Holding on to the family farm

Laura Sayre

As a fifth-generation Northeast Iowa farmer in the USA, Jeff Klinge has been producing mixed grains, forages, and livestock all his life. His father and grandfather were farmers, his brothers and nephews are farmers. He got interested in organic farming when he realized that the increased returns from organic produce would enable him to keep farming his 150 hectares fulltime and still make a decent living, something which was not possible with conventional farming.

Klinge's first season as a certified organic farmer was in 1997. Since then he has realized that farming organically brings not just independence from chemical companies and the ability to stay small without taking an off-farm job, but also the ability to farm the way he thinks is right, without relying heavily on federal subsidies. 'When he first got into organic farming, it was mostly about saving the family farm,' says Jeff's wife, Deb Tidwell, '…but since then it's become more of a philosophical thing. I don't think he could go back.' Today both of them value the independence, the intellectual challenge, and the sense of community that come with organic farming.

The Klinge family.

Managing the transition

Transitioning to organic farming was relatively easy as he had always grown small grains like barley and oats, as well as forages, and was used to working with longer and more diverse crop rotations. He was happy to give up chemicals because he regarded them as an unnecessary input expense and also because of environmental and health concerns. 'I worked for a chemical company while I was in college,' he explains. 'I got burned by herbicides once, and it left me with a bad feeling.'

Having experimented with a number of different rotations, Klinge is currently following a three-crop, five-year cycle of soybeans/maize/soybeans/barley/alfalfa. He plans to reverse the maize and soybeans (maize/soybeans/maize/barley/alfalfa) because he thinks growing more maize and fewer soybeans will help control erosion. He prefers barley among small grains because it ripens earlier, it is easier to market and it produces a better-quality straw. He also uses rye and oats as cover crops, for weed control and to protect and build his soil.

Klinge usually saves his own barley seed and is thinking about trying to do so for his soybeans as well, but says he will need to do some research on varieties first. For weed management in his organic fields, Klinge relies on crop rotations, cover crops, a flex-tine harrow and a rotary hoe. 'My weed pressures are different than they were before transitioning,' he notes. Whereas his fields used to sprout hemp dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*) and wirestem muhly (*Muhlenbergia frondosa*), now the troublemakers are mainly foxtail (*Setaria* spp.) and pigweed (*Amaranthus* spp.).

Klinge says he finds weed management more challenging for soybeans than for maize. He also stresses that 'every year is different'. Last year, 2004, was a wet year, making cultivation difficult and narrowing the advantages of organic farmers over their conventional neighbours. It's widely recognized out here that 'organic does better in dry years, conventional does better in wet years', as Klinge puts it.

As for pests, Klinge says he believes his crop rotations and other whole-farm organic management strategies do a lot to minimize damage. In 2003, for instance, most Iowa farmers had aphids in their soybeans, but his were not so bad, suggesting that his fields harboured higher populations of beneficial, predatory insects to keep the aphids in balance. He has also developed a few specific practices for specific pests, like leaving an uncut strip to serve as a trap crop for leafhoppers when he swaths his alfalfa. For a 20 to 30 hectare field, Klinge leaves a strip about 8 metres wide by 30 to 50 metres long. 'One year the leafhoppers were really bad, and they ate through that and then re-established in the field, but generally it seems to work', he says.

Doing the numbers

Klinge can speak with authority about the profitability of organic over conventional farming on his farm, because he has the data to prove it. Beginning in 1997, his first certified year, Klinge and Tidwell have tracked expenses and returns on their organic fields versus their conventional fields, while the farm was still in transition, and then on their organic fields versus Jeff's brother's conventional fields on a neighbouring farm. In 1997, for instance, Klinge made a net profit on his organic maize of US$511 per hectare, versus US$72 per hectare on his conventional maize. In 2003, his net profit on organic maize was US$364 per hectare versus US$34 per hectare on his brother's conventional maize. For soybeans in 2003, the figures were US$240 net profit per hectare for organic versus a net loss of US$132 per hectare for conventional. In the same year, Klinge made US$495 per hectare on his organic alfalfa and US$51 per hectare on his organic barley, neither of which is grown on his brother's conventional farm.

In general, Klinge's records confirm what most organic grain farmers understand: Machinery and labour costs are higher in

organic farming, but these costs are more than balanced out by the costs of herbicides and fertilizers in conventional farming. Yields are somewhat lower on the organic side, but this is more than offset by higher sale prices. Other expenses – land, crop insurance and seed – are usually about equal.

Getting political

The missing factor in such a cost comparison, of course, is federal farm payments, which compensate conventional farmers for their lack of market profitability, courtesy of the U.S. taxpayer. Although there is nothing stopping organic farmers from collecting these payments on their maize and soybeans, organic farmers sacrifice much of their eligibility for subsidies by adding non-payment crops like forages and small grains to their rotations. In other words, the current structure of U.S. farm programmes forces farmers to choose between farming for good stewardship and farming for maximum federal income.

Federal subsidies play an enormous role in shaping agricultural practice in the United States. Commodity payments constitute the major subsidy, and include price support programmes for key commodities such as maize, soybeans, cotton, rice, and milk. Originally intended to give farmers a measure of protection from commodity price fluctuations, USA farm subsidies totalled more than US$16 billion in 2003, with the top 20 percent of recipients receiving 84 percent of payments.

Faced with the social and environmental effects of such a system throughout his neighbourhood, Klinge has gotten politicized. He has travelled to Washington D.C. for meetings and briefings and stays abreast of agricultural legislation and appropriations as they move through Congress. Klinge advocates the creation of a rule requiring farmers to have a minimum of a three-year, three-crop rotation to be eligible for any federal agricultural programme, as well as modest incentive payments for farmers transitioning to organic. 'I've taken some young farmers around here to meetings about organic farming, but it's hard. It's hard to talk a banker into supporting what they would need to do to transition.'

'The soils around here are some of the best in the region', Klinge says, '... but they're also fragile, subject to erosion and poorly suited to continuous cropping of maize and soybeans'. The growing popularity of soybeans over the past few decades – encouraged by commodity payment programs – has been particularly damaging, he notes. 'When I finished high school in 1968, if you didn't know where the soybean fields were around here you couldn't find them,' he says. 'Now they're everywhere.' Although soybeans are not as demanding of nutrients as maize, they leave behind little residual plant material to protect the soil after harvest.

Subsidies hurt rural communities in indirect ways as well, Klinge adds: 'Farmers produce all this grain below the cost of production, then we ship it overseas, which drives farmers in those countries out of business, so they move to the cities in search of jobs, and because of that jobs here get moved overseas.'

Market issues

Klinge actively encourages other farmers to consider transitioning to organic and does not waste time worrying about the potential narrowing of price premiums. 'I think there will always be a premium. Demand is picking up too, which should balance increased supply. More and more, we're selling to the U.S. market instead of overseas, which I'm glad to see, because I think those markets will be more stable.'

In addition to his organic crops, Klinge raises non-organic feeder cattle in a small feedlot for Laura's Lean Beef, a "natural beef" company based in Kentucky. He finishes about 500 head a year, feeding them on purchased non-GMO conventional maize and his own organic alfalfa. 'They're not organic, but I'm getting a good price', he explains. 'If I was purist... I might insist on doing organic cattle, but I think you've also got to watch the bottom line.' The cattle also supply the manure that Klinge composts and spreads on his fields, mostly in the autumn on ground going into maize the following year.

One of the couple's goals for the future is to help expand local markets for the food they grow. 'This is a very poor county, and it's tough to have to choose between marketing locally or figuring out transportation to markets farther away', says Klinge. 'Locally-produced meat should be locally available', Tidwell adds. 'We should have community-based facilities where local people can have good careers and serve local markets.'

With that goal in mind, Klinge and Tidwell joined with other community members to work on a feasibility study for a regional, state-of-the-art organic meat processing facility. So far, those plans have yet to come to fruition, but the project is representative of the practical idealism of the organic community in this area. Tidwell emphasizes that the cooperation and idea-sharing among organic farmers and activists is a major factor in their overall quality of life. 'If you're in organics there's a community of people that get together regularly to talk about what's happening, what's working, and that's exciting.'

Klinge agrees, adding that he finds organic farming more challenging and more rewarding than conventional farming. 'There's always problem solving in farming, but there's more in organic farming. I think we've seen more wildlife and less erosion since transitioning', Klinge concludes, looking out over his fields at the end of harvest. 'It's a nice feeling to put in cover crops, to get the soil covered up for the winter.' Fifteen years ago he might not have thought about that, he says; but being an organic farmer 'changes how the farm looks, and how you look at the farm.'

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