



the wisconsin foodshed

Family Farmer Cheese

Addressing milk pricing injustices and family dairy farm loss

Cheese carrying the Family Farmer Cheese label is designed to address milk price fluctuations and dairy farm losses. The cheese is distributed through Family Farm Defenders, a coalition committed to farmer-controlled and consumer-oriented food and fiber production. All cheese sold under the Family Farmer Cheese label guarantees a fixed price of \$16 per hundredweight of milk, giving dairy farmers a reasonable and stable price for their milk.

With this Family Farmer Cheese project, Family Farm Defenders has changed its focus from changing dairy policy to increasing consumer action. Family Farm Defenders is counting on consumers to make choices with their cheese purchases that will insure that family dairy farmers can earn a reasonable living from their milk check.

During the first few years of its existence, the Family Farm Defenders focused its efforts on legislative and regulatory problems, reacting to the effects federal milk pricing systems have had on family dairy farms all over the nation. "The value of milk from a small dairy farm is determined to maximize profit for large conglomerate dairy interests," says John Kinsman, LaValle, Wisconsin, dairy farmer with the Family Farm Defenders.

A sense of urgency among the group's members provoked them to speak out in the "Dump the Dairy Board" campaign and the fight against rBGH in the nation's milk supply. Both efforts enjoyed successes and failures. However, the rate of loss of family dairy farms has not slowed, and milk prices have remained low.

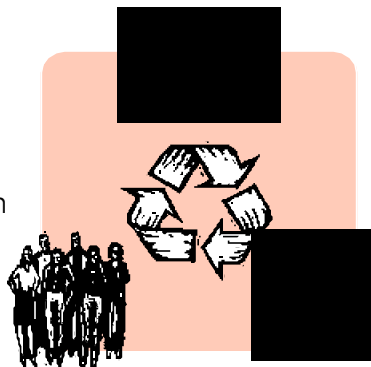
"After banging our heads against the legislative walls for a long time, we began discussing creative ways to more directly influence the markets," says Kinsman. In partnership with consumers, food safety groups, and farmers, board members worked to identify and address the main

problems facing small family dairy farms. Many meetings later, they identified the primary targets for action: milk price fluctuations resulting in farm financial insecurity, artificially low milk prices in relation to dairy product prices in the store, and food quality and environmental deterioration due to conglomerate dairy industry practices.

Realizing that producers and consumers needed to team up to attack unfair economic practices, they approached Bob Wills at Cedar Grove Cheese, a dairy processor in Plain, Wisconsin, to ask for guidance and support. "We decided to market a cheese brand based on a fair relationship between trading partners, providing consumers an opportunity to vote for family dairy farms with their food dollars, and providing family dairy farmers financial security," says Francis Goodman, Wonewoc, Wisconsin, dairy farmer and member of Family Farm Defenders.

Family Farm Defenders believes their pricing structure gives farmers a fair portion of the consumers' dollar. Family Farm Defenders plays a pivotal role by taking the place of middle traders, distributors, and marketers while acting in the interest of family dairies. By collecting a minimal premium (ten percent of costs) from the sale of Family Farmer Cheese, Family Farm Defenders is able to achieve some self-sufficiency of funds, while offering a fair business model that can be replicated at other small processing plants.

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Waiter! Where's my foodshed?!

the wisconsin foodshed relies upon submissions from food system activists, researchers, and organizers for its content. Lately, the editors' cupboards have been a bit bare. Have folks been hoarding for Y2K? Whatever the reason, we would like to hear from you! (See the bottom of page 2 for contact information.)

Whats for Lunch?

news about the food system

Direct meat marketing enhances local food systems and local culture

Three hundred sheep roam the rolling hills of Doc's Summit, a 232-acre farm in southwestern Wisconsin near Mineral Point. Doc's Summit is also home to Matthew Schickel and Jennifer Nugent, second generation farmers committed to sustainable farming practices. Like many Wisconsin livestock farmers, Matthew and Jennifer are facing low prices and are searching for alternative ways to process and market their livestock, including direct marketing. And they are taking part in a unique effort in direct marketing called Healthy Meats!

Direct marketing helps farmers recapture the profit margin they forfeit by selling their crop through processors, wholesalers, distributors, and brokers. However, direct marketing creates a new set of challenges. Farmers who use direct marketing need access to ample state-inspected freezer space and access to a state-inspected processing plant. They need to develop promotional materials and set appropriate prices. Direct marketing also means direct and frequent interaction with the public, which can be both gratifying and frustrating. Little information is available on what direct meat marketing strategies work best under what circumstances.

In 1997 Matthew and Jennifer, along with seven other farmers interested in the promise of direct marketing developed the Healthy Meats! project coordinated by Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (MFAI), a not-for-profit sustainable agriculture research and policy center located in East Troy, Wisconsin in collaboration with the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS). The project's goal is to gather and share useful direct marketing information for interested farmers and to create a model for direct marketing.

The philosophy behind Healthy Meats! is that everyone is entitled to healthful, nutritious food, and a food system that provides for the long-term survival of small- to medium-sized family farms using environmentally sustainable practices is in the best position to provide such food. Healthy Meats! farmers are all committed to good land stewardship practices, humane methods of animal husbandry,

and socially responsible non-exploitive farming methods. They see direct marketing as an integral part of their long-term economic viability.

Most Healthy Meats! farmers currently market their meat at the Dane County farmers market. Farmers markets develop a loyal base of customers and provide a way for farmers to advertise that they can deliver meat direct to customers' doors throughout the year. In its initial stages, Healthy Meats! farmers tried to build on the success of farmers markets by creating a brochure listing farmers and their products and by coordinating meat tastings and other publicity.

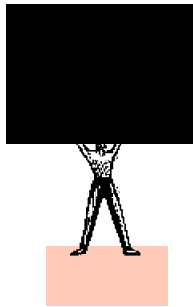
Healthy Meats! farmers tried techniques that worked for vegetable farmers, but had mixed results. For example, consumers seem less inclined to call Healthy Meats! producers, and have constraints like lack of freezer space or a need for preparation convenience. Once contact has been established between farmers and consumers, however, consumers have proven to be satisfied and loyal.

Healthy Meats! farmers hope to attract more customers by asking current customers to coordinate neighborhood meat purchasing.

This would decrease transportation costs, increase sales, and foster community around food. Healthy Meats! farmers are planning a public cookout with meat dishes prepared by Madison chefs.

In addition to getting the word out about their own meat and farming practices, Healthy Meats! farmers plan to provide information about industrialized livestock production's impacts on animal and human health, rural development, and the environment. A study of the problems associated with conventionally raised meat is underway to ensure that Healthy Meats! makes truthful statements about the meat industry.

Healthy Meats! farmers are working with SHARE, a food distribution organization that serves low income families. SHARE is interested in purchasing Healthy Meats! ground beef in bulk. This helps farmers find a market for their less popular cuts of meat, and addresses the group's social justice goals.



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From Field to Table

research on the food system

Study explores farmers' options: selling produce to retail stores

Small-scale growers of certified organic vegetables and fruits use a variety of marketing options: farm stands, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and wholesale marketing of goods through local specialty groceries and natural foods cooperatives. Sales to retail stores is another opportunity for producers of certified organic produce. While many retail produce buyers take advantage of the rich and steady year-round supply of organic produce from California, some also buy local, organic produce.

Laurie Greenberg of Cooperative Development Services in Madison, Wisconsin, with support from the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, completed a study to assess the retail marketing opportunities for local, organic produce growers in the Upper Midwest. She interviewed 21 retail produce buyers in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, and Madison, Wisconsin.

Produce buyers cited numerous reasons for carrying local, organic produce. It is generally considered of good quality and appeals to some consumers who prefer organic food. Buyers saw numerous advantages to locally-raised produce:

- g** Locally grown product is preferred by customers; people love it.
- g** Some customers want to support local farmers.
- g** Product can be "super" fresh.
- g** Local producers can get their products to the store faster than those shipping from long distances.

Greenberg found that produce buyers are a diverse lot, with different needs. But the buyers cited several common issues they consider in buying local, organic food. Quality was the most important issue cited by all produce buyers. Although buyers can get the quality they want from California, high quality

local produce is also attractive to them. Price is another important consideration for buyers. Some outlets can sell higher priced local, organic produce more readily than others. Buyers highlighted grower integrity as key to building a relationship, and maintaining communication as crucial to deepening the buyer-grower tie.

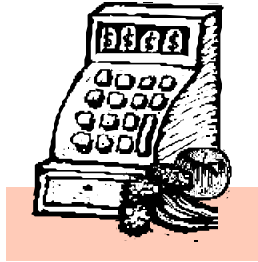
Marketing cooperatively can be a real time-saver for growers of local, organic produce, and most buyers prefer to negotiate business arrangements with a single representative. But buyers had concerns about cooperative marketing. They appreciate and in many cases require product consistency in size, shape, and quality, as well as standardized packaging and

labeling. Growers marketing cooperatively need to work diligently to provide a standard product across all participating farms.

Greenberg offers several suggestions for growers approaching retail buyers. First, prepare an availability sheet describing your products and prices. Send the sheet to buyers for whom you have collected enough information on to know that their needs match what you have to offer. Have a knowledgeable, professional growers' representative meet with the buyers, and work out sale details. And finally, keep in touch with the buyer.

Many opportunities are available for growers interested in selling to retail stores. They can join an existing cooperative, form a new cooperative, or work out another kind of arrangement. But maintaining relationships and paying attention to details are key to making it work.

CIAS *Research Brief #38* discusses the study in more detail. For more information, contact Cooperative Development Services at (608) 258-4396.



Direct meat marketing

from page two

Along with these marketing initiatives, Healthy Meats! farmers are interested in addressing barriers to direct marketing. For example, finding affordable, local processing facilities has been a difficult task for Healthy Meats! farmers. Processing problems will need to be addressed strategically by policy makers to create a business environment that is friendly to small- and medium-size farmers. Ultimately, Healthy Meats! will partner with CIAS to evaluate the merit and drawbacks of various direct marketing strategies and policy options.

Matthew and Jennifer work hard to keep the values of good stewardship alive and their sustainable farming approach might be lost without new solutions and support. Direct marketing is one tool to help farms thrive today . . . and survive for generations to follow.

For more information about Healthy Meats! or for a producer brochure, please contact project coordinator, Derek V. Lee at (608) 257-1660 or e-mail him at derlee@itis.com

—contributed by Derek Lee

Family Farmer Cheese *from page one*

The third and most crucial step is finding consumers to buy Family Farmer Cheese, and getting it to them in a convenient manner. Until recently, Family Farm Defenders gourmet cheese has been available only by mail order. Yet to make a significant

and lasting difference for the farmers, the organizers knew that their products must be more accessible. This year, the group offers new ways of becoming a consumer of Family Farmer Cheese. And anyone who takes delight in eating delectable hand-made gourmet cheese is qualified.

One way to get the cheese is for consumers to join together into groups of "Family Farmer Friends" to place a total cheese order of 50 pounds or more. Family Farm Defenders is offering eight varieties of handmade cheeses at \$3.80-\$4.10 per lb. Built into this price is 50 cents per pound for the Family Farmer Friends group to use as a fundraiser or to cover shipping costs (if the cheese must be delivered outside of their existing truck route). Church or community groups that meet regularly, or Community Supported Agriculture farms can also act as links from producer to consumer in solidarity with family dairy farms.

If you are interested in forming a cheese buying group, or would like to learn more, please call (608) 255-1086 and leave a message for Alicia Leinberger or e-mail her at aguilatres@yahoo.com

—contributed by Alicia Leinberger

Table Settings

g According to the Organic Trade Association's July, 1998, newsletter, Wisconsin has 900 certified organic acres. Only three states have more: Texas (18,000 acres), California (13,765), and Florida (1,312). Idaho also has 900 acres.

g Wisconsin had 16.4 million acres of agricultural land in 1998, making certified organic acres one half of one percent of the total.

g According to the 1997 USDA Census, Wisconsin has 3,843 farms engaged in direct marketing, ranking eighth nationwide. (California has the most with 5,901.)

g The value of direct market sales in Wisconsin was \$21,866,000 in 1997, ranking sixth nationwide. (California was first at \$73,179,000.)

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