



# Why we Transitioned to Organic

Welcome and thank you for taking the time and expressing an interest in OCIA International. My name is Kevin Koester. I have been a member of OCIA International and South Dakota Chapter #1 for 23 years. I have served on committees at both the International and chapter levels as well as serving on both Board of Directors.

I became interested in organic certification after reading an article in a local farm magazine, written by a member of the South Dakota Chapter. This was my first introduction to OCIA. What excited me about the chapter system was the mentorship we received from its members in the areas of filling out an application, finding markets for our products, and farmers sharing what did and didn't work in their operation. You do not have to join a chapter to be a member of OCIA. You can become a Direct Associate, where you deal directly with the International office.

Our operation, K&N Organic Farms, is a small grains, corn, soybean, alfalfa and vegetable farm located in north central South Dakota. The grains are mostly marketed in the Upper Midwest. The vegetable enterprise consists of two high tunnels and outside gardens with the produce sold at local farmers markets.

Thank you again for taking an interest in OCIA as your organic certifying agency and we would like to welcome you to our family of businesses.

Kevin Koester  
President (2014/2015)

## OCIA Family Farmer Spotlight Series

*Written by Demetria Stephens, OCIA International Board Member*



### Hoculak Family Farm

A farmer's work ethic gets tested between drought and floods.

Drought in 2002 and cattle markets closing in 2003 took everything Ward Hoculak had on his Lamont, Alberta farm. It was "start over" for the fourth generation, 43-year-old farmer. The world closed its borders to Canadian beef because of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, also known as mad cow disease, devastating all cattle farmers, Ward said. He was tired of spraying chemicals and his brother Sid and him complained about low commodity prices. He said it made him sick to work year round and never see a penny, with most of his money feeding chemical and fertilizer companies.

"If I was lucky I got a jackknife or a hat at the end of the year," he said.

So he decided to make a change. He started transitioning his fields toward organic certification in 2007 with a nudge from his wife Jacquelin and two neighbors who said the Organic Crop Improvement Association was a great place to be certified. It was one of the only member-driven groups and it had a chapter in his area, the Alberta Organic Producers Association. Talking about farms and stories has been rejuvenating, he said. Now he knows where he can point his car or truck when he's going for a drive this summer; toward other organic farmers.

"Basically they were there to be teaching you the ropes," Ward said.

He said he was brainwashed to farm with chemicals and didn't know how to be an organic farmer. He had to get used to plowdowns on his 2,000 acres and he almost had to be told what to seed; not barley on barley or wheat on wheat. He became certified in 2009 and

adopted a crop rotation that includes wheat, barley, oats and fallow. He researched equipment for weed control and decided on a rotary hoe that he had to ship 2,000 miles -- it's uncommon in Canada. It worked fantastic on drier years, he said.

Ward's challenges went to the opposite extreme a decade after the drought, with 2013 being called the worst year for floods in Alberta. He wasn't able to harrow or rotary hoe and saw crops "get a little weedy." Wild oats took over two crops, but it was still a good year because he sold some crops to a feedlot as silage, he said. His non-organic neighbors sprayed herbicides on their crops four or five times.

Spraying was part of the "ace in the hole" for Ward to certify organic. His father Edward, who farmed before synthetic chemicals dominated agriculture, was proud to see him quit using chemicals, Ward said. He hasn't looked back. Organics made his farm profitable. He gets to keep his cattle money from his certified organic herd of 70 limousin cows and charolais bulls and he gets what he called a bonus on grain production. One measurement of success was he bought a new tractor -- a 2014 Versatile 450, four-wheel drive -- for the first time last year.

"Nature's letting us grow our crop and nature's rewarding us, too," he said.

Ward reaches out to other farmers in his area and internationally now. He influenced a few people to join his OCIA chapter, as its president two years and with his the fourth year on the chapter board. And he was able to go to San Antonio, Texas, to meet other OCIA members at its international Annual General Membership Meeting. He wouldn't have thought he'd go to such a meeting 10 years ago, he said. Sid was still complaining, but he's too stubborn to change, Ward said. He said he's thankful for his brother's complaining because it led him to make a difference in how he feeds the world.

"I must have listened too good because I changed and I still get to listen to the complaining," he said, "but I don't get to join in the conversation because I don't have anything to complain about."

He's excited to wake up and work on a summer morning, he said.

"When you're excited to go to work, you're going to do a good job."

## Driscoll Farm

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Farmers are like professional gamblers, with the weather being a big unpredictable risk factor.

Planting genetically engineered crops, a factor for farmers starting in the 1990s, is a risk some won't take. Genetically engineered corn turned Elliott Driscoll, 67, to organic agriculture on his family-run Walridge Farms in Williamsburg, Iowa. It was the spring of 1996, the year that Monsanto Company took over the DEKALB seed company, he said. A seed seller came to him and would give him this "new thing" that was Roundup Ready corn seed, if he would plant it. He did plant, on a 50-acre field that was used for pasture. It got taken over by weeds. Roundup Ready corn would allow Elliott to spray glyphosate, a synthetic herbicide and kill weeds, but not the crop.

Elliott said he remembered thinking, "Man, this is a good way to get rid of Canadian thistle and quack grass."

Elliott and his four sons chopped a lot of corn silage for their cattle that year, about 400 acres, starting with the Roundup Ready corn. So it was put first in the back of a bunker silo. That winter, they had a tub grinder come in that would grind 20 big round bales of one kind of hay and five of another, to make a total feed ration. They loaded it in a feed wagon and put in about half corn silage, half a mix of hay. It was business as usual until Elliott went out to feed his purebred Black Angus cattle one mid-February morning and saw six aborted calves.

"And I took notice really quick," he said.

His feed mix had some oatlage, so he said his first thought was nitrates, but they just used straight corn silage that day. They found 14 more aborted calves the next morning.

"And we got real serious about it," he said.

They called a veterinarian. While they tried to come up with the cause, the abortions continued and they kept feeding only corn silage. A team of veterinarians from Iowa State University ran tests all day on the fifth day of the abortions, but stood in Elliott's shop at the end of the day without a cause.

He said one asked, "Was any of the corn silage Bt?" Referring to *Bacillus thuringiensis* corn that is a genetically engineered crop to kill insects that feed on it. Elliott told him, "No."

After the team left, Elliott thought about his feed source and realized it was at back of the bunker, at the Roundup Ready corn. One veterinarian said that the Roundup Ready corn wouldn't make a difference. They never came up with the cause, but Elliott quit feeding that corn and the abortions stopped. The six-generation farm lost just short of 50 calves that spring.



"I decided then, that's enough of that," he said.

He joined the Iowa 3 chapter of the Organic Crop Improvement Association that year, 1997, and requested 40 acres for certification to the OCIA International Certification Standards. The 104-year-old farm had neighboring farms added over time to become about 1,500 acres that took 10 years to transition to organic. He transitioned fields as he went through his crop rotation that includes sod, corn, soybeans, a small grain like oats or some rye, clover, alfalfa and pasture.

Along with being a certifier, OCIA is a membership organization that features speakers at its Annual General Membership Meeting on issues important to the association. Don Huber, professor emeritus of plant pathology at Purdue University, spoke at OCIA's 2013 annual meeting on the environmental and health impacts of glyphosate and genetically engineered crops. Elliott could relate to this.

"After all these years," Elliott said, "Don Huber is the one who's come across pretty much proof of what I've suspected all along."

The impact of Elliott's certified organic status has extended beyond his animal's health.

"I'll never forget the first year I did have a certified crop," he said.

He remembered pulling out of the field with his tractor and cultivator, shutting it off and closing a gate. It was the first time he contracted acres; 40 acres of corn for \$3.65 a bushel while the non-organic price was \$1.80 a bushel. He said he thought he should look over his shoulder for a sheriff, thinking, "This is like stealing." Now he sells 100 percent of his corn and about 60 percent or 70 percent of soybeans to several large Amish settlements that have a lot of livestock.

He was fortunate with yields, he said. His best year of corn was 186 bushels an acre, but the weather factor came into play in 2013 when his corn made 110 bushels an acre. It was wet in the spring and then the water "just got shut off," he said.

Animals are important, too. The Driscoll Farm finishes 30 to 40 head of cattle organically every year and markets them as non-organic because his meat lockers aren't certified. His farm is the home of the oldest purebred Hampshire hogs still in existence the United States.

The farm is level to gently rolling, almost all in one area. They are fortunate to have neighbors who won't plant genetically engineered crops next to his fields. This helps protect his crops from cross-pollination, he said. His oldest daughter, Veronica, 42, married a non-organic farmer four miles away who farms with his brothers.

Elliott and his wife Rita, 67, have three other daughters: Theresa, 40, Mary Ann, 33, and Eileen, 29, live away from the farm. Their sons work in agricultural fields. Joe, 37, is on the farm full time. The other boys have other businesses, too. John, 39, runs a hardware store, Jim, 34, runs a welding business and Jerry, 31, teaches high school and community college vocational agriculture. Jerry promotes organic to his students and several are in the process of convincing their parents to try organics.

"Everybody owns some of their own land and then we farm it all together," Elliott said.

The OCIA Family Spotlight is a series of stories about OCIA members, in celebration of the International Year of Family Farming.



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