

Tools for Transition Project Profile¹: Marion and Christina Linn
Cattle Ranch in Pine River, MN
Advice: Work with Agencies for Financing, Support



Background. Marion and Christina Linn operate a 1,000 acre ranch in Pine River, Minnesota on land that has been in the family for four generations. They are following in the footsteps of Marion’s father – raising Black Angus feeder calves.

Decision to Transition. In fall 2008, however, Marion and Christina broke with tradition by certifying their land as organic and bringing in 175 already certified cow-calf pairs from Canada. “We liked the idea of healthier animals and were already managing our pastures according to organic rules,” says Christina. “We applied for certification when the Canadian herd became available.” Although the Linn’s land easily qualified for certification, the animals arrived two weeks before certification could be awarded and the animals lost their organic status. “The loan process for the animals just moved more

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quickly than the certification paperwork,” says Christina. “But we continued organic practices and [in 2009] our first calves were certified.”

Each year, the Linn’s wean 180 calves. Calves are weaned at six months of age. Weaning occurs twice each year to correspond with the Linn’s early fall and spring calving schedule. Feeder calves are grazed and fed field crops such as alfalfa hay, oats and peas until being sold for finishing. The Linns rotate animals every 3-5 days depending on pasture conditions. Pastures are improved and regularly maintained through soil conditioning, frost-seeding and manure applications in fall.

Transition Challenges. Despite the relatively smooth transition to organic four years ago, the Linns continue to face some challenges: sourcing organic inputs, winning community acceptance of their “unusual farming practices” and finding markets that offer a premium for organic yearlings.

Sourcing Inputs. The Linn family (including Marion’s father) typically sourced winter hay and feed from nearby farmers and occasionally purchased seed, lime and fertilizer from a conventional supplier 25 miles away. Since certifying, however, Marion and Christina have found it difficult, if not expensive and time consuming, to source needed inputs from certified organic suppliers. “Marion spends a lot of time on the phone,” explains Christina. “He has to call around quite a bit to find things like fertilizer and lime.” The Linns currently source poultry manure from a supplier 60 miles away and lime (used for soil conditioning) from a supplier located 185 miles from their ranch. The Linns also gradually have been renting more land to raise their own hay for winter feed. “Organic hay has been really hard to find,” says Christina explaining why they initiated the certification process on the rental land, which had been former hay ground farmed without inputs.

Winning Community Acceptance. Although the transition to organic production was relatively easy for the Linns, the social transition within the conventional cattle community has not been as smooth. The Linn family, long-standing members of the Cattlemen’s Beef Association and well-respected within the conventional ranching community, regularly are questioned by other ranchers who ask about the amount of extra work involved with certification and organic production practices. Marion’s father, who has “been a wealth of information” since Marion and Christina took over the ranch and who still finishes beef conventionally on rented land, supports the Linn’s desire to market organic animals. “He understands the idea of taking a risk on a niche market. But he is having trouble wrapping his head around the idea of finishing animals on grass,” says Marion. “We do feel like we are alone in the organic community,” confides Christina. “We’ve been to some of the organic conferences, but there aren’t a lot of people [cattle ranchers] there who we can sit down and talk to.”

Finding Buyers. Marketing has been another challenge for the Linns. Despite booming markets for certified organic milk and grains, organic beef sales have been slow to develop. The Linns have been unable to connect with buyers who will pay a significant premium for organic yearlings and instead have sold animals into conventional markets. “We always top the conventional markets because our family has a good reputation,” says Marion. “But the organic markets don’t seem to be there.” Marion and Christina even considered dropping their certification for this reason. The Linns are not alone in their struggle to find organic buyers. Only 18 percent of the cattle and calf farmers who participated in the

USDA's 2011 *Certified Organic Production Survey* (nationally and in Minnesota) reported selling their animals as certified organic. The remaining 82 percent of cattle and calf farmers sold their animals to conventional markets.

In the fall of 2012, however, the Linn's realized their long-term dream of marketing organically. A buyer from South Dakota purchased 90 certified organic yearlings for a premium equal to \$0.30/lb above the top steer price. The Linns hope to develop this sale into a long-term marketing opportunity.

Most Satisfying. When asked about transition successes, the Linns say "herd health has been very good." Marion adds: "We used to have problems with pink-eye and scours – mostly because the land was overcrowded." Now, however, Marion and Christina "love to brag" that their ranch is organic and that the animals are healthy. "I'm constantly out there telling people about the health of our animals," says Christina. "I tell them, mostly buyers, to look at the fat on their beef; I tell them about the Omega-3's." In fact, one of Christina's long-term goals is to finish some of their own animals and have the meat processed for local stores. "I'd love to see my label on beef at the Brainerd Co-op," she says with a smile.

Advice for Other Farmers. "Most farmers don't want the government anywhere near their land," says Christina. "But we would not be able to do what we are doing if FSA [Farm Service Agency] hadn't been on board." Christina explains that, when beginning to farm organically, they went to FSA "with a lot of ideas and hope" to apply for a seven-year loan. FSA was "really open to us going organic; they really supported us," says Christina. She recommends working directly with county offices such as those operated by FSA and the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to obtain advice and funding. "NRCS cost-shared so much of our seeding," explains Christina. "They have helped us become more self-sufficient." NRCS offers cost-share assistance to transitioning farmers under the EQIP Organic Initiative for the development of a transition-related production plan, grazing plan and/or conservation plan as well as the establishment of buffers, grazing resources (eg. Fencing, pipeline, watering facilities). For more information about the EQIP Organic Initiative, visit http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/?cid=nrcs143_008224.

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