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Green Field Farms stay profitable with superior produce

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By JEFF CANNING

Staff Writer

FREDERICKSBURG -- The Amish and Mennonite community has always been deeply rooted and based upon agriculture, but in the past few decades, that emphasis has dwindled throughout the region.

In the 1980s, approximately 90 percent of Amish families made a living on their family farms. Now, less than 10 percent are full-time farmers, mainly because their methods of farming have a hard time competing with larger farms operating with heavy equipment over hundreds of acres.

With such a staggering trend, members of the community realized something needed to be done to help preserve what was left and ensure that agriculture remains a strong part of Amish heritage.

In 2003, Green Field Farms was created as a marketing cooperative to help farmers stay profitable despite their bigger competitors.

"We were struggling, competing with the big commercialized farming and so if we'd go back and look at the whole picture we had to have a way to produce more on less land and that's one of the reasons why we have opted to produce organically," said coordinator Aiden Yoder. "We have to produce more value and we can get a premium for organic products."

All of the producing members of the co-op exercise organic processes with the exception of one, which produces cage-free eggs.

Green Field Farms also encourages farmers to explore other niche markets such as grass-fed beef or other products that might be more rare and therefore more profitable.

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Membership is reserved solely for farmers who are Amish or Mennonite and whose primary mode of transportation is a horse and buggy. That's why every item their farmer's produce receives the certification seal of authenticity depicting a horse-drawn buggy, to guarantee that their products are produced by Plain community farms.

"Many people put the name Amish or even put a horse and buggy on there that might or might not have anything to do with the Amish because we all know that the Amish name sells," Yoder said. "We didn't necessarily want to put the Amish name on our packages so we opted to certify this seal that can only be put on products that are produced by a Green Field Farms member and we have the exclusive rights to that seal."

The organic label requires farmers to meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture standards including using no herbicides, pesticides or hormones while cultivating crops or raising animals. Yoder said that many of the practices Green Field Farms growers use actually are more strict than the organic standards.

"Really, the intent is to keep it as natural as possible," Yoder said.

Members of the co-op are required to pay a one-time entry fee of \$249 for full membership, but that cost provides them with much more than a seal on their products. Green Field Farms also offers a soil amendment program in which local farmers can have their fields tested to determine the makeup and see if there are any imbalances that need to be corrected.

Once changes need to be made, farmers can also be provided with a mixture that is specifically tailored directly to the needs of their soil as opposed to a typical topsoil to be used for all locations.

After eight years of helping farmers, the co-op now sends its members' produce to stores throughout the eastern half of the country.

Despite the continued growth, the mantra has always remained the same. The way to stay profitable is to provide a superior product.

"There are organic standards but we like to believe that we go more than just organic with the soil balancing and everything," Yoder said. "We're definitely looking at supplying great value."

Reporter Jeff Canning can be reached at 330-674-5676 or jcanning@the-daily-record.com.

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