

## Maine organic beef farms see uptick in sales

1/12/2004

PORTLAND, Maine -- Although the recent mad cow scare has hurt the beef industry as a whole, some Maine farms that raise natural or organic beef have seen an uptick in sales in the last three weeks.

Wolfe's Neck Farm in Freeport is a producer and wholesaler of naturally raised beef. Since late December, the farm has received e-mail from consumers up and down the East Coast. They have two questions: How are your animals raised? And where can I find your meat?

"It's never good when anything hurts the beef industry," said Erick Jensen, chief executive officer. "But this has actually helped us."

The farm's products cost about 10 to 20 percent more than conventionally raised beef, Jensen said. Wolfe's Neck sells up to 40,000 pounds of beef each week, from 60 New England farmers. But it can't satisfy the demand for its beef with the number of cattle those farmers currently raise.

Wolfe's Neck Farm advertises that its beef, which is sold in Hannaford supermarkets and other stores from Maine to Florida, is raised without hormones, steroids or antibiotics. The cows eat hay and barley and don't get any livestock feed additives. Synthetic fertilizers and pesticides are also banned.

Maine isn't known for beef production. Most of the state's 800 producers raise small herds, according to the Maine Beef Industry Council, with a total of about 38,000 head of cattle, less than 1 percent of Texas' roughly 14 million. But Maine farms and retail operations that sell organic beef are seeing growing consumer interest in knowing where beef comes from and how it's produced.

The mad cow scare began just before Christmas, when an infected cow was found in Washington state. The life-threatening illness can be passed on to humans, as it was in Great Britain in the 1990s.

Experts believe the disease spreads when animals eat feed containing body parts, including brain and spinal tissue, from an infected animal. Since 1997, both the United States and Canada have banned feed containing these and most other cattle parts.

Recent government rules that certify organic production go further, banning all animal by-products and keeping antibiotics, hormones and pesticides out of the feed. Natural foods can't be labeled organic, but many natural producers take similar steps.

Consumers have also been making inquiries at Nezinscot Farm, a diversified, organic dairy in Turner with a retail store.

Gloria Varney tells customers that her beef cattle are fed grass, and eat corn and hay silage in winter. If a visitor stops by, she can point to the barn and pasture across the street and tell them that's where their food comes from.

"People are starting to look around," she said. "That's what I hoped would happen."

Mark Mayatt, who works at the meat counter at The Whole Grocer in Portland, said four new customers came in last week to ask about organic and natural beef. He told them about the grass-fed cattle at Nezinscot Farm and two other Maine farms that supply The Whole Grocer. And he sold them some organic ground beef, which costs \$4.99 to \$5.99 a pound.

Government regulators and industry officials have assured the public that all U.S. beef is safe to eat.

In the absence of more sick cows, the issue may fade from the headlines. But for some consumers, knowing what their beef is fed is not a recent interest. Lisa Barstow of Kennebunkport said she has tried to eat mostly natural or organic foods over the past five years. Last week, she was buying a pound-and-a-half of lean ground beef, at \$3.99 a pound, at a Wild Oats Natural Marketplace in Portland.

Barstow said the mad cow publicity won't change her buying habits, but it may make other people consider the sources of their food.

"I just think people are becoming more conscious about how animals are raised," she said.

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