



July 10, 2015

Walker County Agriculture News Update

Greetings from the Walker County, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension office!

We are pleased to introduce our newest member to the Walker County AgriLife staff. Elizabeth LaSalvia has joined us as an Extension Assistant Ag/4-H. Elizabeth will be with us for one year as part of a state funded project being conducted by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension.

When you have the opportunity, stop by and meet Elizabeth. Be sure to say hello when you see the Extension Crew out and about. We are excited to have her here.



New option on pesticide licensing training:

Everything is online it seems, and the training class to obtain a Texas Department of Agriculture Pesticide Applicator License is also. If you can't wait for a class to form here at the Extension office (2 per year \$60.00), then you can take it over the internet. Online training costs \$75.00

<http://agrilife.org/aes/how-to-obtain-a-private-applicator-license/>

Visit us on Facebook at:
WalkerCo TxAgriLife
Or on the web at:
<http://walker.agrilife.org>

Soil Testing Education for New Landowners

The Cooperative Extension Program at PVAMU-CEP will be partnering with The 100 Ranchers Inc. to conduct a series of Soil Health Workshop focusing on Soil Testing. The program will be conducted by Dr. Richard Griffin Professor/Research Scientist at Prairie View A&M University and Dennis Brezina Zone 4 Soil Scientist with NRCS. The workshops are supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under "Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program Grant"

The Walker County Mentorship Program will be conducted at Red Hill Ranch, August 21, 2015 @ 9:30 am. Red Hill Ranch is located at 2572 FM 980, Huntsville, TX 77320. To register: email kratcliff@100ranchers.org or call 214-676-3357.

Texas A&M Beef Cattle Short Course, August 3-5, 2015

The largest beef cattle educational program in the state is coming up! You can find program information, schedule and registration information at <http://beefcattleshortcourse.com/>

In This Issue:

- **A DISCUSSION OF ORGANIC PRODUCTION CHALLENGES**

The challenge of education and agricultural concepts:

Did I mention the internet in my last article? It seems like this is going to be a reoccurring connection for this series of information.

The news services that I follow tend to produce headlines that draw my interest which quite honestly focus toward topics that I hear about from many of you who I am in contact with. The basic premise of Extension Education is to support our grassroots clientele with information that they find of interest or that which is needed in the community.

I have been watching these topics closely over the past weeks with the identification of alternative agriculture as a general topic and specific notation of organic production being indicated as issues of importance. These issues were identified during our AgriLife Extension, Texas Community Futures Forum as topics of great interest in Walker County. In response I plan to work to address some of these topics when possible in our newsletters and educational programming.

A discussion of organic production challenges and opportunities

By Reggie Lepley, CEA-Ag

Let's think about the often time quote, Ben Franklin's old saying of "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." This is a sound premise to live by as long as it fits your active employment model. I have to say it was presented to me as good advice as well, during my formative years.

Without a doubt organic products are of interest to many individuals. The health aspects of such products are most often the prime reason for the interest. Other statements of affirmation which I hear mentioned include the freshness or quality of the product. Although those two items aren't necessarily interchangeable that is the general reference which is being alluded to by the people providing their opinions on the subject.

What would make Ben's quote fit into a discussion of organic production? Stay with me a bit on this.

Healthy:

Most will agree nowadays, that it's better to not cook our fresh vegetables quite so hard. After all, we don't want to lose all those good vitamins and minerals. I have had to work at it with a bit of effort to become accustomed to crunchy green beans and such.

I have to admit, I sort of like them that way now.

I still think if you want to get down to the base of an issue, you have to boil it out to see what is underneath the surface. If you look closely at the individual promoted benefits of organic production, the boiled down standouts are; health, increased income for the farmer, and sustainability.

Health is the big selling point. People want organic products because of the health perception. Any product with a built in marketing campaign is a number of steps in the right direction for the producer and the end retailer. After all, how do you sell somebody something they don't think they are in need of?

The facts show very clearly that there is no difference in health benefits based on nutritional composition between organic and conventional produced vegetables. Put down your stick, that horse won't be getting up.

Other health issues that come into play will include the use of pesticides or fertilizers in the growth of the products. Is that a concern?

Well I would say yes, we should be concerned. We should be concerned to the point that we handle our food items appropriately when preparing them. I always want my vegetables washed thoroughly prior to any precook processing. To me this falls into the common sense category.

We recently had a big discussion on mushrooms at our house.

One family member was of the impression that the package of mushrooms being added to the evening salad was prewashed and "good to go". The other two of us had much different opinions. Thankfully my viewpoint carried the day with the argument of, "I have been in the grow house there and I know what those things grow in". After a reminder of the nutrient substrate material utilized in the production of mushrooms, everybody agreed that washing to insure the cleanliness of the product was a really good idea.

My point is regardless of whether we are talking about potential pesticide or "fertilizer" contamination, handling our food in a responsible safe manner is a good practice to be adopted.

Those of you in the know about mushroom production will know the substrate I was referring to is a totally natural organic product. Now let me be clear, when I said it was an organic product I am meaning by definition, not by law or certification. Think about what that means. Is it possible that that can be somewhat of a two way street?

As far as pesticides are concerned, we also need to insure the surface of the product is free of contamination so give it a thorough wash to make sure. Other safety factors which are in place come down to the laws and regulations placed on the pesticide use in our country by the EPA. These "laws and regs" as we call them include a thorough testing procedure to insure safe and acceptable residues. These numbers are getting smaller as our technology is advancing. There is no such thing as zero anymore.

I have to be very honest here. Commercially produced vegetables treated with pesticides bother me much less than many homeowners treated vegetables out in the back yard garden. You may have just raised an eyebrow at that statement.

The basis of my thought process is that our commercial producers are much more aware of how their economic inputs affect their bottom line and are thus more likely to follow label rates much more closely. These are the same people who regularly integrate recommended IPM practices into their production system. One of the benefits of IPM is being able to catch an issue before it happens or shortly thereafter with a less toxic address.

In my last article, you may remember that I mentioned helping people with their problems. I work with many home gardeners who don't see their problem until it's at the point of the final option. I rest my case.

Sorry, I got ahead of myself. Certified organic does not mean pesticide free. Look it up.

Food safety is important to us. We spend a lot of time educating our youth livestock exhibitors as to the fact that natural does not mean safe. Just because somebody claims a product is “all natural”, and even if it is, there is no assurance that it is safe from residue testing or causing a potential issue.

We should apply the same logic to our organic pesticide products. I am not meaning only the commercial products. Folks this also includes the homemade pest and weed control recipes you see on the internet made from stuff you have under your kitchen cabinets.

Wealthy:

This may be the item that prompted this article. Organic products bring a premium at retail. End of story. Have I used that phrase already?

Or maybe that is the start of the story.

The attractiveness of a crop that brings a premium draws lots of quick interest from our agrarian producers. The concept works with livestock and cattle raisers just like vegetable, fruit and grain farmers. We talked about built in marketing campaigns already.

The article I was reading when I began thinking about writing this little informational piece mentioned a price premium published in PNAS by a couple of professors at Washington State University of 22 to 35 percent for organic products vs. conventional. The hook was set.

PNAS is the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America. I was interested enough to look it up. They reeled me in.

The actual article quoted requires a membership to view the full text. There is a short term option if you are inclined to spend a few dollars; however, most of the figures which caught my attention can be seen in the abstract. Here is the link <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/24/7611.abstract>

We all see the organic movement growing. Something must be up, I am writing an article on the topic after all.

Here is the kicker. The article that caught my eye was titled “*Farmers abandoning organic farming despite lure of higher price premiums*”. This was written by Andrew Porterfield and published by the Genetic Literacy Project (July 7, 2015). It is online also, <http://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2015/07/07/farmers-abandoning-organic-farming-despite-lure-of-higher-price-premiums/>

Mr. Porterfield also discussed the following items:

- Amount of labor required for organic production 7-13% higher (reported in the PNAS article).
- Breakeven between organic and conventional systems only had to be 5-7% (reported in the PNAS article).
- Organic yields range 10-18% lower than conventional (reported in the PNAS article).

I don't plan on chasing the rabbit of why organic producers are getting out as that is not my purpose. Read Mr. Porterfield's article if that interests you.

The direction I am going with this is if organic production numbers are such as reported above, then why don't more of us adapt this model? Well..

It is going to come down to one item. I am going to work backwards into it. Keep in mind that I am not an economist. To stay out of deep economic organic nutrients I am looking at this from the common sense side of the issue.

Crops with premiums of 22-35%, which require only 5-7% for a comparable breakeven price, can still look somewhat good even with 10-18% lower yields when you are figuring how to allow your land to provide an income. So what makes this really work? The issue is size. Organic production is most often much smaller in size than conventional operations.

The reduction in land utilized limits your costs. Smaller acreage immediately limits the equipment numbers/size/maintenance which would be required. Other economically important inputs required such as cost of irrigation, fertilizer and so on are also limited by the smaller size. This is sounding good.

Some of the most successful cattlemen I have known worked under this basic premise but in a slightly different direction. That's another story though.

Wise:

So if we can make money producing organic crops, isn't that a wise choice to make.

We are still looking for that one item that produces a tipping point. I mentioned it in my previous article *"A little food for thought on "Foodshed" potential?"*

The problem is simply in one word, labor.

With requirements of 7-13% higher costs, adding labor to an agricultural production system in our society is a hard pill to swallow. As it is there are relatively few of us who work in agriculture. Even fewer who work outside in the heat, cold, rain and such on a constant basis.

Just this week I had someone say to me, "I don't know how people work outside all day." Keep in mind it is July in East Texas. We aren't living in a large society of individuals willing to step out of the air conditioner for low paid manual work.

Oh, I didn't forget the organic is a wise choice because of the benefits for land health portion of the discussion. The sustainability issue is a total wash in my opinion.

Sorry, I haven't bought into drinking the colored sugar water. That particular topic is being used as a promotional item to make you feel good. Feeling good about yourself and your choices is part of being healthy isn't it? Marketing at work, buy the product and feel good, you saved the world and didn't do anything.

The health of the land is important. I do not know a landowner who would believe differently.

Best management practices continue to develop and be adopted by more of our producers. When utilized properly and adequately, conventional production can be sustainable for the land. Conventional farming methods can produce very healthy land when that goal is included in the farm plan. Organic doesn't have a lock on that one.

I think the part that could be improved would be diversity within our production systems.

We have been fighting the crop production diversity issue for years. Unfortunately it is most often controlled by economic issues such as which crop brings more based on the inputs required and the available market.

Early to bed, early to rise:

It is July in East Texas. You have to get it done when it is cool. But with any type of agriculture you can't stop until it is done. There is no such thing as a set quitting time if you are prepping the land, planting, harvesting or storing crops. You stay with it until the job is done. Did we just go back into the labor portion of the issue? You bet we did.

If this is a lifestyle choice that suits you, look into it. The potential market share is growing with all those well paid air conditioned people wanting to feel good. Will organic agriculture solve the world's problems? I don't think so, but it can be part of the picture that is being drawn.

I think old Ben had farming figured out pretty good.

If you have questions or would like more information regarding Extension Educational Programs, call us at (936) 435-2426.

Reggie Lepley

Reggie Lepley,
County Extension Agent – Agriculture & Natural Resources
Walker County
(936) 435-2426



Provisions from the American Disability Act will be considered when planning educational programs and activities. Please notify the Walker County Extension Office if you plan on attending an Extension Educational program and need specialized services. Notification of at least three to five days in advance is needed, so that we may have ample time to acquire resources needed to meet your needs.

Educational programs of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, genetic information or veteran status. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating