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## **'We're All Farmers': Organic Agriculturalists Educate FFA Students at the 2009 National FFA Convention**

By Kelliann Blazek

Old MacDonald had a farm... but was it organic?

Two young organic farmers representing Organic Valley presented a workshop entitled, "An Introduction to Organic Farming and Gardening," at the 2009 National FFA Convention. About 300 FFA members and guests attended the first of two workshops presented by Organic Valley, a farmer-owned organic cooperative based in Wisconsin.

This marks the fourth year that Organic Valley representatives attended National FFA Convention and the second year Organic Valley has presented a workshop. Joe Pedretti, Organic Valley Farm Outreach Manager, said the relationship between National FFA and Organic Valley is an important one to garner interest in younger generations.

"One of the big misconceptions is that organic is trying to promote itself as better than other types of agriculture. But really what we want to show folks is that's an alternative... it's another option," Pedretti said.

Preston Green and Sarah Holm, both college students in Wisconsin, presented the workshop, citing their farms as examples of organic success stories.

"I can honestly say if it weren't for Organic Valley, my family wouldn't be farming today," Green said. "My dad can tell me honestly that he wants me to farm. He knows there's a future in organic agriculture and he knows there's a future in agriculture for me."

Green is a student at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and a former Wisconsin state FFA officer. Rebel Ridge Farm, his family's farm, is a 300-head organic beef operation in southwestern Wis. Green's family started the transition to organic agriculture in 1992, he said.

"We [organic farmers] don't use anything synthetic. We work as close with nature as possible to produce the best food we can," Green said.



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But just because organic agriculture is different, doesn't mean it's not agriculture, Green said.

"I want to see the stereotype broken that organic is against conventional. We're all farmers. We can all farm together," Green said. "I hope that FFA members can see that agriculture is agriculture."

Holm, a student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, echoed Green.

"It's kind of like we're taking the best of what our grandparents and great-grandparents had and then applying some modern technology to do a completely new thing, but it is based a lot on traditional farming," Holm said.

Holm is one of seven children that work on her family's 35-cow Jersey farm in Eau Claire, Wis. Her family moved to Wisconsin from California in 2001 and switched to an organic operation in 2005.

"I was a city girl before we moved to the farm. We had Olympic-sized swimming pools by our apartment," Holm said. "But my dad was from Wisconsin, and he always dreamed of having a family business where the family could work together."

Holm's family found that business opportunity in dairy production. Holm Girls Farm is home to more than cows, though. Holm called the farm a "wildlife sanctuary" that encourages biodiversity.

"We enjoy knowing that pasturing [the cows] encourages wildlife," Holm said.

Amanda Hannon, 16, from the Mason County FFA Chapter in West Virginia raises beef cattle and was skeptical of the practicality of organic agriculture in her operation.

"I think it's feasible for larger scale farming... but with a small cow herd, I don't think it would be doable for me to spend that much and wait three years," Hannon said.

Fellow Mason County FFA Chapter member Wesley Davis, 15, also attended the workshop. Davis raises 170 hen layers and would like to expand his operation. A grant he received from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop a plan to compost poultry manure sparked his interest in organic agriculture.



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“I think it’s great for niche marketing; it’s especially good for the farmers... to serve that market that people really want,” Davis said.

For Green, organic agriculture is a lifestyle choice that provided his family with the opportunity to continue farming.

"I'm a farmer through and through... that's my blood type. That's what I'm going to do when I grow up. I can feel it."