SPRINT SUCCESS STORIES

ORGANIC DAIRY FARMING IN SLOVENIA

A family dairy farm in Slovenia recounts their experience of transitioning to organic agriculture. Struggling with high cost inputs, low economic viability, and little control over the business direction, they took the leap into organic agriculture.

Switching to organic helped them lower their input costs, and increase their economic viability. Milk yield and quality stabilised, and the farmer reports that their land and livestock are healthier since conversion. This whole-farm approach led to many changes; a dramatic reduction in pesticide use was just one of them.

THE CHALLENGE

Limited economic viability, high input costs and a lack of control over their resources led one farm in Brežice to take a leap and move into organic farming.

MAIN OBSTACLES

- Adverse weather conditions
- Limited financial resources
- A lack of markets for uncommon crops
- Weed burden
- Fusarium fungal disease in cereal crops

KEY OBJECTIVES

- To become an organic dairy farm, transitioning away from synthetic pesticide & fertiliser use
- Introduce rotational crop management
- Experiment with new livestock feeds
- Farm more ecologically
- Create a more sustainable and profitable farm

MAIN APPROACHES

- Grow disease resistant varieties
- Break disease establishment in the soil with crop rotations
- Reduce the need for protein feeds through altered grazing
- Promote knowledge transfer between farmers and researchers
- Raise public awareness about organic farming

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SOLUTIONS

- Awareness-raising activities with citizens and schools
- Promotion of the 'zero pesticide' label to municipalities
- Knowledge sharing through farmer groups, e.g., on more efficient pesticide use

TECHNICAL

1. **Experimenting with different varieties and techniques suitable for the terrain, fertiliser need & prevalent diseases.**
2. **Optimising grassland management practices for environmental benefits, yield and sustainability.**
3. **Investing in extensive new machinery.**

ECONOMIC

4. **Making best gains from the Common Agricultural Policy in their work.**
5. **Reducing the amount of bought-in protein feed for livestock.**
6. **Reducing input costs through using manure fertilisers, and improving grassland management practices.**

ADVISORY

7. **Consulting with farm advisors on how to measure crop resilience, and which techniques and treatments to use.**

SPOTLIGHT ON FUSARIUM

This serious fungal disease of cereal crops can damage kernels and result in the loss of grain yield and quality. The farm found that they could break the disease's hold by rotating with oilseed rape, and is now experimenting with legumes like fodder peas and clover.

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RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

Pesticide reductions: Using crop rotation and disease resistant varieties has maintained productivity whilst dramatically lowering pesticide inputs.

Farmer knowledge: Taking part in many trials, experimenting extensively, and getting involved in learning opportunities have expanded understanding of different crop varieties and approaches to growing them successfully.

Economic benefits: Higher subsidy payments aided conversion, but they were able to maintain similar earnings without subsidies after the conversion. Overall, the farm has become less input-intensive, leading to cost savings.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Adaptability and experimentation**: Continuous experimentation with crops, livestock feed, and farming techniques was crucial for finding what worked best in their specific conditions.
2. **Collaboration and knowledge sharing**: Working with younger, knowledgeable advisors and participating in knowledge transfer among farmers was vital for learning and implementing new organic farming methods.
3. **Long-term commitment**: The transition to organic farming requires patience, adaptability, and long-term planning, emphasising crop rotation and soil health.
4. **Home-grown nutrients**: Reducing reliance on external inputs by using home-grown feed and organic fertilisers improved economic viability and environmental sustainability.
5. **Infrastructure needs**: Expanding market reach would be helped by improved storage and refrigerated units, but financial capital remains a challenge.

SPOTLIGHT ON CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Žnideršič organic farm see citizen engagement with organic farming as key to improving understanding and motivation for shoppers to support their approach. They have cultivated a strong social media following, helping communicate widely about their work, and some of their high-tech kit in particular!

TRANSFERABILITY

The approach taken emphasises understanding local conditions, along with implementing crop rotation, and reducing external inputs.

In addition, access to resources and support is essential for successful adaptation.

With these in place, the farm's model demonstrates that sustainable and economically viable organic farming can be achieved through dedicated research, collaboration, and continuous adaptation & improvement.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Read more about Ekološka kmetija Žnideršič here.

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