

Dairyman touts organics

Straus says his holistic methods are the keys to success

Julia Hollister

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The Straus Family Creamery in Tomales, Calif., uses holistic and sustainable approaches to dairy farming, which means no hormones, genetically modified organisms and unlimited access to pasture. The operation calls itself the first organic dairy west of the Mississippi.

working.

SAN FRANCISCO - The owner of Straus Family Creamery in Tomales, Calif., came to the Commonwealth Club here last week to counter claims of limited pasture access, antibiotics use and genetically modified feed and to share his secrets of success.

"We started the family West Marin County operation in 1941 with 23 cows," Albert Straus said. "We took the farm to the next level, but today - with a herd of 660 cows - all the news is not good."

Half of a farm's income goes for feed - the price of corn jumped from \$300 a ton to \$500 a ton this year - and there are tighter environmental controls.

The good news is Straus found ways to survive and be sustainable by going organic. He also said his holistic and sustainable approach to dairy farming is

"Going organic means access to pasture," he said. "Only 12 percent of dairy cows in the nation are grazed."

He claims the Straus operation is the first organic dairy west of the Mississippi, and that today there are 72 organic dairies throughout California.

Dairy has been one of the fastest-growing segments of the organic foods industry. According to the Organic Trade Association, sales of organic milk in 2007 were over \$1.3 billion but only accounted for 2.7 percent of the nation's total milk sales, up from 1.7 percent the previous year.

"One-quarter of the dairies in California are organic," he said. "We have experienced double-digit growth in the past 15 years, so I am optimistic. Very few farmers followed the organic path with livestock in the early years, but I experimented and found sensible solutions."

Straus said his cows are milked three times a day. He has also tried alternative

feed sources such as tofu, cocoa bean hulls, and sake waste - which resulted in some tipsy bovines.

He said he fenced the creeks, refused to use any genetically modified organisms, and used no-till planting. He also introduced an electric car that runs on electricity generated by the dairy's methane digester.

"We are trying to close the loop by using a cow-powered truck that feeds them," he said. "The car now has 83,000 miles."

He also bans hormones, antibiotics and clones at the farm.

Straus has a closed herd and uses natural pest control. Flies were the main problem, he said. He tried fans and putting sticky fly strips on the cows before finally came up with a solution - an electric fly zapper tunnel that the cows walk through. A way to power the tunnel with solar energy is in the works.

He plans to increase the number of electric trucks on the farm, find sources of local feed, and provide healthier feed ingredients such as honey and agave.

His said his farm's dairy model can work in an average 900-cow California dairy, because the biggest challenge facing larger operations is disease prevention.

Prevention is 99 percent of the cure, he said, and because his cows are milked three times a day, they are seen more often and injury and disease are noted immediately.

"I'm a farmer at heart," Straus said. "My mission for sustainability is a convergence of people, planet and profit. That means we must take care of our people by offering a good wage, using wise environmental decisions to keep the planet healthy, and farms have to make a profit to be able to make sustainability a reality."