



Mark and Jane Pike, 320 organic dairy cows, Matamata.

ORGANIC DAIRYING ‘A BETTER WAY’ FOR MATAMATA COUPLE

Mark and Jane Pike were among a small group of pioneering Waikato dairy farmers who ventured into commercial organics in the late 1990s.

Prior to that, they had been producing milk conventionally for several years at Waharoa, just north of Matamata, but were becoming increasingly uneasy about the heavy use of fertilisers and herbicides. Mark explains that what finally prompted them to switch to organics was an outbreak of nitrate poisoning, in which 26 cows died in a single morning.

He says, “We decided there must be a better way of farming.”

A decade later, the couple have proven that organic farming methods, carried out correctly, are not only sustainable, but are also as productive as conventional farming - and potentially more profitable for the farmer.

But Mark stresses while organics stacks up nicely from an economic viewpoint, their motivation goes beyond money, to something much deeper - a feeling that they are farming in harmony with nature.

“We look at the big picture. It's about much more than just payouts. And I guess there's a bit of ego involved, too. I take a certain pride in being different.”

Mark and Jane began the transition to organics in 1999 with BioGro. Around the same time, Mark and Jane joined with a small group of other dairy farmers from Waikato and the Bay of Plenty to set up the Organic Dairy Producers Group.

The group worked hard to promote organics, with field days and discussion groups, and interest among farmers gradually grew. By 2004, there were sufficient numbers of organic dairy farmers, and those wanting to convert, to encourage Fonterra to get into the market for organic milk.

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Mark says mastitis was a “big issue” in the early years after switching to organics, and they had to work hard to contain it with homeopathy and other natural treatments, such as honey, cider vinegar and seaweed supplements.

He acknowledges that even now it is an ongoing challenge to keep on top of mastitis, but each year of farming organically has seen their herd become gradually healthier.

Mark stresses that healthy soil is the “absolute key” to successful organic dairying. He and Jane have invested heavily in natural fertilisers, such as lime, reactive rock phosphate, seaweed sprays and sulphur. Each year, their soil is tested as part of the Agriculture Research Group on Sustainability (ARGOS) project, which is run by Lincoln and Otago universities.

Mark and Jane now milk 320 cows on 130 hectares, which includes their original 65 hectares at Waharoa plus an adjoining farm, which they acquired later. The entire property is fully certified organic.

Mark applauds Fonterra’s commitment to organics, noting the company “took a punt” a few years ago, which has paid off. Fonterra now has about 20,000 cows in its organic programme, of which about 10,000 are fully certified and the rest are in transition.

Greg Walters, Fonterra’s Business Development Manager – Specialty Milks, says the company has set a target of 60,000 certified organic cows, to be achieved “as soon as possible”.

He adds, “We could sell everything we could produce from 60,000 (organic) cows.”

Last year, Fonterra processed more than 40 million litres of fully certified organic milk. This has grown from virtually nothing five years ago. The company’s exports of organic cheese, yoghurt, milk powder, butter and milk powder concentrate generated \$6.9 million last year.

Organic dairying has certainly come a long way since Mark and Jane took those first pioneering steps 10 years ago.

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Greg Walters, Fonterra

