

Is there any point being organic?

There does seem little point in being organic.

The recession has depressed the demand for organic fruit and veg to such a level that there is little or no premium available. The weakness of the pound has also meant that beef and sheep can be sold for more to the conventional market, so again no organic premium is available. Much the same is true for the dairy sector while organic pigs and organic poultry appear to have priced themselves out of the market altogether. So not a good time for organic; or is it?

Government policy looks to the biotech industry

Recently Hilary Benn has been outlining future Government policy at the Oxford Agricultural Conference. Obviously, given the problems of climate change, peak oil and food security there were lots of words such as sustainable, environmentally friendly, low carbon footprint, healthy ect. Now it is obvious to me that organic principles have much to offer if the objectives are sustainable, environmentally friendly, low carbon foot print, and healthy. Unfortunately the Government don't see it that way. They prefer to believe that technology alone holds the answers and with this in mind have increased the research budget for the biotech industry. Even Government policy is therefore not encouraging anyone to consider organic.

Organic principles are shown to be more profitable for farms

It would therefore appear a complete non-starter to be considering organic. However, an interesting fact is that Farm Income surveys suggest that organic farms can still be more profitable than conventional. Generally this is because the variable costs tend to be lower. To understand why, you need to understand what the organic principles really are.

Many people think that it is not doing things, such as using fertilisers, sprays, GMs, in food medication, growth promoters etc. However, it is rather a system of farming that doesn't need to use such things. It all starts with clover and its ability (along with other legumes) to fix nitrogen. A good clover ley can be fixing in excess of 150kg of nitrogen (N) per year. While it is doing this it also provides a high protein forage, improves soil structure and contains high mineral content, which may reduce health problems in livestock.

However, if you also apply N you suppress the clovers ability to fix N from the air. Around this, basically free input, an appropriate rotation can be established allowing other crops to exploit the N. You don't get the very high yields that you could expect from applying bagged N, but you also don't get many of the problems that high yielders, be it livestock or crops, display. Basically the more you push, the more problems you get, and the pushing all starts with the use of bagged N.

Lower inputs equal lower costs

Of course, while getting smaller yields you are also getting smaller variable costs; saving on fertilisers, pesticides, and

herbicides. Farming to organic principles will create a low input farming system that works incredibly well.

The future appears very unpredictable at the moment. As a farmer you need to be considering future trends and trying to plan your farm accordingly. It would appear to me pretty certain that input costs are going to rise. Making bagged Nitrogen is very energy intensive; it requires high levels of oil. Even if you suppose, as the oil companies claim, that peak oil will not arrive until 2035, it is certain that oil prices will continue to rise just because of the increasing demand, driven mainly by China and India.

When looking at the future it maybe worth your while taking another look at a successful low input farming system; organic. If you do want to consider this option there is still free Government advice that can be had. The Organic Conversion Information Service, (OCIS), will provide, in Wales, up to three visits to your farm by an organic adviser to allow you to find out how an organic system could work on your farm and discuss the options.

Stephen Merritt

About the author

Stephen Merritt is a partner in The Welsh Poultry Centre and an accredited advisor and board member of The Institute of Organic Training and Advice and has spent over 30 years working in sustainable agriculture in developing countries, England and Wales. In the last 8 years Steve has specialised in free range and organic poultry production and now offers on farm advice and training to this sector in the UK and overseas.

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The Welsh Poultry Centre, Llwyncrychuddod, Llanpumsaint, Carmarthen SA33 6JS, Wales, UK