

AGRICULTURE

Conventional crops, unconventional practices

For rural Freeman brothers Stan and Will Ortman and their families, 'organic' has not just become their work, but also their way of life

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FOR THE COURIER

Beef, corn, soybeans, small grains, alfalfa — sounds like a fairly conventional farm in terms of product.

But the agricultural practices of Windberry Acres east of Freeman are far from conventional. Brothers Stan and Will Ortman and their families transitioned from conventional cropping to a certified organic farm from 2008 to 2010, and now have several years of organic production under their belts. They produce food-grade soybeans, oats and corn and receive a premium price for their crops.

Organic field operations are often identifiable by the presence of more weeds than a conventional GMO field of corn or soybeans exhibits, although with weeds demonstrating a growing immunity to chemical herbicides, that isn't always true anymore. Still, an organic farmer is required to practice more careful cultivation than most farms do these days, which increases the cost of production.

In addition, the Ortman families have engaged teams of Mexican field workers to clean their fields, which they do quite effectively. The Ortman families estimate that weeding costs an average of about four bushels an acre, which, with organic prices and production, approximate the cost of chemical weed control on conventional farms.

Mention organic production and most people think of increased labor costs, lower crop yields, weedy fields, and in the end, less income. While some of these assumptions may be true, the Ortman families' experience in recent years challenges the last one. While yields and prices vary by year, fields and crops, the net return per acre on their soybean and corn fields has averaged about \$700 to \$800. This does not consider owner labor and time which every farmer invests. Plus, Will makes the point that in an organic system they don't have to stress their land in order to be profitable, and the fertility of their land increases from year to year.

Windberry Acres is a 600-acre family farm corporation that helps support three family units: Stan and Gwen Ortman, Will and Sherilyn Ortman, and Stan and Gwen's daughter, Lindsey and her husband, Austin Unruh. Going organic involves a three-year process before organic certification can be achieved, which Ortman families went through from 2008 to 2010. Once their fields were certified organic they could engage in producing crops that currently sell for \$8 to \$10 a bushel for corn and mid \$20s a bushel for soybeans. They need to pay a fee and have their farm inspected annually in order to keep their organic certification.

Asked about the financial, agricultural, and social costs involved in the transition to organic, Stan and Will acknowledge that there is a significant learning curve involved, with lots of experimentation going on in the first years. And yes, they have lost some crop

yields in the transition. Imagine trying to establish organic methods while weaning the land (and yourself) from the crutches of GMO seeds, chemical herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers. And, yes, the Ortman families are aware of an element of social stigma involved in farming organically!

The Ortman families use composted manure from their cattle operation as fertilizer. Diversity is a hallmark of organic agriculture, so livestock on the farm along with crop rotations from alfalfa to row crops to small grains are critical for the success of organic methods. Ortman families clean and plant their own soybean seed, but do utilize organically certified seed for corn. Organic farming once established saves on the expense (input) side and pays on the income side.

So how are markets organized for organic crops? How do you access that high price for your crops? The Ortman families utilize a broker, essentially a middleman between growers and purchasers, who together establish the price for crops. Prices are set by supply and demand, with no speculators involved, so the prices for organic commodities are much less volatile than for conventionally raised commodities. Organic growers work together to produce the particular crops that purchasers are seeking, so advance crop planning is

important.

Ortman families note that there is a huge demand for organically raised field grains with the growth in demand for organic crops and foods within the larger society. There is the promise of long-term profitability for organically produced crops. Indeed, they have been approached by several landowners who would like to rent them land to be farmed organically for the health of the land and the kind of crops that are raised. They also note that there has been strong support for organic production from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in recent years.

In addition to the field crops, Windberry Acres — also known as Berrybrook Organics — produces grass-fed and grass-finished beef as a value added product, selling frozen beef in a number of Sioux Falls outlets. (The terms are deliberate: the beef is not "organic" since some of the feed comes from ditches and field buffer grass that cannot be certified organic. In this case the "grass-fed/grass-finished" designation, as well as its local production, is more important than the "organic" label.)

Other offerings of the farm include organic eggs, as well as berries and small fruits. The Ortman families are all involved in the production of these various value-added products. Both Ortman brothers also keep exploring other niches and value-added products and agricultural enterprises.

Stan and Will Ortman are clearly innovative

and courageous entrepreneurs, willing to assume the risks and uncertainties of introducing unconventional methods into their agricultural enterprise. They acknowledge that their system works because they have a rather small or limited farm in terms of acres, and their system would not work as well on larger farms.

Rather than compete with other farmers for more land, they have chosen to seek a better return per acre of land this way. They quote the adage, "It is better to have a neighbor, than to have the neighbor's land."

Stan and Will and their families are also thoughtful people of faith. Their website, berrybrookorganics.com, features this quote attributed to the Native American Chief Seattle: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children." It is their concern for future generations that motivates these Ortman families to produce healthy food in sustainable ways that care for all the life of God's creation.

Learn more about their operation by visiting berrybrookorganics.com.

Rural Alternatives is a monthly feature facilitated by Rural Revival, a local organization that focuses on agricultural-sustainability as a way of life in rural America. S. Roy Kaufman is an occasional Freeman Courier columnist and a member of the group.



Will Ortman, left, and his older brother, Stan, work together on the South Dakota prairie east of Freeman. While they are growing traditional crops, they are fully certified as organic, a process they completed from 2008 to 2010. BERRYBROOKORGANICS.ORG