

Tools for Transition Project¹
Lars and Melissa Rowe
Battle Lake, MN
Certified and Transitioning Dairy Farmers
Take Home Message: Stick With It!

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mindjourney1962.wordpress.com.



Looking back on their transition experience, Minnesota dairy farmers Lars and Melissa Rowe wish they had just “stuck with it.” They began transitioning all of their cropland in 2006 (117 acres), but went back to conventional farming in the spring of 2008 when they were unable to obtain an organic milk contract. It was a difficult decision and one that Lars regrets. “If we could have just stuck with it, we could have gotten the land certified and just had it ready to go [for when the organic dairy markets turned around],” he explains.

Three years later, in spring 2011, Lars and Melissa decided to make another go of organic farming. This time around, they put 44 acres of their best producing, irrigated land into transition. One year later, they began transitioning 73 acres of non-irrigated cropland. They maintained the remainder of their 222 acre farm in grass, as has been done by four generations of the Rowe family. The pasture certified in June 2012. The Rowes planned to transition their cows in 2013.

“But in August 2012 we heard about 49 organic cows for sale,” explains Missy. By purchasing the already certified organic animals, the Rowe’s were able to “get on a truck” with Organic Valley (and obtain milk premiums) sooner than planned. They purchased organic feed for the new milking herd and converted some of their pasture to small grains and some into corn for silage.

On the remaining crop land, some of which will qualify for certification in 2013, the Rowes have established a rotation of two-thirds small grain with an under seeding of red clover. They plan to take the red clover off for feed and, in the following year, harvest three cuttings of hay. The remaining one-third of the non-irrigated land is planted to corn, which the Rowes are marketing conventionally until certified in 2014. They plan to follow their corn with a planting of rye and red clover.

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The Rowes will continue to purchase some organic grain for cows as well as hay for youngstock unless they can improve productivity on their non-irrigated land. "Our corn yield on the dryland is 100 bu/acre compared to 168 bu/acre on the irrigated land," explains Lars. At the time of this writing, Lars and Missy were applying for Farm Service Agency loan to finance the purchase of a well and irrigator.

Motivation to Transition. The Rowes were motivated to go organic and to transition for a second time for a number of reasons. Lars and Melissa have always been grass farmers operating under a low-input philosophy. This made it easy for their pasture land to certify right away. On the marketing side, the Rowes liked the stability offered by organic milk contracts. "Stability allows you to plan ahead," explains Lars. "If you know what price you're going to get for a year, you can make projections." The Rowes say that the stable organic pay price, which they started receiving in fall 2012, has already allowed them to secure financing and make needed improvements.

The Rowes also acknowledge the benefits of living in an area where organic farming is well established. "We have lots of resources; other farmers that we can talk to when we have questions," says Melissa. "This has been really helpful and gave us more confidence to transition."

Lars and Melissa agree that the transition has gone much smoother the second time around. "The first time we transitioned, we did it by the seat of our pants," says Lars. "This time, we did a lot of Internet research and talked with other farmers." The Rowes also feel that the National Organic Program guidelines are easier to understand thanks to the availability of new resources. "There's just more information available now compared to when we first started out in 2006," says Lars.

Long Term Goals. Despite the availability of information, the Rowes still say that it's still tough to accurately estimate feed needs and availability. "Pasture production can be really variable," explains Lars. "If we can get the irrigation in place, then we'll be okay. Otherwise, it's going to be a challenge to find enough feed [if we were to expand the herd]."

The Rowes plan to gradually expand their organic milking herd to 90 cows through internal replacements and through the retention of youngstock. In doing so, they expect to reach their long-term goal of generating all income from the farm (Melissa currently works two days off the farm and Lars works seasonally off farm). They also hope to make housing improvements and create enough value on the farm to provide work for their two sons, now ages 10 and 12.

Advice for Other Farmers. When the going gets tough, Lars and Melissa say, "stick with it!" Despite the initial set back, they feel very positive about their transition experience, the opportunities available to small farmers, and the organic marketplace in general. "Organic dairy farming is the only turn-key entry point for farming," explains Lars. "You can start out as a small dairy because it requires a small investment compared to other types of farming." Moreover, Lars says, he thinks the organic market "is going to grow!"