



Jon Bansen is the owner of Double J Jerseys, part of the Organic Valley cooperative.



PHOTOS BY ARKADY BROWN

Verdant Hills Farm's Rich and Michael Butler say protecting their watershed is a priority.

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"We were on a faster rotation, fed them a lot more grain. We pushed a lot more production out of our cows," he said. "That was the old days where conventional agriculture was push push push, produce maximum amounts at really small margins – and that model is a little broken."

But that was until 20 years ago, when George Siemen, the founder of Organic Valley showed up on his doorstep and asked Bansen if he wanted to join the organic cooperative. He became one of Oregon's early adopters of the organic milk movement after that.

In the years since, Bansen said, he's watched his soil become healthier and his pastures lusher, sequestering more carbon.

He's also watched how bigger dairies' moving in has coincided with smaller dairies' going out of business. But being in an organic cooperative, he said, he doesn't face the same market pressures.

"There were two other dairy farms on our road," he said as we walked the perimeter of his pasture, "this one and another one that have all closed shop in the last five years."

Troy Downing, a dairy specialist at Oregon State University, pointed out that U.S. milk production is so efficient, with cows bred for production and advances in

livestock technologies, that the impact has been greatly reduced.

"Fifty years ago, we had twice the number of dairy cows in the U.S.," Downing said, "and we produced half the milk. So what we've done by improving that efficiency is we're feeding more people on less impact – and using grain has been a big part of that."

He said most U.S. dairies feed cows a mix of grain and forage, which also cuts down significantly on methane emissions.

But the Butlers and Bansen both noted that grain-fed cows produce products containing harmful Omega 6 fats, rather than the beneficial Omega 3 fats found in grass-fed animal products. They said grass, not grain, is what a cow is supposed to eat.

"I consider giving them grain cruel. It's like giving someone who is lactose intolerant milk," Rich Butler said.

"The disconnect for modern agriculture has been to bring the animals in off the pasture, put them on concrete, bring the food to them, feed them high diet of grains and you get much more production," Bansen

said. "But the cow doesn't live nearly as long. It's definitely a shortened lifecycle because you are pushing that cow really hard."

While beef consumption in the U.S. is trending down, consumption of U.S. beef in other parts of the world is increasing. In June, U.S. beef was sold in China again for the first time in 14 years, reopening a gigantic market for export.

"The appetite for American beef has grown tremendously in Asia in recent years, with Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong rapidly becoming three of the world's top five importers of American-produced beef," according to a recent press release from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. "NCBA said it will continue to fight for greater and fairer access to foreign markets for American producers."

On the small scale, raising beef and dairy cows doesn't necessarily have an enormous impact, but what happens when your state is home to 1.3 million cattle?

"We have far too many animals out there, and there's too much area being grazed at this moment right now to truly sustain

Oregon's biological diversity, particularly in the face of climate change," said Boone Kauffman, senior researcher for the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Oregon State University.

What happens when your country is home to 93.6 million cattle, like the U.S. was at the start of the year?

To some cattle industry adversaries, such as Wuerthner, there is no such thing as sustainable beef or dairy, no matter where the animals graze.

The sheer amount of resources needed to raise cattle and produce dairy heavily outweighs the sustenance the animal provides, but federal subsidies and low-cost public-lands grazing continue to mask the true cost of beef.

"People are looking for this happy coincidence where they can say, 'It's OK to eat grass-fed beef,'" Wuerthner said. "There are reasons why grass-fed beef is better than factory-produced stuff, but there are also reasons why factory-produced beef is better than grass-fed. In other words, neither is good."

Even as a dairy farmer, Bansen said people should eat mostly plants.

"Truthfully, some Americans probably consume too many animal products," he said. "I say, consume less and consume really high quality."

**1/3**  
methane produced  
by a grain-fed cow  
compared to a  
grass-fed cow

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