

Column of Nov. 2, 2013. Editor's Headline: "Going Organic is Better for All"

(Headline is inaccurate)

Holistic or organic management is deemed workaday for some Wyoming farmers and ranchers. The men and women espousing the practice cast a weather eye on fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides: chemical additives, they have found, over time deplete the soil of vital microorganisms, rendering it mere dirt. The only way anything will grow on dirt is by loading it up with yet more petrochemicals. In time, the inevitable result is a reduced yield.

Dennis and Terry Baker have farmed wheat since 1973. "We've always farmed the organic way," says Dennis. In 2003, the couple decided, "to make it official." First, they had to document that no chemical additives whatsoever had been put into their fields for the past three years.

The biology of the soil is of utmost importance. After the harvest, Dennis plows the stubble back into the soil for much-needed mulch. Should the soil require additional nutrients, he supplies these via compost or compost tea. He monitors and tests the soil of his fields religiously.

Maintaining certification entails a lot of extra work. The couple document in meticulous detail each field's nutrient cycle. A separate storage bin exists for each field, and a visiting inspector will arbitrarily test one or the other bin for chemical residue. All the machinery—the drill to plug the seeds, the combine to harvest them—must be thoroughly washed if non-organic grain was plugged or harvested with them.

As certified organic growers, the Bakers sell most of their crop to the Kellogg Company for its Kashi line of products. In addition, Terry maintains a part-time certified bakery and kitchen, which is also annually inspected. There she bakes yeast and quick breads as well as granola bars and their variant, "prairie pies." Her products are for sale at Java Jar in Torrington, Thrifty Foods in Wheatland, and Chugwater Chili and Chugwater Soda Fountain in Chugwater.

While, over the years, the Bakers have reduced the acreage they're willing and able to farm, they have no regrets over the organic label. "It's been good for us," says Dennis.

Ranching, too, focuses on maintaining soil health, which begins with understanding what plants need in order to flourish. Grazing guru Allan Savory "taught me what I know about holistic management on our ranch," writes Gretel Ehrlich, well-known essayist and Wyoming rancher. The Savory method entails short-duration, high-intensity grazing, which duplicates the movements of wild herds of ungulates that bunched up for protection against predators, thereby trampling the ground, fertilizing it with urine and feces, and

moving on quickly. Thus, each plant was bitten only once and afterwards had a chance to recover.

Ms Ehrlich describes how their cattle are turned out onto the range: “Thousands of acres are split into temporary hundred-acre pastures by the use of electric fences, and we move the cattle, sheep, and one guard donkey through these quickly—depending on the growth rate of the grass, it’s about every three days—in order to avoid overgrazing and damage to the whole ecosystem.” The nutrient cycle and the water cycle are monitored closely.

Ranchers using traditional rotations are attuned to the health of their ecosystems as well. “You can say we are organic, all of us, as we monitor our pastures,” says Judy West, a member of the Wyoming Beef Council. “If we want our stock to flourish, we pay attention to our grasslands and their biodiversity.”

Diverse groundcover supports the insects, earthworms, and small mammals that help maintain the vibrancy of savannahs (grasslands) even in semi-arid regions. When it does rain, instead of running off, the water soaks into the soil to sustain plant roots, fungi, and nematodes.

Desertification is not a natural phenomenon, says Allan Savory; rather, it’s human caused, driven by actions that disturb the life cycles of many plants and animals. Sparse vegetation causes topsoil to blow away; afterwards, rains run-off on hardened topsoil. The vital water fails to reach the subsoil. Added heat causes more dry-out, making habitat yet more hostile to growth. Desertification, climate-change, and loss of biodiversity are intertwined and need to be solved together, he writes.

The demand for grass-fed beef is coming into its own, for several reasons: grain feeding is expensive and wasteful; animals pressed into feedlots suffer deplorably; the resulting meat is overly fatty, inducing consumer unhealth. To produce certified natural beef, ranchers may not use growth hormones or promote growth via antibiotics, nor may they fertilize their pastures with sewage sludge. Often, grass-fed beef is available at farmers’ markets.

Grass-fed beef, however, is not synonymous with organic beef, the latter deriving from cattle that’s been fattened with organic corn—a yet more profligate practice than run-of-the-mill grain feeding. At a time when countless families and homeless vets go hungry, does it make sense to feed expensive grain to cattle, only to produce meals that clog yet more arteries, collapse yet more hearts, befuddle yet more brains? We should heed Terry Baker’s approach, if only to imitate her nutritious concoctions. While we may be unable to secure grass-fed beef or even the lean game rightly prized by hunters, at the least it’s within our reach to shun pizzas and Big Macs—and bake our own breads and prairie pies instead.