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Does Organic Mean Healthy for Dairy Cows?

A \$1 million USDA grant will explore the animal health and welfare of dairy cows on organic farms



Organic food has traditionally been associated with a certain subculture: granola, health food, and Birkenstocks. In the 20th century, though, a growing number of people began to question the effects of widespread fertilizer and pesticide use on rivers and animal species, including humans, and a movement toward increased production and consumption of organic food ensued.

This growing interest in organic food is at the root of a \$1 million project that will explore the health and well being of dairy cows on organic dairy farms. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the four-year investigation will unfold on 300 dairy farms in Wisconsin, New York, and Oregon, 200 of which are organic with the remaining operating as conventional dairy farms.

"This is one of the largest, if not the largest applied research project on organic milk production on US dairy farms," said Linda Tikofsky a co-principal investigator and Senior Extension Associate at Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine. "The study allows for a comparison between conventional dairy farms and organic farms and will provide enough information to look at herd factors within the organic farms that are associated with disease and well being. An important part of the project is to provide feedback in the form of benchmarking to the farmers, both conventional and organic, who participate in the study."

Organic dairy farming is a rapidly growing component of the US dairy industry. Organically managed farms graze their cows during the grazing season and do not use antibiotics, pesticides, or hormones in their day-to-day management of cows and calves. One of the potential consequences of the pledge not to use these registered animal treatments is a potential problem with the cows' health and welfare.

The project's principle investigator is Dr. Pamela Ruegg at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Other co-principal investigators are Drs. Mike Gamroth at Oregon State University, Charles Benbrook of the Organic Centre in Oregon and Drs. Linda Tikofsky and Ynte Schukken at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University.