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Francis Thicke's Radiance Dairy

Organic Farmer Envisions a Sustainable Future for Iowa

BY LINDA EGENES



Francis Thicke takes exceptional care of his cows at Radiance Dairy in Fairfield, Iowa. (Photo: copyright Rick Donhauser)

OUTSIDE THE RADIANCE DAIRY milking parlor on a drizzly spring morning, Francis Thicke rings a bell and blasts a reveille on his trumpet. His Jersey cows amble slowly toward him in the misty dawn, waiting for him to slog through the muddy holding area in his knee-high rubber boots to unhook the electric wire that separates the cows from the milking parlor.

"I used to play this—majored in music in college." He rolls the tarnished instrument in his hands. "It was once a fine instrument, but it got burned in a fire." He turns and leads his cows into the milking parlor, like the pied piper, only with a horn instead of a flute.

A tawny cow named Harmony is first in. A few straggle behind. "It's just like *Rawhide*," says Francis, a gentle man who at age 60 flings grain with the strength of a lifelong farmer. "There are always a few drag cows. Each has its own personality, and there's a pecking order. The older cows tend to run in first, because they're more dominant." He speaks quickly in his clipped Minnesotan accent, punctuating his words with a shy smile or a laugh.

"We don't use antibiotics on our cows," says Francis, who owns and runs the dairy with his wife, Susan. "If we have a health issue, we use homeopathic or herbal remedies that are designed for humans, with doses recommended for cows." After 40-some years caring for cows, Francis rarely needs to call in a vet, although he has called in a chiropractor to reset the back of a cow who couldn't stand up in the pasture.

How do the cows respond to such tender loving care? One statistic tells all: the cows at Radiance Dairy continue to produce milk up to 12 years, compared to the two-year life expectancy of conventional dairy cows. These cows literally spend their days in clover—grazing carefully tended pastures of organic legumes and grasses. If there is such as a thing as a happy cow, they're here.

Working with Nature

But after spending time at Radiance Dairy, you begin to realize that special attention is only one part of the whole picture. There are many reasons why these cows live longer, why their milk is so healthy and desirable that Radiance Dairy can sustain a viable economic base by selling to a small community of 11,000. One thing binds all the puzzle pieces into a complete picture of pastoral success: Francis's basic philosophy, to work with nature rather than try to overcome it.

Francis calls his farming philosophy co-creative agriculture. "Nature has a game plan," he says in his

quiet voice. "We just have to recognize it. Nature, with its intelligence, brings something to the table, and the farmer brings something to the table. Solving problems is a co-creative process, rather than one of dominating nature."

This kind of nature-driven problem-solving is evident in the way Francis converted his herd from grains to grasses, a more natural feed for cows. "Cows aren't really made to eat grains," Francis explains. "Cows who eat grasses are healthier."

It turns out that allowing cows to graze also conserves energy. "An organic farm mimics the efficiency of nature," says Francis. "At Radiance Dairy, we don't consider cow manure to be a waste to be disposed of, but a resource that fertilizes our pastures, improves soil fertility, and makes the grasses more nutritious—thus increasing the health of the cow and the milk. Better still, the cows harvest their own forage and at the same time spread their own manure, saving energy."

When farmers do what nature intended, it seems, they solve economic and ecological problems in one stroke.

Farmer, Scholar, Public Servant

What makes someone start on the path to organic farming? For Francis, the dairy farming part is in his blood. He was born on a conventional dairy farm in Minnesota, working alongside his father and brothers since childhood.

It was while studying at Winona State University, where Francis majored in music but took all the philosophy courses he could, that he started to question many of his beliefs.

"I remember my philosophy teacher teaching us to always question everything, and that resonated with me," he says. "So when it came to putting chemicals in the soil, I thought there might be a better way to do things."

Back on the family dairy farm after college, he saw an opportunity to put his new ideas into action. In charge of spring herbicides for the farm, he decided to skip applying them to one of the fields.

"I just kind of watched it," says Francis. "And I was encouraged with the results." He showed the field to his two brothers, and they decided to try the whole farm without herbicides the next year.

Francis's father didn't like the idea. But the sons prevailed, successfully converting the family dairy farm to organic in the 1970s, when organic farmers were a rare breed.

Francis laughs and says, "That first experiment must have been pure luck, with a lot of climatic conditions coming together to make it a year without many weeds, even without any alternative weed control."

Their trial-and-error approach caused a few disasters along the way, such as weeds taking over the fields before they learned how to do timely cultivation. "It took us a few years to get things fine-tuned," he says.

With no one close by to show them how to farm organically, the brothers subscribed to early organic farming magazines, such as Rodale's *The New Farm* and *Acres, USA*, which still exists today.

"We'd read how other farmers were doing it, and then we'd try it," says Francis.

Francis and Susan left the farm in 1982 so Francis could pursue higher degrees, an M. A. in Soil Science from the University of Minnesota and a Ph.D. in Agronomy from the University of Illinois.

"I went to graduate school because I thought I could help change the system," says Francis. "I soon learned that graduate students are very vulnerable, subject to their professors' opinions, so I learned not to talk about my views on organic."

After getting his Ph.D., Francis and Susan headed for Washington, D.C. As National Program Leader for soil science for the USDA-Extension Service, he worked on water quality and sustainable agriculture. Again, he kept most of his views quiet, trying to effect change from the inside.

When he quit the USDA in 1990 to buy Radiance Dairy, most of his colleagues thought he was weird and radical, he says.

All that has changed now that organic is the fastest growing segment of the food industry. Perhaps more than anyone, Francis Thicke sees the danger in making organic farming the latest agricultural fad. Unless people have a commitment to organic farming philosophical or personal—it's difficult to make it work long term, he has written in the *Organic Broadcaster* and other publications.

"I've seen a lot of farmers try organic as if it were another specialty crop," he says. "You have to look at the big picture, and approach the organic farm as an ecological system, or it's not going to be successful." Francis knows a corn and soybean farmer who tried to farm organic soybeans by substituting organic fertilizer and pesticides for conventional ones. He gave up, believing organic didn't work. According to Francis, another recipe for failure is to neglect inputs altogether—without

adopting ecologically friendly practices to replace them—leaving the crops vulnerable to pest infestation and soil depletion.

Somewhat Francis manages to live several lives at once—farmer, writer, and public servant. Even though he no longer works for the USDA, Francis has served on many national and state boards and committees and is now running for [Iowa Secretary of Agriculture](#) on a platform of greater energy efficiency for rural farms using wind and solar, creating more jobs and economic development by supporting local food production, exposing predatory practices by corporate monopolies, promoting wider uses of perennial crops to keep Iowa's rich soils from washing into our rivers, and re-establishing local control over animal confinement operations.

Francis and his dairy are already known throughout the state. Each year hundreds of visitors—from school children to politicians to farmers—flock to the farm to see how solar-powered organic farming can be done.

"Radiance Dairy exists as an extraordinary model for the kinds of direct marketing to local markets that other farmers may do in their own operations," says Fred Kirschenmann, Distinguished Fellow at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. "He's also an engaging personality. He's having an impact in Iowa."

Kirschenmann also wrote the introduction to Francis's new book, *A New Vision for Iowa Food and Agriculture*, in which he says, "We have the opportunity in the decades ahead to design an agriculture that can be more economically, socially, and ecologically resilient. That is the future to which Francis has dedicated himself—and so should we."

Above all, Francis Thicke is a hands-on, old-fashioned farmer, with his heart tied to the land, the cows, the crops.

"It's hard for a dairy farmer to give up milking his cows," he says with a wistful smile. "I still milk them several times a week. When we first started, my wife, Susan, and I did it every day."

Linda Egenes ([www.LindaEgenes.com](#)) is the author of Super Healthy Kids and four other books on healthy, green living.

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Excerpted from the book-in-progress Green Angels by Linda Egenes and Rick Donhauser.

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written by Will Merydith, September 14, 2010

If you haven't already please help Thicke's campaign by:

- 1) 'liking' his Facebook Page and sharing out of the SE Iowa network. He needs contributions and press from greater Iowa and the entire country to win this election.
- 2) Contribute \$10, \$20, \$50. It's going to take thousands of small doners to match Norhey's Big Ag money.
- 3) Request and send in your absentee ballot now - EARLY VOTERS WIN IOWA ELECTIONS.

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