

Expanded grass-fed dairy production research project to start this fall thanks to funding from USDA

Thanks to new grant funding, current research on grass fed dairy production will be expanded to a larger geographic region and scope, addressing more of the key issues in grass-fed dairy production. This new multi-year research project, funded by USDA's Organic Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), is titled Advancing Grass-Fed Dairy: A Whole Systems Approach to Enhancing Productivity, Quality, and Farm Viability in the US (Project no. 2018-02802).

The project, led by Dr. Heather Darby at the University of Vermont, assembles a team of farmers, consultants and researchers from several states (full list provided at end). This multi-disciplinary research team hopes to identify critical components of grass-fed dairy management that support high quality milk production, herd health, environmental health, and farm economic viability while contributing to a vibrant grass-fed dairy market that meets the needs and preferences of consumers. ***If you are a grass-fed dairy producer, look out for information in the mail on the project, or contact one of us if you'd like to participate.***

This new project builds on recent research results on grass-fed dairy farming, as well as questions from both farmers and researchers. The project goal is to continue to meet the need for educational resources and relevant research to support farmers, service providers, and the rapidly growing grass-fed industry overall.

During the past 2 years of research, farmers and researchers in the Northeast have been documenting basic production benchmarks and practices that may contribute to successful grass-fed dairy systems. In the fall of 2016, a survey of all grass-fed dairy producers in the U.S. (140 at that time) was conducted from which 83 farmers anonymously shared data about their production practices (thank you!). This not only helped establish the first set of production benchmarks for grass-fed dairy, it also helped the collaborators better understand what additional research would be most helpful to farmers. A smaller group of 22 farms were then enrolled in a 2-year research project in which they shared data each month, and receive data reports back regularly.

This new project will begin with another survey of all grass-fed dairies in the U.S. (now estimated 300-400). ***If you are a grass-fed dairy producer, keep an eye out for the survey!*** If you receive a survey request, we hope you will fill it out and return it to us. Also, if you would like to participate in further phases of this project or want more information, please contact one of our project team. This initial part of the project will serve two purposes: 1) to get a better measure of the production practices on grass-fed dairy farms throughout the US, and 2) inform farmers about the project, and identify farmers who would be interested in participating further in this four-year project.

The new OREI project will include:

- Continued collection of information on production practices
- Information on economics and the cost of production data of grass-fed milk
- In-depth research and modeling on how the nutrient cycling and soil health differs in grass-fed systems without grain nutrients.
- Research on MUN (milk urea nitrogen) and grass-fed dairy rations
- Research on high energy forages and utilization in grass-fed dairy rations

- Research on consumer preferences, market demands and potential for grass-fed market growth and expansion
- Expanded educational and networking opportunities for farmers, processors and technical service providers

For more information about this project contact Heather Darby at heather.darby@uvm.edu or 802-524-6501, Sarah Flack at sarahflackconsulting@gmail.com or 802-309-3714, or Sara Ziegler at sara.ziegler@uvm.edu or 802-524-6501.

Project Team Members

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