



**KANSAS RURAL CENTER**  
P.O. Box 133  
Whiting, Kansas 66552  
(785) 873-3431 FAX (785) 873-3432  
[www.kansasruralcenter.org](http://www.kansasruralcenter.org)

## **KRC Beginning Farmer & Rancher Conference Call**

### **Transitioning to Organic Production**

Thursday, October 24, 2013

#### **Call Moderator:**

Natalie Fullerton  
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#### **Experienced Producers:**

**Ed Reznicek**  
(785) 939-2032  
[amerugi@jbntelco.com](mailto:amerugi@jbntelco.com)  
Goff, KS

Ed farms a total of 400 acres. He raises organic grains, forages, and has a cow-calf beef herd with pastures. He uses crop rotations of alternative alfalfa-clover mix with cereal grain. He leaves it in 3 years, then rotates corn-soybeans up to 7 years. Ed might opt to use cereal grain in dry or fields with yield issues. But he uses a strong component of legumes. The forages, of course, can go into beef herd. Organic grain markets have been very strong. Ed markets through KOP (Kansas Organic Producers). It's not difficult to find markets.

Ed farms organically because it's a much more interesting way to farm. It doesn't require the same level of operating capital as conventional operations, and he feels it is better for environment and personal health. Ed used to certify the cow-calf herd, but the beef market does not compare to grains in terms of ease of marketing and a very strong conventional market for beef. Even so, Ed raises cattle consistent with organic standards but for last 2-3 years have not certified. He mostly sells calves into conventional feeder markets, or directly to other producers who are doing grass-finished beef. He direct markets to a few.

**Rick Boller**  
785-389-1039  
Lebenon, KS

Rick farms around 1100 acres of cultivated ground plus about 700 acres of grass. It's all certified, and last year was the first year we certified our cattle. Rick has raised on cropland since 1996. The raise wheat and barley with milo and corn in rotation. There are also some



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rotations of alfalfa in bottom lands. They got started in organic because Rick got tired of spending a lot of money and not knowing what the market prices would be so he phased it out.

Rick advises that if you're going certified, you have to be committed, because it will test you during years when prices drop down near convention. But if you stay with it long-term it's worth it.

### **Jackie Keller**

(785) 633-4621

Topeka, KS

Jackie owns 160 of pasture that's not certified in Wabaunsee Co., and 108 that are certified. She grows mostly wheat, soybeans, milo, and uses a lot of red clover for nitrogen for hay and cash crop as well. She also grazes two fields. She is summer grazing now on the certified field as a weed control experiment / practice as part of the EQIP program and conservation stewardship program as well. Jackie first certified half the acreage in '04, then the entire 108 acres by '05.

She went organic due to philosophy plus the small size of the acreage didn't seem worthwhile for conventions. She had the support of family and the support of KRC to get started with their River Friendly Farms notebook and whole-farm planning, implementing legumes and cover crops. Jackie describes trying to do minimum tillage but it's hard with organic, especially if you don't have a roller-crimper. Using the cover crops, she's experimented with a lot including rye, Austrian winter peas, radishes, and chickling vetch.

### **John Crisp**

620-787-2380

Americus, KS

John runs Shepherd's Valley in NE KS. It's a CSA Farm now 90 acres. They raise 50 types of fruits and vegetables, with 90% being vegetables. They produce sheep, eggs, chickens, turkeys. Mostly the marketing is direct consumer from the farm. John follows organic standards but is not certified.

## **Questions Addressed:**

Question #1 comes from David at Rockin' H Charolais.

**Question#1:** Ed, why do you not certify your cow-calf operation? In David's own experience in 5 years, they are beyond organic according to what he reads.

Ed: The main reason I don't certify the beef cattle organic is because I also do some part time general management for KOP on cooperative grain marketing, which is pretty demanding, and I don't have what I feel is the time necessary to effectively market the beef cattle organically. Given the conventional market is strong; it's been easier for me to just market them that way. I focus on the grain marketing side, and for my own operation as well as trying to build the KOP as a strong marketing cooperative.

In terms of the evolution of organic certification programs, they really got going in the late 80's. We formed the Eastern KS chapter of the OCIA, and the market for organic grains really didn't get off the ground till there was a certification in place. Certified grains really helped begin that market. There was



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some cheating with it, because there was no public regulation of it, so the national organic program was passed in the early 90's. The way it works the national organic program, under the Ag Marketing Service of the USDA, licenses mostly private certification agencies. There are some state agencies. What the USDA's national organic program does is establish the standards, the list of products or inputs that are permitted or restricted or prohibited, and establishes and oversees the protocol for the agencies actually doing the certification. Involvement of the public agency has made it more bothersome; on the other hand, I think it kept out some of the cheating.

As the national organic program came into place, there were a lot more vegetable operations certifying, but the program made it more expensive. So it made more complex operations complicated. If you can do direct marketing successfully, you may not need the certification. A lot of vegetable operations did drop out because of that. In the organic grain market, certification is really necessary. There's the routine transfer of certification documents, protocol of clean trucks, and certified processing. All of that stuff has really been necessary to participate. It can vary by what kind of production and operation you have.

Question #2 comes from David at Rockin' H Charolais.

**Question#2:** If we're feeding grain, we would actually require it. But we are all grass-fed. I'm on the call to determine do I actually need it; an annual inspection? Customers aren't really asking for it; they can come see.

Ed: You can be exempt from certification if annual sales are less than \$5,000. You wouldn't have to go through the process but would have to maintain records in case questioned. If you are labeling as organic, the law may require you to be certified

Question #3 comes from Natalie Fullerton.

**Question #3:** What experience has the group had with labeling? What if folks are not certified organic -- what are the requirements for marketing / direct marketing?

Rick: We're mostly grain producers, like Ed says, to get your premium you have to go through the process. Some people may not really realize what all is involved. The Cattle industry in organic is still in its infancy. But I think it will become more organic with price premiums in the future, just can't tell how long that will be. In the meantime, if you can convince consumers you have a superior product; you should go ahead and do so.

Jackie: On the topic of labeling, the National Organic Program standards, has a section for labels, labeling and market information, and then standard 205. 300 has use of the term "organic" explained, and as Ed mentioned, there's the under \$5,000 exemption for annual organic sales, where you can use the word but not go through the certification process if you have your records. But you can't use the USDA seal or label.

Ed: One of the reasons why the organic beef market hasn't developed as have other forms of organic production is because if you're going to be grain-fed, to feed organic grains at prices they have been the past few years; it's hard to get enough premiums out of organic beef to pay for that grain. Beef production has been a way to add value to cheap grain, so when grain isn't cheap, it doesn't really work.



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The Organic beef market will have to be a forage-based production system. The interest in that will grow when the conventional markets slump in beef or if organic grain markets slump.

The certification program in grain has given us access to a nationwide grain market. A lot of our grain leaves the state. We produce way more wheat than can be utilized, and a lot of organic feed grain is going to poultry. Prices have come down a little bit this year so dairies are interested again in utilizing a little more, and some organic swine production, but really not beef.

In bulk grain sales, we are selling primarily semi loads. So we are not putting on a label you would on a package of organic bread or what have you. So we don't have to deal with labeling so much but the certification documents have to go with that semi load of grain.

Question #4 comes from Julie Mettenburg.

**Question #4:** Rick, Maria produces Vegetables, is she certified?

Rick: She was certified one year, and then did not because of cost involved. She sells it via CSA and at the local grocery store. People have gone crazy over it. I was totally amazed at the demand in this part of the country for organically produced; it has taken off.

When we are talking person to person, we use the term "organically produced with biological products," and talk about how we go ahead to work and till the ground. We are in the sea of no-till people around us. There's a lot of articles being written about advocating over organic, that's a real uphill scenario.

Ed: Some of the barriers on taking organic from the farm through processing, where it gets complicated is meat production. If you are going to certify meat animals, you have a USDA organic label on it. That processing facility will also have to be certified. Most of them don't see enough volume of the organic coming through that they can see it makes sense. So if you can make it work in a local marketing arrangement, there is nothing wrong with that.

Jackie: There is only one certified organic locker in Kansas, in Frankfort.

Ed: KOP once looked at certifying a locker in Seneca but that market didn't develop. When you think of these meat processing plants, they have to have inspectors there whenever processing, and killing. There's way more to meat inspection protocol than organic inspection, so I would like to see the state meat inspection program be able to handle the organic kind of inspections as well. There's paperwork on animals coming in, but the issues at the plant is that it doesn't get co-mingled with other non-organic product. They are doing a pretty good job of that already, it just has to be documented. Clean-down is required before starting an organic run so it takes planning and documentation.

Jackie: If a product is bulk, there is no label. If it is retail, it must be labeled. In complex products, 95% of ingredients must be certified organic. So, if anyone is thinking about getting certified, get the NOP.gov standards, or visit the OCIA.org website to get familiarized. Certainly it's difficult to interpret at times. But if there are questions, OCIA is good about researching and have a materials person. If you have any question about inputs, OMRI.org also is good.



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Question #5 comes from Julie Mettenburg.

**Question #5:** What about succeeding with organic on native grasses?

Ed: Brush or lespedeza control presents a significant challenge. I don't know of any easy way to completely eliminate those if you've got them. My pastures do rotational or MIG so cattle spend a brief period in the paddock, graze it down to no more than 3-4 inches, and move along. One to two times per year if see hedge sprouts or any of the weeds they don't graze-- may be some ironweed, couple of areas where small patches of lespedeza, after they come off it --I go in with rotary mower to that paddock. I'd say on ironweed it diminishes population; don't see lespedeza spreading although in pastures around us. So I don't know if I will get rid of it.

But under the rotational grazing system where I can graze down uniformly, I can go in and mow without removing a lot you would not want to mow off. But in continuous grazing regime, you would also mow off palatable, nutritious forage you just as soon would not be mowing off. If some areas are really out of control, one thing you can do is take it out of organic production and chemically treat it, if you don't want to take entire system out. To maintain certification on your animals, you would have to prevent them from getting into that treated area, and you'd have to document when you sprayed, what, how you controlled access, etc. If you treated it once, it would be 3 years before you could bring it back in. Time flies by pretty fast! If you have a serious issue, it may well be worth treating it, getting under control.

Rick: Also, the word "control," important. When working with authorities on controlling a noxious weed, like thistles here, the truth is if you have a control program and 500 foot back from fence, in the middle of pasture we can use our natural bugs. Even if using spray but intelligently, they can use the word "controlled eradication" but you still have thistles. You may have to do more in organic program, live with them. Control well down around the sides.

Ed: Also, the questions come up, if you take it out of organic production and treat it, then how do you use that product? So you have to figure out some other way to utilize it. In pasture, it could be used for hay production you would market off the farm, and would have to document that sale, retain receipt, and record your volume of product. The certifying agency will check whether volume of sales will be what you might expect off that area. Give it some thought and planning.

Rick: Or rent it out.

Question #6 comes from Natalie Fullerton.

**Question #6:** What are some of the first steps you need to take if deciding to produce organically, some of the more technical things, whether certified or not?

Jackie: As we've touched on previously, documentation is very critical, and starting on it early because of that 3-year waiting period from the last prohibited materials application. Get a hold of NOP standards for reference.

Also, look at your equipment: it might require a few more implements. I was able to get a row crop field cultivator very inexpensively, \$90, and a plow for \$30 at auctions. That's something to be proactive about.



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Soil testing might be something to consider, plus also observing areas of the field that might have problems with more weed pressure in the future. Also, it might be important to really think about what you really want to do and are good at. For me, I decided not to get my own cows as it was too overwhelming. So it worked best to rent these fields to someone else with cows, even knowing that financially I was making in 1-year on rent what I could make on one cow. And: come up with a rotation plan.

Rick: Would I do it again? The answer is yes. The difference is I would seek out more guidance. Because I came from an area of conventional farmers, they aren't quick to share with neighbors. With organic producers, that's not true. So people need to realize there are people out there who will help. When you are starting, you do need help. For your grain, you need to have grain bins.

It is a good idea to know the standards first. It's more work and more work per acre, but it's also a lot more enjoyable. So it balances out, and I feel good about what I'm doing. As I get older, those things are more important. And I got tired of handling chemicals.

Also if you have a banker, see if they are behind what you're doing. If not, you might want to find another banker who can be committed and back you up. The same way with landlords. There are a lot of products and biologicals out there. Get connected -- ACRES magazine is an excellent source, and they have a conference. Going every year has always paid.

Ed: The main challenges are soil fertility, weed control and insects, depending on crop and methods of production. Look at organic standards, but from the standpoint of getting started. The next main document is what's called the "Organic System Plan," or OSP. When you go through the application, you're laying out what your soil fertility program is, and what your weed control program and insect / pest control system is. It makes you think through how you are going to handle products to maintain organic integrity so it's not co-mingled with something else. Organic plan really helps you think through what your production and handling system is going to be.

In terms of fertility, organic works better in eastern and central than west, but you can utilize legumes to fix nitrogen especially with our rain in the east. You can use some minerals -- Agline, soft rock phosphate -- to manage pH and build phosphorous. Eastern KS soils tend to be low, so that's the nutrient in my mind that's a challenge. Utilizing manure resources -- the standards do outline some restrictions. I'd sure know those standards, but livestock manure is really a good soil amendment.

Weed control in organic grain is a challenge primarily with row crops. Utilize crop rotation and various cultivation implements. Not only do you need effective tools, but what we fail to recognize looking back on the use of those tools is the skill that went with utilizing them. So it may involve developing some skills that you're going to need to learn and improve as you go.

For insect pests you're looking for biological controls. In my system, the biggest challenge is the alfalfa weevil, so you have to learn how to manage. Fall or winter grazing of cattle can help significantly. Or mix species like red clover to increase diversity. In talking with a lot of farmers, as they get cropping systems in place over time the weevil pressure diminishes.

John: Generally what we've found with fruits and vegetables is if we get soil in good shape with good balance, we have fewer insects and weed pressure. We still have to deal, but it depends on how much you're willing to settle or reference the word "control" vs "eradication," as mentioned earlier. We don't try to eradicate. We do use biologicals, and with multi-species grazing, for example we use ducks for



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some of our bug-control issues. Chickens and turkeys as well. By bringing those things together we help both with veg. and fruits as well.

**Audience comment:** to control weevil, burn alfalfa weevil in the spring?

Ed: I think that's true. What I understand, there will be late eggs in the stems. Whether through burning or grazing, to destroy those eggs will diminish first hatch and probably will subsequent hatch as well.

Rick: We never leave our alfalfa to grow tall, at least on purpose, be sure you cut it. The more stem you have, the more weevils you will have. Any way possible have it harvested, and then pasture it. Another is light disc. You will think you're hurting it but you're not. Then plant light oats in it -- then at least you've got oats.

Jackie: I heard producers in Sabetha area recently got good results from a sea salt product.

Ed: We need to mention control instead of eradication. The best case of weed control, and similar to pest, is control with thistle by the thistle weevil. It appears that it does a really good job of controlling thistles. But what you see is that as the thistle population increases, the weevil population follows it. As the population gets higher, the weevils do too, but then it crashes -- a wave cycle where the predator species follows. This is probably the same with the alfalfa weevil. Year to year pressure is different. Try some different things, not necessary every year. If you can understand prey species, this might help you do a better job understanding and managing it. One year I brought heads of thistles full of weevils from another farm and threw on my own farm. Seemed absolutely crazy but other years you could absolutely clear the farm with a hoe. Answer is: you leave them alone! So you keep a weevil population.

Rick: The answer is, keep your perimeter clean! (to satisfy the county!) But let some patches of thistles go to seed -- one year we mowed around them ... the last few years there have been no thistles.

Question #7 comes from Natalie Fullerton.

**Questions #7:** There were several different resources mentioned -- any others recommended?

Jackie:

-The paper "Organic Broadcaster," put out by MOSES. [MOSESorganics.org](http://MOSESorganics.org)

Ed:

-ATTRA's got a lot of publications on organic practices.

-Rural Center has some bulletins on chemical weed control, crop rotation planning, cover crops. Fact sheets on red clover. Find online at [kansasruralcenter.org](http://kansasruralcenter.org) or call the office at 785-873-3431.

-SARE and Sustainable Ag network, excellent publications -- books worth owning.

John:

-ATTRA for fruits and vegetables

-ACRES for veg production as well



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## **Resources:**

**Finding Your Niche: A marketing Guide for Kansas Farms** -- Pricing can be both an art and a science. A complex array of variables confront producers when establishing product prices, including not just market supply and demand, but also personal values and the needs and desires of the target customer base. What farmers and ranchers charge for their products directly impacts their potential to meet goals and generate profit. Fortunately, setting the prices for your own products offers a fair degree of flexibility and adaptability to market or seasonal changes.

This resource, written by KRC, offers an entire chapter on how to price your products for direct and wholesale markets. Included in this resource is a list of other resources you may look to.

<http://kansasruralcenter.org/strategies-for-profitably-pricing-and-receiving-payment-for-your-agricultural-products/>

### **ATTRA-National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service**

<https://attra.ncat.org/>

### **SARE-Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education**

<http://www.sare.org/>

### **ACRES Magazine**

<http://www.acresusa.com/magazines/magazine.htm>

### **Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service**

<http://www.mosesorganic.org/>

### **Organic Crop Improvement Association**

[www.OCIA.org](http://www.OCIA.org)

### **NOP—National Organic Program**

[http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=ORGANIC\\_CERTIFICATIO](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=ORGANIC_CERTIFICATIO)