

Shared Dan and Rosie Middendorf
Shared Certification Allows Farmers to Experiment with Organic Management
Forage and Dairy Producer
Verndale, Minnesota



Photo Credit: Dan and Rosie Middendorf. Dan Middendorf (top left), cow grazing (top center), cows on pasture during winter (top right), cows on pasture under irrigator (bottom).

Dairy farmers Dan and Rosie Middendorf have been managing with mostly organic practices on 440 acres in Verndale, MN since the year 2000 – acquiring knowledge, equipment, and solid recordkeeping strategies along the way. They certified their land and herd in 2012 and then did something truly unique – the Middendorfs established an informal partnership with several neighboring farmers to cooperatively certify another 280 acres under one organic certificate.

“Our inspector thought it was a great idea,” says Dan. “I hold the organic certificate while [neighbors] Joel, Josh, and Clarence perform field work. It’s been a great way for them to get started farming organically; to try it out and see if it works.” Dan further explains that he is ultimately responsible for

anything that happens with his partners' organic fields. "But they have been very good at following the rules and supplying paperwork," says Dan. "We all want to make it work."

The partners include the Middendorf's son, Joel Middendorf; employee, Josh Grundyson (who farms 10 miles away); and long-time neighbor, Clarence Horsager.

Under the partnership, Dan's neighbors have the opportunity to experiment with organic management without committing all of their land to organic production or paying prohibitively expensive certification fees on smaller, "test" parcels.

Horsager, for instance, who most recently approached Dan about cooperative certification, said that he'd like to "try out organic" on 20 acres. "The certification fees on 20 acres would have been too much," explains Dan. "It doesn't cost me anything to certify an additional 20 acres."

Decision to Transition. Dan and Rosie began transitioning their land in 2000 for health reasons. "I felt sick every time I sprayed [chemicals]," explains Dan. "So we decided to try farming without chemicals and it worked!" The Middendorfs then began managing the land organically in earnest and transitioning their herd with the goal of shipping milk to Organic Valley Cooperative along with five other dairy farmers in the area. "We had medium-sized herds and approached Organic Valley about shipping milk," recalls Dan. "All of us were expecting to certify in 2002 and, combined, could deliver a semi-load of milk every other day."

By 2002, however, Organic Valley was unable to absorb the large volume of milk supplied by Dan and the five other dairies. "Organic Valley only had 112 members at the time and we simply had too much milk," explains Dan. "Today they [Organic Valley] could easily take the milk, but in 2002, it was just too much for them to absorb." Consequently, the Middendorfs decided to drop their certification plans for the herd. However, they did continue to manage most of their land using organic methods. "We sprayed some corn ground but otherwise have not used non-approved substances since purchasing the farm in 2000," says Dan. At the same time, the Middendorfs continued to maintain comprehensive production records, using a hired organic consultant. On-going recordkeeping gave them the flexibility to certify their land and transition their herd at any time when organic milk market conditions improved.

The Middendorf's decision to certify ultimately came in late 2012 when they lost their inexpensive, conventional source of livestock feed: Hunt Wesson potato peels. "At that point it made more sense financially to go organic, feed organic forage from our farm, and obtain an organic premium for our milk than to feed and market conventionally," says Dan.

There are other savings too for the partners. By using Dan's equipment, which is run strictly on organic fields, they save on "cleanout" as would be otherwise required when managing a "split" operation (moving equipment from conventional to organic fields). Most importantly however, Dan provides his partners with something that money can't buy: 15 years of organic management experience.

What's in it for Dan? Much of his neighbors' acreage now under organic management abuts the Middendorf farm. Dan no longer needs to maintain a buffer along these stretches. More importantly, Dan has a guaranteed supply of supplemental organic feed for his dairy herd right next door and the chance to mentor new organic farmers.

Transition Strategies. Most of the Middendorf's land certified right away in 2012 with the Midwest Organic Services Association. They began transitioning their herd of 120 cows in April 2013 with certification awarded in spring of 2014. Cows – a mix of Normandy, Ayreshire, and Fleckvieh - are

housed and fed on pasture year round. “We’ve been wintering cows outside since 1996,” says Dan. “We provide some open-shed housing where they rest and where calves under six months can shelter.”

The Middendorf’s rotation consists of alfalfa hay or peas and barley followed by corn. They use turkey manure from nearby farms to supplement fertility mostly provided by their grazing herd. All corn is grown for silage. The majority of harvested peas and barley are turned into baleage. During the herd’s transition, the Middendorf’s purchased supplemental organic grain to feed since their corn land was not certified at the time and they had been “chronically short on hay due to drought.”

The Middendorf’s irrigated pasture regularly produces six tons of dry matter per acre. They do not seed or improve the pasture in any way other than grazing and irrigation. “Our grass productivity is phenomenal!” says Dan. “People are stopping all the time to look at our pasture. You’ve never seen anything like it.” The Middendorf’s excellent pasture productivity inspired them to try feeding only grass (no grain) in 2014. When they did so, however, productivity dropped from 12,000 pounds/cow to 10,000 pounds/cow on average. “Our goal is to feed as much grass as we can,” says Dan. “But we’re going to have to introduce some grain this year to improve productivity.”

Winter feed is supplemented with baleage grown on the Middendorf’s land and the acreage managed under the partnership by Joel, Josh, and Clarence. Grain also comes from the three partnering farms. “This partnership has made our own transition and continued organic management of our herd much easier,” says Dan.

Transition Challenges. Looking back, Dan says that he wouldn’t have transitioned his cows when certifying organic. “I would have bought a pile of heifers to transition on pasture while milking the cows and selling conventional milk until the heifers certified,” he explains. Dan’s rationale is that, with the combined drop in productivity and increase in feed costs when feeding organically it is difficult to make enough money transitioning the dairy cows, even with a transition premium of \$2/cwt milk. “At the end of transition, I would have simply sold the conventional cows and started milking the heifers as they calved,” says Dan. “In the meantime, during transition, I would have been making money on the conventional cows.”

Most Satisfying. The Middendorf’s find great satisfaction in raising healthy, productive pasture; mentoring three neighboring farmers; and working with Organic Valley Cooperative. “I can’t believe how much [Organic Valley] care[s] about their farmers. I’ve never dealt with anyone like that before. You feel a part of their family,” says Dan. “A lot of them have been to our farm – they know who we are and where we are. They have been so helpful.” From a business perspective, Dan says that “knowing a full year ahead of time what they’re going to pay us” has made planning much easier. “Working with Organic Valley and knowing what you’ll be paid in advance is very different than selling conventional milk and finding out what you’ll get paid *after* you ship.”

Words of Advice. “Find a neighbor or experienced organic farmer that you can partner with if you’re interested in trying out organics,” says Dan. “This is the best way to learn and can save you both some money as long as you share common goals and communicate.” Dan invites anyone considering transition to visit the farm: “Our door is always open and we’re happy to show off the pastures!”