

Schueler Farms Finds Niche in Organic Hay Production

Sherman Schueler came home to his father's Willmar-area farm in 1973 after five years as a Navy pilot. Sherman, along with his brother Kevin who quit junior college to join him shortly thereafter, took over the management of Schueler Farms after their father had a mild heart attack. "I also took over a small hog farrow-to-finish business and expanded it at the same time," added Sherman.

When the farm economy went downhill, Sherman fell back on his experience as a pilot and returned to flying to supplement his income. "During the farm crisis of the '80s I returned to flying and joined Sun County Airlines where I flew for 18+ years," said Sherman. "I continued to fly and farm until 2005, when rules required mandatory retirement at 60."



L to R: Sherman Schueler and Kevin Schueler, Schueler Farms, Willmar, MN.

His stint as a pilot, however, didn't stop Schueler Farms from expanding. "Since a small tie-stall dairy was only producing the same income in the '90s as it had in the '70s, we decided to expand and build a 250-cow free-stall dairy." With the expanded dairy and Sherman still employed as a pilot, the Schuelers sold off their row-crop equipment, kept their forage machinery, and hired a neighbor to help custom farm their 800+ acres.

In the summer of 2011, the Schuelers sold off their milking herd, then sold their heifers the following summer. "Even though our dairy was not a very profitable business venture, we had some respectable numbers at the time. Very close to a 20,000-lb rolling herd average, just shy of 4.0 butterfat, good protein, and low somatic cell. This was a 100% Holstein dairy herd," he said.

After selling their livestock, the Schuelers still needed to operate the farm to service some remaining debt. At the time, row-crop prices were very attractive. However, they thought it was unwise to start competing in cash-cropping corn and soybeans. Instead, they decided to go into commercial hay production. "We purchased a hay dryer and have been farming between 300-400 acres of mixed alfalfa hay ever since," said Schueler. "The hay acres have dropped a little as we are now operating mostly organic, with a few acres still in transition."

The Schuelers began purchasing a few grass-fed, lowline steers as a way to enhance their operation. The idea was to use some of their lower-quality hay to finish the steers and supplement their income. They also fed some higher-quality hay to feeders. Now, the Schuelers have a small beef cow herd and produce their own feeders. The Schuelers process the animals locally and deliver fresh meat to two outlets in Minneapolis.

The transition to organic farming was an outgrowth of their sales of grassfed beef into the Minneapolis market. "At the urging of the meat manager at the Eastside Food Coop in Minneapolis, we visited the Grassfed Exchange in Rapid City, SD," said Schueler. "It was such an eye-opening event. There were people there from all over the world. I went to learn how to feed and finish cattle on grass and instead was introduced to the concept of *'healthy soils produce healthy feed which produces healthy food.'*"

What led to the Schuelers foray into organic production? "A University of Minnesota graduate student did her doctorate thesis on organic versus conventional farming. There were several advantages, but the one that caught my attention was the microscopic analysis of the soils from each farming method," said Schueler. "In the organic

soils she found 119 living organisms but only 12 in conventional farmed soils. These organisms are our factory workers that produced the black top soil we are presently living on.”

One other piece of information caught the Schueler’s attention – price. “Organic field corn was bringing \$8.00/bu two years ago while conventional was at \$3.50 or less. Also, with a little research, we found out there is a viable local market for organic crops. The cash cost to raise organic crops is much lower than the cost to raise conventional, but the labor costs are higher. Since growing hay is chemical-free other than fertilizer, all we had to do was utilize a neighbor’s turkey litter for fertilizer to make the transition to organic.”

The Schuelers spring-plant 15 lbs of alfalfa with 7 lbs of a three-grass mixture, with spring triticale as a cover crop. They take four cuttings per year with September 15 as their target date for last cutting and rotate out after three years. Schueler likes planting alfalfa into lightly tilled soybean stubble. In the past, they planted corn following alfalfa for two years with soybeans after that. Their organic rotation is to plant winter wheat after alfalfa, followed by corn, peas, corn, soybeans, and then back to alfalfa. This can be a seven- or eight-year rotation depending on either two or three years of alfalfa. “Since this is our first year with organic row crops, we are still in the learning phase of our crop rotation. We feel cover crops are integral to organic farming and thus a big determinant in this rotation.”

The Schuelers cut their hay and then ted it within two hours. It lays tilled until they rake two swaths into rows a couple of hours prior to baling with a medium square New Holland baler. “With our hay dryer we can start baling at 20% or so. When it gets to 17% or under we preserve the hay, and dry bale if it gets to 14% or lower. In our part of Minnesota that is not very often.” The first five years or so, most of Schueler’s hay was sold to dairies through Steffes Hay Auction. However, in the last couple of years, most of their hay goes to hobby farms, for horses mostly, but also for sheep and goats.

Schueler noted his greatest management difficulty lies in the weather. “It is our most prevalent problem. We have decided for the most part to trust the weather forecast and try to find an open window to make our hay. This has worked better for us than to cut on a set day schedule. If cutting is delayed, we get more hay at a slightly reduced quality, but cutting on time and getting rain on the hay is more costly. There is a market for all qualities of hay,” he added.

The Schuelers have been MFA members since its inception and enjoy the articles and information that demonstrate the vast difference in how commercial hay operators run their farms. “Since working to switch our farm to organic there aren’t as many articles in the general farm press that interest us. However, we always seem to find something useful in *Forage Focus*.”