

Survey Highlights Diverse Needs in Organic Livestock Research

In the United States, it has only been legal to label meat as “organic” since February, 1999. The organic livestock industry is still in its infancy, but interest in organic production is growing rapidly. The number of certified organic beef cattle, milk cows, hogs, pigs, sheep, and lambs was up nearly four-fold since 1997; and up 27 percent from 2000 to 2001. Certified organic poultry – including laying hens, broilers, and turkeys – showed even higher rates of growth during this period (USDA Economic Research Service).

With the Organic Foods Production Act now in force, and with consumer demand for organic products growing at over 20 percent per year, research is needed to support livestock producers who choose to enter this growing sector.

In response to this growth and the need for research institutions to understand the needs of the industry, a survey of organic livestock research needs was developed and conducted by Jim Riddle, Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems at the University of Minnesota in September, 2003.

Two hundred and three participants from the U.S. and Canada responded and prioritized organic livestock research topics in ten categories, and submitted research ideas of their own. Over a third of the respondents identified themselves as organic livestock producers (36 percent), 20 percent as organic crop producers, with non-organic livestock and crop producers, researchers, inspectors and certifiers also participating.

The priorities chosen and respondent’s comments revealed two strong trends: 1) the need for a holistic “systems” approach for organic livestock research; and 2) a widespread need for improved processing, handling, and distribution systems for approved inputs (feed, feed supplements, and medications) and for organic livestock products.

Respondents are most interested in the following general research topics:

- Economics and profitability of organic livestock production;
- Approved organic methods of parasite management;
- The relationship between organic soil building methods and livestock health and nutrition;
- Analysis of the nutritional and health value of organic livestock products; and
- Approved health care options for livestock.

The need to catalog animal health problems for various species and list approved health care options and allowed medications scored the highest of any single topic.

This is a summary of the findings of the organic livestock research needs survey. The entire survey report is available in print from the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, 800-909-6472, misamail@umn.edu, on-line at www.misa.umn.edu, or by request from Jim Riddle, 507-454-8310, or jriddle@hbcu.com.

This survey was conducted as part of Jim Riddle’s tenure as Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems at the University of Minnesota. Jim would like to acknowledge the assistance of Jane Jewett, Kate Seager and Nikki Harper in conducting the survey, tabulating and analyzing the results; Joyce Ford in the development of the survey; and Beth Nelson and Daniel Ungier for design and layout.

Over the past 22 years, James A. Riddle has been an organic farmer, inspector, educator, policy analyst, author, and consumer. Jim serves on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Organic Advisory Task Force and the National Organic Standards Board, which advises the USDA on organic agriculture policies and regulations.

Priority Needs for Livestock Research

- Catalog approved health care options and allowed medications.
- Analyze the nutritional and health value of organically produced livestock products.
- Organic Best Management Practices (OBMPs) for least-toxic parasite management for various species.
- Organic methods of building soil fertility to optimize livestock health.
- OBMPs for prevention and treatment of mastitis.
- Naturally occurring sources of vitamins and minerals within organic feed.
- Distribution channels used for organic livestock products and improved processing, handling, and distribution systems.
- Manure management systems which do not contaminate crops, soil, or water.
- Livestock record keeping systems.
- Comparison of investments and profitability of organic and non-organic livestock systems.
- Impacts of organic livestock operations on local and regional economic development.
- How livestock production impacts the entire diversified organic farm.
- Market survey of supply and demand for organic meat products.
- Breeds of various species best suited to organic production.
- Nutritional value of weeds and how they can best be utilized in livestock diets.
- Comparison of grain-based and grass-based organic livestock systems.
- OBMPs for least-toxic fly control, including holistic strategies.
- OBMPs for the prevention of various diseases in various livestock species and breeds.
- Organic management systems to produce high quality beef.

