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THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Organic Cowpokes

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The small herd of Angus-cross calves grazing lazily just outside this central Utah town makes for a pastoral scene characteristic of rural Utah since settlers first arrived in the state. Their coal-black coats glisten in autumn's filtered sunlight as they forage beneath mountains ablaze with the colors of changing leaves.

Rancher Jon Sundstrom smiles when he sees them; they are healthy and growing fat.

These are no ordinary cows.

In a manner reminiscent of bygone days, they graze on feed free of herbicides and pesticides. They have been given no human-made supplements; no one has administered antibiotics, hormones or growth stimulators. When the calves are slaughtered this winter, their meat will be the first certified-organic beef produced in Utah.

Sundstrom and his wife DeAnne, along with partners David and Kellie Taylor, believe they will find a ready market for their product among consumers who are increasingly concerned about meat safety and are searching for healthier food in general.

"I see no risk at all in going down this path. All I see is an upside," Jon Sundstrom said.

Like others in agriculture exploring the benefits of organic production, he sees a clear profit motive. He and his partners believe cattle raised in the Emery operation can be sold at a 20 percent premium.

The payoff is philosophical as well, Kellie Taylor said. "It's a way of life with clear benefits," she said. "It benefits the land. It benefits the animals. It benefits us."

Seth Winterton of the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food agrees prospects are promising.

"There are people out there who won't put anything in their mouths but organic products," he said.

Industry statistics support his statement. Retail sales of organically produced goods are expected to reach \$9.3 billion this year and are growing at a rate of about 20 percent annually, said Holly Givens of the Massachusetts-based Organic Trade Association.

Organically produced meat has been one of the industry's fastest-growing segments since federal rules first allowed producers to label meat as organic in 1999, she said. From 1999 to 2000, sales in the segment increased 151 percent to \$288 million. Sales are expected to continue growing by about 30 percent annually.

To date, most organic production in Utah has been in crops, although Winterton, the state's organic program coordinator, estimated that less than 5 percent of Utah's \$1 billion in annual agricultural receipts comes from organically grown goods.

That percentage is increasing, however, and organic livestock may add to its growth, he said.

Utah's first foray into organic livestock production occurred in part due to a \$44,000 U.S. Agriculture Department grant the state received earlier this year to encourage organic certification of lambs produced in the state.

Winterton said 80 percent to 90 percent of sheep raised in Utah already meet standards for organic certification because they typically graze on federal land and other parcels that are free of chemicals. Producers seeking to increase demand for lamb have seen organic certification as a way to potentially encourage consumers not accustomed to eating lamb to try the meat.

Officials certified a sheep operation in Box Elder County and did some test marketing, but were unable to find buyers willing to pay more for the lamb, Winterton said. He and others involved in the effort are deciding whether to try again.

Although consumers increasingly seek out organic goods, building markets for new entrants in the category still is difficult.

Other challenges exist as well, Winterton said.

For meat to carry an organic label, it must be processed in a certified-organic facility. To earn organic certification, processors must demonstrate that they meet a number of rigorous regulations, including a stipulation that organically produced meat will not come in contact with other meat.

The headache and paperwork involved in earning the certification is not worth it to processors who cannot be guaranteed they will get

enough meat to process to make it worth their while, said LeRoy Loftus of Loftus Meats in Richfield.

He investigated trying to get his business certified but decided against it, wary that organic livestock production may not take off.

"Sometimes with these things, after the new wears off, people decide the extra price isn't worth it to them and they go back to buying what they were buying before," he said.

Winterton said organic producers have to be dedicated.

Paperwork involved is significant and it takes time to meet the standards to earn certification, so once producers realize the effort involved, they sometimes lose their initiative.

"It can't be just about money," he said. "People have to reflect the philosophy or they're not going to be successful."

The Taylors and the Sundstroms agree, saying they adopted organic cattle ranching after already realizing the benefits of organics through other types of involvement in the industry.

David Taylor in 1986 began making organic fertilizer composed of humic shale mined on school trust land in Emery County and other natural materials. The fertilizer produced by his company, Live Earth Products of Emery, now is sold worldwide, as are animal and human nutritional supplements he has added to his product line.

Sundstrom has used the fertilizer to grow organically produced hay; that is how the pair became partners in the cattle business.

They know marketing a new product is difficult, but they are optimistic.

Already, the calves that make up their first herd are spoken for by individuals who want to buy them. **David Taylor** said initial conversations with restaurateurs in Utah and Nevada suggest his operation will be able to sell as much beef as it can produce.

"No one is touching the market in Utah right now," he said.

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