transition to organic production” brings up a long list of scholarly papers and extension publications on transition costs. Many focus on dairy. The Organic Path section on the ACORN web site (www.acorn.org) provides spreadsheet models for a variety of farm types where farmers can input their own production data such as labour, crop yields, market prices and other revenue and expenses expected during the transition process. This useful tool helps account for the many different types of farming operations. A similar model for organic dairy production in British Columbia is available at www.agf.gov.bc.ca/busmgmt/budgets/budget_pdf/dairy/organic_dairyapril2003_final.pdf

Q: Do you have the compost on your farm analyzed by microbiology and do you use compost tea?

A: I recently attended a discussion led by Elaine Ingham about the Soil Food Web and her lab run by Jason Hoffman in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I have considered following this approach to soil health during the four years I have worked my farm, but concluded that my crop choices, crop rotation, field layout and development of the livestock/compost infrastructure needed attention first. I don't see the point in doing detailed soil analysis before some semblance of cropping system is in place. I will probably have some soil and compost analysis done this fall and try brewing some compost tea in 2009. I do not doubt that corrective measure based on thorough microbial analysis can improve soil health and crop productivity on poor and abused soils, but I am interested to see whether there are benefits on soils in relatively good shape..

Q: Why do you have no cover crops on your tomato field?

A: In 2008, I grew about one acre of tomatoes on plastic mulch. Extremely wet weather lasting from mid-July until early September made weed control between the rows difficult. After lifting the mulch in late September, the soil still needed to dry out before the land could be worked. I chose not to plow in early October, choosing instead to try controlling (versus burying) the weeds. I am also reluctant to further compact the plow sole unless absolutely necessary. Had I plowed immediately there probably would have been time to sow a cover crop such as oats, but by late October luck would be required to establish winter rye. Rye is a dicey cover crop, to say the least, because of the tremendous amount of spring growth before tillage is possible. Overall, having bare soil is not desirable and in future years I will consider a living mulch such as annual rye grass between the tomato rows.

Q: Why are there greater uptakes in the organic dairy sector?

A: There is greater interest in organic dairy farming because at this point there is barely any organic fluid milk production in the region. Interest is widespread, but uptake has been largely limited to organic cheese production in Prince Edward Island. The sticking point appears to be finding a willing processor.

Q: Do you have any advice on fitting grains into veggie rotations especially on a small scale?

A: Growing cereals for grain as part of small-scale vegetable production is difficult to justify. Even with my own International 82 pull-type combine, I find servicing and clean-out take longer than harvesting an acre of wheat. A willing custom operator is ideal, but are they willing to come for just a small field and perform the necessary clean-out required for certification purposes (if the machine is not dedicated to organic crops)? Then what do you do with the grain? Clean it, sell it, feed it? The straw is certainly valuable. If cereals are included in the rotation, then consider mulching them or possibly grazing. On the other hand, winter cereals are quite beneficial for breaking up weed cycles and don't always demand attention at peak labour periods. If recent introductions of Eastern European winter barley varieties here in Nova Scotia prove promising, I will most definitely try some as a potential source of straw and feed grain.

Q: How long did it take to recoup your transition costs and did you develop a lease agreement to help recover these costs?

A: When I purchased the farm four years ago, fertilizers and pesticides hadn't been used for 20 years and the land had been cut for hay since the last sheep were sold in 2000. Actual transition costs were minimal, but start-up costs such as building demolition, field work and machinery purchase and repair were significant. The market access afforded by becoming certified organic more than made up for any costs in going organic. Generally, I find fewer farmers are choosing the "cold turkey" route and are converting their farms section by section. Dairy farmers are good at this. Although costs are incurred, risk is reduced. Many find their input costs going down. On a 400 acre conventional vegetable operation I advise, the owner began with a 2 acre garden certified organic in 2008, to be followed by a 5 acre plot next year and eventually ramping up to 40 acres.

Wolfgang Pfenning

Q: Is free trade in organics with the U.S. a good thing?

A: Whether good or bad we have to adapt to the conditions and make things work.

Q: How do you adapt to such a seasonable market?

A: The market is not as seasonable as the growing. We are familiar with the seasons and their effect on vegetable production. We keep farm activity records, and of the outcome. This way we can over time learn to use the season to its maximum

Q: How do you factor in the costs of equipment conversions to your costs of production?

A: The conversion cost is based on time and material. My ideas are free to the farm.

Q: Do you have a fields person who goes to each farm to help each grower?

A: We sometimes visit the farms. We deal with most farmers on the phone or e mail.

Q: Do you utilize a single certifying agency for all farmers growing for you?

A: It doesn't matter to us who certifies, as long as the certification is compatible with "Pro cert".

Q: Do any of the organic farmers use seaweed products for fertility?

A: Yes. It is a nice product.

Q: Do you have your compost analyzed for microbiology and do you use compost tea?

A: We do compost analysis, but not for all compost. Yes we do make compost tea.

Q: What are the main things you consider in planning crop rotations on your farm?

A: Soil type and condition, fertility, previous crops.

Loic Dewavrin

Q: Do you have any advice on fitting grains into veggie rotations especially for small farms?

A: To be efficient, grain production requires techniques which involve use of adequate equipment. Often small farms don't have enough capital to invest in such operations, or acreage is not sufficient to justify such investment. Equipment coop or sharing should be explored.

Q: What type of manure are you using on your farm?

A: We do import chicken manure which is partially composted on the farm depending on the season of application. We are aiming at using it only after soybean harvest at a rate of 1 metric ton per acre the year preceding wheat. According to our fertilization plan, our actual imports of manure represent 40% of allowances in respect with Quebec environmental laws which are (I think) among the strictest in Canada.

Q: Is there any research/development into crop varieties that are better suited to organic cropping systems (eg. better nutrient utilization)?

A: I've heard of development in progress on a variety of wheat by Dr. André Comeau and his staff in Ste-Foy which seems very promising. I hope this research will encourage public funding for such initiative and that it won't end up in the hands of private corporations.

Q: Are you concerned about the cost of manure rising? And how may this potential cost increase affect your cost of production?

A: With the increase in all fertilizer prices, demand on manure is very strong. I think this will induce a better utilization of manure which has long been seen as a waste. This will certainly have an impact on our costs and this is part of actual increases in prices of grains. Green manure is part of the solution, something we are investing a lot these years on our farm. Our experimentations are very promising, improvement in soil structure seems to be another very important part of the puzzle we have to work on.

Q: What are the major on farm food safety issues in your opinion?

A: I think that if you do things in respect with the environment, if your techniques make sense, then you are not at risk... when you push the system to the limits, when yields and short term profits are the main concerns, then, there could be some slippage on safety. It's true for all other sectors, not only food. I don't feel we are at risk the way we're operating.

Q: Do you have your compost analyzed for microbiology and do you use compost tea?

A: As we do not apply compost or manure within 3 months of the harvest (we usually turn our piles twice and spread in September/October, the harvest is in August) we are not subject to such microbiological test (i.e. Organic regulations). We are not using compost tea either. We are not against any improvement of this sort, but we want to keep things simple, farming the way we do is already quite demanding.

Janine Gibson

Q: What is the Canada Organic Regime?

A: The Canadian Organic Regime is the system Canada is developing to implement our Canadian Organic Standard (COS) and the new Federal organic regulation. It is a partnership between the Organic Federation of Canada (representative of the organic production movement and industry provincially, with one Federal seat), and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and their new Canadian Organic Office (COO) in charge of implementing the regulation. The Standards Interpretation Committee, with members from the Canadian General Standards Board Organic Technical Committee and the “Competent Authority” CFIA will make interpretations of the standard as certifiers and organic operations use it and ask questions. They will also be recommending necessary clarifications in the Standard to the Future Work List of the Technical Committee.

Q: Will the new Canadian standards ensure that our Canadian system will be accepted in Europe?

A; That has been the goal all along! So we hope so. Negotiations are always ongoing as standards are always being updated.

Q; Label confusion - is there a definite solution or any regulation that would correct this (e.g. natural-green-organic)?

A; Education primarily is the tool needed. Informed consumers vote with their dollars. The regulation does cover words “like” organic or that imply the standards of certification. In the EU, if more than 50% of the people think something should be covered by the regulation it is! We’re a little more specific in our scope!

Q: For organic processing - How do I ensure that imported "organic inputs" (i.e. spices) meets my certifying Association's standards. Is there an international body which recognizes/approves other certifying agencies?

A: Yes there are many. These are called Accreditors of certification bodies. We have 5 who have applied to the COO to be recognized in the Canadian Regime. The COO has chosen to use the term Conformity Verification Bodies (CVBs) for what is internationally called Accreditors, as the COO itself will be the primary Accreditor in Canada but “subcontract” the actual verification to the CVB’s. See the presentation for details

Q: Is there a method for identifying farmers who may use organic practices but are not certified?

A: Yes, visit their farms and buy directly from them at the farm gate. They will make some sort of Label claim without saying organic- Maybe “Beyond Organic!”.

Q: Will land that has been treated with sewage sludge be eligible for transitioning to certified organic?

A: After 36 months of no prohibited inputs like sewage sludge. If an organic operator knows the land s/he is about to use has had inputs like that, he or she would probably test it for heavy metal contamination and account for the soil and rhizosphere restitution in the Organic System Plan.

Q: Do honey producers have an organic forum?

A: Yes, bees are considered livestock in the Canadian standard and there is an Apiary Section of the Canadian Organic Standards (COS).

Q: Are intra provincial sales and regulations affected by the new national standards?

A: Only in so far the federal standard and regulation are being modeled by the Manitoba Provincial government and other provinces may consider it worthwhile to follow suit.

Q: Will the Canadian Organic Standards re-evaluate the use of antibiotic use on dairy farms?

A: All standards are being evaluated as comments are received.

Q: Are there any educational campaigns planned to educate consumers to recognize the new logo (e.g. Canadian Organic logo)?

A: The Organic Trade association and Canadian Organic Growers are educating their members and conducting outreach. The COO has a limited communication budget.

Q: When will the COS include items that currently fall outside of the CAP act (eg cosmetics, fertilisers)?

A: When the public demands it.

Q: Will the national standard increase or decrease barriers to trade between provinces?

A: Trade of certified organic product shouldn't be negatively affected if the task of implementing the regulation is done with skill and consultation.

Q: Will the national standard affect fertiliser labelling?

A: Perhaps in terms of the use of the word "organic" which I know is used by Composting companies. Some will become certified and continue to use it.

Q: What do you mean by Production Risk Management?

A: The manager of the organic system plan assesses the points at which the organic integrity of a process or product might be impacted (organic control Point) and plan to use management tools to prevent any loss of integrity.

Q: How is imported product sold as certified organic in Canada?

A: CFIA and the COO will manage that aspect via recognition of equivalence of CVBs/Accreditors and also country to country negotiations.

Q: Do you realistically think there will ever be organic aquaculture?

A: No. Too input intensive.

Q: Will the OMRI list continue to be recognized or do they need to switch to the federal list of acceptable products and will there be a new label for cdn fertilizer products?

A: OMRI is looking at including the Canadian Standard in certain services they offer. New labels will continually evolve and be marketed.

Q: Smaller CBs in BC, which are not ISO 65 compliant, won't be able to certify to the National Program but will be able to continue to certify under the provincial program. Would they be able to sell their product as organic to processors in BC certified under the National Program?

A: Not to be an ingredient in a processed product, only for direct sales to consumers within BC.

Q: Scale is not regulated in the organic standards. Should it be?

A: No. We have written the standard to be applicable to all scales of production with positive environmental impact, if a compliant organic system plan is implemented and well monitored.

Q: What is the status of the sodium nitrate issue?

A: The world is running out of the stuff. All companies are trying to reduce its use and use other fertility management methods. It will gradually be phased out, as the NOP only allows for 20% of a crop's nitrogen needs now to be met with its use. Growers have to use other sources of nutrient cycling and will increase the use of these other options. We will have the implementation period (18 months-2 years) to have any importers change their methods to meet our standard.