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ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



ORGANIC LIVESTOCK FARMING 101: WHAT MAKES ORGANIC BEEF DIFFERENT?

This article was written prior to the tragic passing of Cathy Halonen, and is being published in remembrance of her. Her passion and dedication to organic cattle farming was, and still is, admired among so many. Our hearts and deepest condolences go out to the Halonen family.

WHY ORGANIC CATTLE FARMING PRACTICES MATTER

If you've ever picked up a package of organic beef at the grocery store, you've probably wondered how organic beef is different from conventional beef. When you look at the regulations organic beef producers in Alberta have to follow, the difference is significant.

More and more Alberta farmers are transitioning to organic practices and becoming certified. According to CBC News, the Canada Organic Trade Association says as many as 240 Alberta farms switched to organic production from 2013-2017.

Many of these transitions were only relevant to crop production and not livestock. There may be a reason cattle and livestock have been slower to make the switch to organic. According to Cathy Halonen, an organic farmer in Alberta, it was best for her family farm to transition their grain and hay crops first. Once they'd fully transitioned, they had more time to focus on transitioning the cattle herd. Now, Cathy's family farm is mostly organic, and she said that comes with a range of benefits.

As an organic cattle farmer, she's required to feed her cows organic food. Thanks to her organic crops, she can provide them with her own organic hay and grains. It works the opposite way as well. "The most wonderful thing is that a cow's stomach does amazing things that create the world's best fertilizer," Cathy said. By spreading the manure on cropland, her organic cattle provide her crops with greater growing power. These overlaps between the crop and cattle operations help Cathy's family farm stay self-sufficient.

However, the transition to organic cattle isn't overnight. You can't simply transition your current herd. Cows can only be born organic, which means taking the first organic cattle to market from a transitioned farm can take years. This means organic farmers have to be dedicated to their transition long before there's any major pay-off from the organic market.

MEET CATHY, TYLOR, TYSON, AND DYLAN – ALBERTA ORGANIC FARMERS

Cathy Halonen and her husband, Tylor, spend a lot of time on their farm near Redwater, AB. Their sons, Tyson and Dylan, also like to help out when they can. That's not the only reason they refer to it as "the family farm" though. Cathy's family has owned the farm and worked most of their main section of land since 1905. When Cathy took over from her dad, she and Tylor decided to transition to organic farming. Unlike many farmers', Cathy's transition wasn't as difficult as you might think due to the traditional way of farming Cathy's family has practiced since the beginning.

WHY ORGANIC?

According to Cathy, her dad's farming practices were already falling very close to meeting organic standards. He hadn't sprayed chemical herbicides and pesticides since the late 90s. Instead, he used natural growing methods, including crop rotation, to keep his grain and hay healthy. When Cathy and Tylor started working the land, they researched their options and found returning to conventional methods would actually be more expensive and inconvenient. They would have had to buy expensive sprayers and start working with chemicals they had no experience with.

Thanks to years of natural farming methods and the absence of herbicide and pesticide residue in their soil, the transition to organics wasn't very difficult. Once they became certified for their crops, they started the process to transition their cattle herd. Again, there wasn't much they had to change. Aside from giving their calves shots at birth and antibiotics when they were sick, their practices were almost up to organic standards when they started the transition.

One interesting difference between transitioning crops and cattle to organic production is the time needed for the changes to take effect. Despite transitioning their cattle two years ago, Cathy hasn't seen any sales from her organic herd yet and doesn't expect to for a while. Calves have to be certified organic from birth. The calves she's currently raising as organic aren't old enough for the market yet, but she's hopeful that within a few years, she'll be able to benefit from the organic beef market in Alberta.



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HOW ARE ORGANIC CATTLE RAISED?

When you buy organic beef (or any organic meat), how can you trust the label?

While there are currently no testing of final products in organics, record keeping and inspection are required all along the value chain in order to place an organic label on a product. In fact, the processing plant used to butcher and package organic meat requires the same certification and inspection process as the producer, and the paperwork and audit trail throughout the entire process from cow to table must be available for review during the certification (Canadian Organic Regulations).

The Certified Organic label is backed up by Alberta legislation to ensure organic cattle are all raised consistently and tracked within the organic program. Organic cattle farmers have to follow very strict guidelines. Organic cattle are raised:

Without Hormones or Antibiotics

Alberta organic beef producers do not use antibiotics to treat their cattle (unless medically necessary for survival, at which point those cattle are treated and removed from the organic program. See below for more details.) While conventional farming practices are permitted to use growth hormones to increase the rate of gain of the animal, organic regulations do not allow farmers to use hormones of any kind. Hormone use in conventional beef is always closely monitored by governing bodies to guarantee your beef is safe, no matter where, or how, you get it.

With 100% Organic Feed

Organic animals are provided with 100% organic feed and allowed to graze during the summer months.

With Humane Farming and Husbandry Practices

Organic farmers have restrictions on how many cows they can have per acre of land. Cattle must also have access to clean, fresh water and open air (weather permitting).

These are just a few of the many rules surrounding organic livestock. To learn more about the specific regulations for organic livestock, please see the Canadian Organic Regulations.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ANIMALS GET SICK?

All livestock farmers do what they can to ensure their animals do not get sick. Cathy Halonen said sick animals are rare at their farm, but occasionally an animal will contract a disease her father always referred to as "the scours" (the medical term is coccidiosis) which is a common disease on most beef farms and is caused by a parasite in the large intestine that results in severe diarrhoea. Often, the only treatment for coccidiosis is antibiotics.

When faced with coccidiosis or other serious diseases that can't be treated naturally, Cathy often has to make the decision to treat the animal with antibiotics in order to save its life (remember that humane farming practices are an important part of the organic guidelines). Once an animal has been treated with antibiotics, that animal is removed from the organic program. Strict documentation, tagging, and record-keeping ensures any animal that has been treated is no longer certified organic. It can, however, still be sold in the conventional market.

According to Cathy, prevention is half the battle when it comes to sickness. Farmers have access to natural supplements to help with the prevention of disease. Cathy said one prevalent condition in her herd is known as foot rot (bovine interdigital necrobacillosis). One of the major causes for foot rot is a mineral deficiency resulting from a diet low in certain mineral supplements. Cathy uses an approved selenium supplement to help keep her cattle healthy which in turn helps prevent foot rot.

HOW ARE ORGANIC CATTLE TRACKED?

Sometimes, animals raised organically are removed from the organic program. For example, when an animal gets sick and needs a treatment that doesn't fall within the organic regulations, that animal's certified organic status is revoked. But how can farmers tell the difference and know which beef animals are under the organic program and which aren't?

In order to ensure the organic status and full health history of all cattle is accurately applied to each animal in her herd, Cathy uses a double-tagging procedure. The first ear tag a calf receives when it's born is created at the farm. This tag assigns the animal a number and a year of birth, which helps Cathy track her animals easily and refer back to their paperwork. Cathy's farm also uses the CCIA (Canadian Cattle Identification Agency) tagging program. These are government-issued RFID (radio frequency identification) ear tags that can be easily read by a scanner at the stockyards. This ensures paperwork and health histories can be matched to individual animals, even after they're sold.

WHAT WAS THE TRANSITION TO ORGANIC CATTLE FARMING LIKE?

Cathy and Tylor said a few regulations that appeared to be challenging have actually benefited the farm. For example, when they stopped administering vaccines to newborn calves, the disease rate didn't increase. This saved the farm the cost of vaccines and the calves were less stressed. Record-keeping was another major issue. Each cow is individually certified under the organic program. Cathy said this makes for a lot of paperwork, but it actually helps her track her animals more easily and effectively.

WAYS TO LEARN MORE

Do you want to learn more about what organically-grown means in Alberta? Would you value monthly updates on Alberta's local organic sector – including legislation, farming practices, GMO regulation, and more? Now you can receive it the way you want to:

- **By Email** – Become a member of Organic Alberta and we'll deliver our latest article directly into your inbox.
- **By Facebook Messenger** – Be the first to read the latest information.
- **By Browser Notification** – Receive convenient notifications of new content the next time you're online.

