



PRODUCER PROFILES:

Fresh Air Farm

By Tim King

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SAUK CENTRE - I've had the pleasure of visiting Marty Primus on his Fresh Air Farm, north of Sauk Centre, on a number of occasions. I always leave with at least one remarkable idea. For example, Marty does not grow corn or grain crops on his farm. He grows grass and some hay. Corn especially, he believes, is expensive to grow and destructive to the environment. But he does provide his dairy cattle with a little grain in the winter. Mostly they don't eat it. They just aren't interested.

"I've trained my cows not to eat grain," Marty said. "I started that when they were little calves."

Imagine that! If dairy cattle ate little or no grain, how much soil would stay in place, anchored by grass? What would happen to the quality of water in our streams and in the Gulf of Mexico? How much petroleum would not be used to power large equipment?

The implications of training your calves to not eat corn and to prefer grass and hay are immense. Could training your calves not to eat grain have an effect on Atlantic hurricanes and dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico?

Visiting Marty Primus does get my mental juices flowing.

"Fresh Air Farm is a grass based dairy farm," Marty said in an interview some years ago. "All other species raised are used to enhance the environment for the dairy cow. Pigs are used as aerating machines for the soil and winter bedding crops. Chickens control pasture pests, such as flies and grasshoppers."

Since he said that, the pigs at Fresh Air Farm have become history.

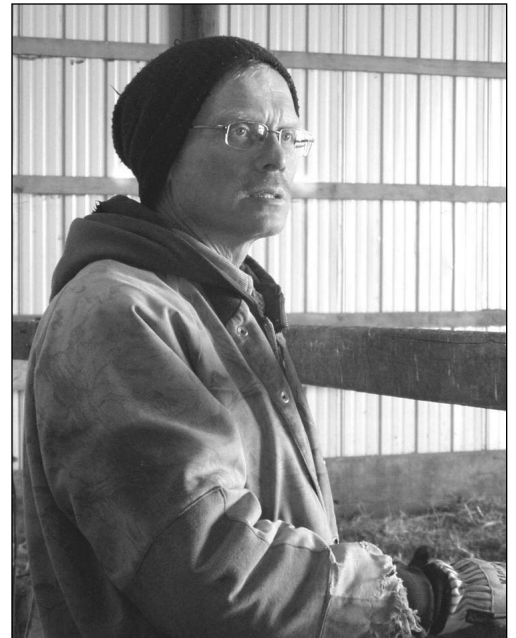
"We just can't compete with the big farms," Marty said.

But chickens continue to be the farm's defense against pests. During the summer, when the grass is growing, the milk cows get first shot at the paddocks of lush green grass. Depending on the quality of grass, Marty may move the milk cows to fresh pasture as often as three times a day. After a day or two the dry cows, heifer cows, and steers graze the grass that the milking cows recently left. The chickens and their mobile chicken coop are with the second group of cattle.

"The cattle keep the predators away," Marty says.

Marty recalls a time when he saw cattle actually chasing a pair of brush wolves out of the area.

He calls mixing the cows with the chickens companion farming. He's not sure what companion farm-



Marty in his loafing barn.
Photo by Jan King.

ing is, exactly. It's an evolving concept. But he gives an anecdote to show the potential value of companion farming.

"The chickens go in the chicken coop at night by themselves," he said. "But I have to go out to close the door. When I'm out there I naturally look at the cows. I might see something about the cows that I would have missed if I hadn't gone to close the door."

In the winter Marty moves one of his mobile chicken coops into a barn. Part of the barn is a space for the cattle to come out of the cold wind. It has a nice deep bedding of straw. Another part of the barn is for the chicken coop. The chickens move back and forth between their area and the cow bedding. As in the summer, they break the cow pies down with their scratching and pecking.



A farm meet and greet. The chickens are Marty's free range laying hens. Photo by Jan King.

"I put fresh bedding in here every couple of days," Marty says. "I spread some whole grain on the bedding pack and the chickens scratch around and fluff up the bedding searching for the grain. Their scratching covers the cow poop that they don't scratch apart. That keeps the cattle much cleaner while saving on bedding and labor for me."

Over the years Marty's cattle have been bred to do well on grass and to not need corn. Recently he's begun working on developing a Fresh Air Farm chicken. He is working with a cross between the White Rock and the Buff Orpington chicken breeds.



Some of the barn's other occupants waiting for a little attention. Photo by Jan King.

"It is my hope to build a self-sustaining flock of chickens that will breed itself healthier and smarter every year," he said. "I will still need to bring in some outside blood from time to time to get more type bred into the breed."

One reason Marty wants to create a self-sustaining flock is because the cost to buy chicks keeps going up. He estimates that it increased by fifty-percent this year (2013). Marty doesn't make a profit on his chickens but he can't afford to take a loss.

"Chickens are my loss leader," Marty said. "I have them to provide services to the cattle. If I can pay for my feed, I'm satisfied."

Whole Farm Coop has Marty's eggs and chicken for sale. Just imagine what could happen if you ate a chicken raised by a farmer that taught his cows not to eat corn!

Definitions:

Heifer cows are young female cows that have not been bred yet. Thus, they have produced no milk.

Steers were formerly bull, or male, calves. There is limited use for breeding age bulls on a farm and they can also be dangerous. Steers are somewhat more docile. They will eventually be converted to roasts, steaks, and ground beef.