



Profiles of Successful Strategies for Small Farm Dairies

A project of the Northern New York Agricultural Development Program

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Ortman Dairy, St. Lawrence County — Weathering a Dairy Start-Up

The Transition

After 30 years of working in the newspaper industry, Loren Ortman started dairying in 1999 with his wife, Cynthia. Tending dairy cattle wasn't new to the Brasher Falls, N.Y., couple. They had raised and sold heifers for several years.

When reorganization in his industry forced the career change, Loren originally planned to run a conventional dairy. He and Cynthia remodeled their tiestall barn and seeded their pastures to annual Italian ryegrass. But it took only two years and an entire silo full of moldy silage to convince the couple that rotational grazing and baleage feeding was a better dairy strategy.

The couple switched to rotational grazing and stopped growing corn. To keep investment low, the Ortman's partner with their neighbors to put up baleage for the winter. In 2004, the Ortman's planted brown midrib sorghum Sudan to feed during the summer pasture slump. Yields were quite acceptable.

Mechanics, Management & Resources

The transition to full-time dairying was difficult, and the lack of cash sometimes strained the Ortman's relationship. Cynthia now works part time off the farm to supplement the farm's income.

In spite of cash-flow gaps early on, the couple has stuck to the goal of paying off debt and fixing production problems. In retrospect, the Ortman's say just "taking the plunge" was the most difficult part.

For help during their transition, the Ortmans relied on the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Cornell Cooperative Extension, neighbors, their veterinarian, their nutritionist, and lots of books and magazines.

Much of what Loren learned, he taught himself, Loren says. He wishes there could have been some sort of mentoring program to help them through the first couple of years getting started.

To track their progress, the Ortmans watch their debt closely. They have an Excel spreadsheet ledger as well as Quickbooks to keep their records.

The Future

The Ortmans have aggressive plans for their dairy. To begin with, they plan to be debt free in five years. They also plan to improve all their paddocks, build soil fertility, expand to 60 cows, and install a pasture watering system and, eventually, irrigation.

Reaching these goals, the Ortmans say, will help them achieve their most important objectives: to grow equity while raising their family on a farm.

Transition Tips

The Ortmans, who are more than willing to talk about their transition experience with other farmers, have this advice:

- Get advice from a reliable source. Then follow it.
- Open your mind to new ideas.
- Be willing to admit that you may be wrong every now and then.
- Don't take the easy way to pay bills. That is, don't use credit cards or sell assets to cash flow your farm.

The Northern New York Agricultural Development Program

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