

# Demand for organic pork creates opportunity for producers plus processors

By Roz Lehman

It wasn't that long ago when livestock roamed the landscape and rural communities thrived on a local producer-to-consumer food system. We don't see pig huts or herds of grazing cows along our Midwest highways much anymore, but change is on the horizon. The demand for organic meat is growing, and the U.S. organic livestock sector needs to boost production and infrastructure to meet that demand.

In 2019, the Iowa Organic Association hosted the Midwest Organic Pork Conference to collaborate around current organic pork production resources, research, mentorship, and industry growth. Why organic pork? It's better for the farm, the customer, the environment, and it just tastes better according to research conducted by Texas Tech University and a study published in the Journal of Animal Science.

Concerns about food quality and long-term health effects, food safety, environmental degradation, animal management and welfare, exposure to harmful chemicals, and the decline of rural economic opportunities all contribute to the growth we're seeing in the organic sector. The \$55 billion organic industry continues to see the highest growth within U.S. agriculture as consumers take these food values to the checkout line. The market for organic meat, poultry, and fish increased by 29% in sales between 2016 and 2019.

Consumers have greater access to food and health-related information and are evaluating their food and product choices based on their personal values. This motivation is not fading. According to the Organic Trade Association, 52% of people who consume organic products are millennials. They are investing in what's good for their health and what keeps money in their communities. A 2017 Y-Pulse study found that 68% of millennials would rather buy locally sourced ingredients, and almost just as many are willing to pay more. Additionally, when millennials become parents, these factors become even more important when choosing food for their families. We can only expect this upward trend to continue among future generations as more information and access to organic and local foods become mainstream.

Currently, the U.S. market for organic pork is pushing American farmers to expand production and transition to organic hog production. Iowa and Wisconsin are the top two states for organic pork, placing Midwest farmers in a prime position to meet

consumer demand. The organic market continues to provide consistent and reliable returns for organic products, and we know consumers are willing to pay higher prices for organic food. Likewise, adding livestock to a crop production system can prove profitable by diversifying income streams and utilizing farm resources for feed and land management. The on-farm environmental and regenerative benefits include improved soil and water from a range of practices such as varying crop rotations, grazing, and holistic land and manure management methods.

Increased awareness about the environment, animal welfare, and chemicals in food have encouraged a rising number of producers and businesses across the U.S. to provide a range of niche options for organic, clean, natural, and pasture-raised pork. These efforts are celebrated as important steps in moving away from large, corporate animal feeding confinements and towards more sustainable, community-based, and socially conscious food choices. However, clean, natural, and pasture-based claims are a largely undefined and unregulated standard of practice, therefore, providing the consumer with little to no proof of marketing claims. The organic label, with its established requirements, continues to be the gold standard when it comes to a consistent and reliable option when making wise food choices.

The USDA organic label provides consumers with the confidence and assurance that their food was grown and processed according to the federal guidelines that were developed to address soil quality, animal raising practices, pest and weed control, and



Pigs at Jude Becker's farm in Iowa enjoy ample pastures. At a workshop in the Growing Stronger Collaborative Conference in February, Becker will share how he manages his organic farrow-to-finish operation.

Photo by Jude Becker

the use of additives. Additionally, organic meat must follow regulations that require animals are raised under natural living conditions, like access to pasture, a 100% organic grain and forages diet, and restrictions on the use of antibiotics or hormones. Sow offspring are also required to be managed organically during at least the final 38 days of gestation. There is no regulatory oversight for farming practices used to develop other types of niche products. USDA organic operations are inspected annually, and organic products are verified organic from the farm to the store.

Where our food comes from is just as important as knowing how it is produced. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the importance of food sovereignty and the value of local, safe, and fresh food products for our families, communities, and planet. The pandemic has also revealed cracks in our current food systems, in Iowa and across the country, as we saw disruption in food processing and distribution supply chains. But these disruptions have initiated

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innovation among regional food producers and others who can now more clearly see the vulnerabilities of the current structure.

The demand for local, organic, niche pork options has been overwhelming; however, the resources and infrastructure to support this growing industry is limited. We need more small and mid-sized processing facilities. We need more research to address hog health, housing, and nutrition topics. We need better veterinarian expertise as it relates to methods for organic pig care. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to expanding organic pork in the U.S.

Today, life on an organic hog farm reaffirms an age-old practice of farming in harmony with the land, animals, and community. Countries across Europe have long ago turned to organic production and food sources for food safety, environmental protections, and animal health. We now see the same interest emerging in the U.S., providing farmers new opportunities.

Iowa’s seasoned and aspiring organic producers each find success in unique ways, but demonstrate

similar dedication and passion to the process and the community.

One example is the Frantzen family operation, a diverse farm near New Hampton, Iowa. The Frantzens have been producing organic crops, pork, and beef for over 20 years. They are one of only 36 farmer members of the Organic Prairie Cooperative network that provides certified organic pork products for sale online and in select grocery stores across the U.S. The Frantzens are encouraged by the growing organic demand but are also conscious of the gaps in efficiency, infrastructure, and resources within the industry, such as trucking, processing, and marketing.

Another example is Jude Becker with Becker Lane Organic. Becker is an organic pork producer on his sixth-generation family farm near Dyersville, Iowa. He has been in organic production of crops and hogs since 1999. He has curated a market for his organic products. His pork is processed nearby and sold to restaurants and retail locations across the U.S. and Asia. He is also developing value-added organic pork

products that offer other opportunities to retain product value and boost farm income.

Organic hog production provides farmers an opportunity to meet consumer demand, increase profits, enhance farmland, and revitalize rural communities. As farmers well know, there are always challenges and obstacles to address each new season and navigating new territory. Success in the organic community is a result of shared resources and support.

The Midwest Organic Pork Conference is contributing to the Growing Stronger virtual conference in February 2021 to share information about current research, best practices, and technical assistance to advance greater organic hog production in the U.S. Farmers are at the forefront of this local food movement, and change is on the horizon.

*Roz Lehman is the Executive Director of the Iowa Organic Association (IOA). IOA’s Midwest Organic Pork Conference is part of the Growing Stronger Collaborative Conference, the 5-in-1 virtual event happening Feb. 22-27, 2021.*

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