

Award-winning columnist and Shropshire-based producer Roger Evans shares the ups and downs of organic conversion and hopes that all that paperwork and reseeded will be worth the effort.

Organic option suits our set up

In mid-June we officially became an organic herd and started selling organic milk on July 1. I always think that I'm good at ideas but this one came from our consultant. It was a good idea and fits the bill for what we see as our future in so many ways.

Firstly, it adds value to what we do without further expansion. We only have 32 hectares that our cows can graze, but we have three times as much land on FBT and grass keep that's about two miles away.

We have always been wary of investing money in the dairy herd when, in theory, we could lose all this other land. No one knows the direction that agricultural support will go post Brexit, but if there is any support then I see it going towards the environment and sustainability and organic fits that particular bill.

I will need some support if I am going to pay the sort of rents that my various landlords require. We felt we were half way down the organic route any way – we were already using less fertiliser and making more use of slurry.

If our land were all in one block then we would probably have 200 cows managed on a conventional system. But it's not, so we can't.

We are still very much on a learning curve. There are fields that we knew needed slurry in the spring but it was too wet. In 2017 we put 32 hectares down to grass with plenty of clover in it.

The one thing we miss is being able to use our poultry manure and we have to sell it. But we have moved from broilers to producing point-of-lay pullets and hope that they will be organic soon.

Growing organic arable crops is not easy and that is one reason why inputs, such as feed, are so expensive. But we are going to try. We have worked the land and will work it again after some of the weeds have germinated. If the kale is latish going in, we hope that fly pests will not be such a problem.

We quite enjoy organic farming but it's not for the faint hearted. It's taken 20 months to convert and when we started out, 20 months seemed like forever. But it's gone quicker than I thought it would.

The past six months have been tough because we have had to buy organic cake for the cows, but didn't see an organic premium for our milk. We are due to receive a conversion grant, which we expected in February, but it has yet to turn up.

When you start out on the road to organic conversion, there is so much paperwork to fill in that it's surprising there are any trees left standing. It's not easy, but there is no way it should be.

We have found everyone we have had to contact very helpful and straight, so we will be straight with them.

The biggest challenge that I see in organic farming is docks. We badly need an organic cow that will eat organic docks.

