

Freedom Organix Newsletter - Late Fall 2010



November 28, 2010

Dear Friends:

I am over seven hundred miles from my farm physically, but just a blink away mentally. I have come to spend time in Virginia and Maryland with my family over the Thanksgiving holiday. I brought some of the bounty of my farm with me to share in the form of a 30 lb. free range turkey and ½ pastured hog. As I sit at the granite island in my brother's kitchen writing this letter, I am tending the large pot of pork fat on the stove as it is slowly rendered into lard. It is for a project with my nieces; we're making soap. Combining fat with lye to make soap is an age old process but there is a lot of new interest in soap making as a craft. While you can buy everything you need to make soap at the craft store, some of the fun of this project was being able to use the 10 lbs. of fat that was in their hog share. Vanilla Pomegranate was the scent my nieces chose at the craft store just in case you were all thinking it was going to be 'bacon'. For the other main ingredient we needed, lye water, we skipped making it from the ashes in the fireplace and picked up a can of drain cleaner instead. There is something satisfying about using a sustainable, centuries old, farming technology that makes good use of available, renewable, resources.

Much to my family's dismay I shop for farm equipment even when I'm on vacation. I persuaded my brother to go on a field trip into the countryside (even though they are immersed in suburbia, they are only a few miles from their county fair grounds) to buy a small furrowing plow I'd located on Craigslist. On a weekend that is all about food for most of America, the ride there was spent discussing why 70% of antibiotics produced in this country are laced into livestock feed. My brother, a dentist with a sharp analytical mind, finds nothing wrong with this, so there was the start of an interesting debate on the drive to our destination. In much modern livestock production, the antibiotics are at a sub-therapeutic level, administered in the feed to animals that aren't technically sick. Years ago when I raised my first chicks I had to drive 50 miles to find starter feed without antibiotics. The practice of starting animals (piglets, chicks, calves) on medicated feed is so common that it is hard to find starter feed without it. I was also warned that feeding non-medicated feed was a big mistake. My baby animals would get sick and die. That has not been the case. I believe that there is a place for antibiotics in treating sick livestock, but that it should not be included in feed rations as a matter of course.

The use of antibiotics is common in modern, confined animal feeding operations (CAFO's), but our farm uses a traditional, sustainable system where animals can thrive without the automatic use of antibiotics.

Here are a few reasons why. **Lower stocking rates.** That means that only the number of animals the land can support are raised. Less crowded conditions means less disease. Fewer animals mean that a farmer can monitor the health of each animal in their care. Our animals are observed for overall wellbeing each and every day. Without antibiotics as a crutch, the farmer has to pay attention to all the little signs that give an idea of an animal's health. (It's the difference between being a shepherd or a 'slop slinger'.) **Rotational grazing** systems give land a chance to recover as animals are moved around to different pastures and not housed in the same area. This way the soil won't harbor as many pathogens. **Multiple species** of livestock are raised on our farm instead of just one type. Many domesticated animals don't share the same diseases and parasites, so grazing different species in sequence will break a disease/parasite cycle naturally. Animals **housed outdoors.** Sunlight is a powerful disinfectant. Dark, dingy, damp barns harbor pathogens; it's as simple as that. **Lower manure concentration.** Fewer animals make less waste. Less opportunity to saturate soil with animal waste to the point that nothing will grow (More is not necessarily better when it comes to manure. Depending on how it is handled it can be a soil amendment or a soil contaminant.) It gives the plants a chance to use the nutrients deposited by the animals and for it to cycle through the system, making both our pastures and our animals healthier and more productive. It's a system that mimics nature. It seems that making soap and raising animals in a traditional way have some things in common such as thoughtful use of available resources, developing expertise in place of spending money, and the patience to wait for the result.

So getting back to my brother, we arrived where we were headed before he finished explaining why he is OK with daily dosing of healthy animals with antibiotics, but he has made a decision for himself on why this is acceptable and why he is willing to eat food raised in this manner. His thoughts are pretty representative of many in America, especially during an economic downturn. (Maybe he'll give it some more thought over the winter while he's working through his stash of juicy, flavorful pork because quality pretty much speaks for itself.) Yes, the industrial food system works if abundant, inexpensive food is the only criteria. If you have other criteria, as do I, you will have to research and decide for yourself what makes sense for the kind of food you want to eat, the way domestic livestock is cared for, and what kind of environment we will have. Food is a necessity of life so we are all stakeholders in this. A farmer near me painted his silo to read "Eating is an agricultural act" and I pretty much think that says it all.

Best regards,

Cindy Nawiesniak

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P.S. In case any of you were wondering, I struck a favorable deal on the plow, so in the Spring I can plant the asparagus you have all been asking for.

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