

Organic farming meeting upcoming

The ninth annual Virginia Biological Farming Conference will be held Friday, Feb. 15 through Saturday, Feb. 16 at the Sheraton Richmond West Hotel in Richmond.

Co-sponsored by the Virginia Association of Biological Farming (VABF), Cooperative Extension at Virginia State University and USDA's Risk Management Agency, the two-day educational meeting's theme is "Opportunities in Organic Farming."

An array of notable speakers from across the country will discuss the diverse marketing possibilities that exist for organic farm products. Experienced farmers and leading scientists will present proven production systems for organic horticulture, field crops and livestock.

Before January 24, the registration fee is \$70 for VABF members and \$95 for non-members. After January 24, late registration for members and non-members alike is \$125. To register, contact Marilyn Buerkens, VABF conference registrar, at 291-4333 or e-mail biofarmingconf@hotmail.com. For more information, contact Andy Hankins at (804) 524-5960 or e-mail ahankins@vsu.edu.

Contaminated milk blamed for deaths

BOSTON — At Whittier Farms dairy, the fifth-generation owners brag of the quality of their Holstein cows and still deliver milk right to your door, in glass bottles. Customers like the products because they are a hormone-free taste of old New England.

But health officials now say three elderly men have died and at least one pregnant woman has miscarried since last June after drinking bacteria-contaminated milk from the dairy's plant in Shrewsbury, which is west of Boston.

All were infected with listeria, which is extremely rare in pasteurized milk. It is more often found in raw foods, such as uncooked meat and vegetables, and processed foods such as soft cheeses and cold cuts.

The outbreak is believed to be only the third time listeria has ever been linked to pasteurized milk in the United States, said Dr. Alfred DeMaria, state director of communicable disease control.

Planners approve water plan in Ga.

ATLANTA — After more than three years of wrangling, environmental officials approved a proposal Tuesday that would give drought-stricken Georgia its first statewide water plan.

But members of the Georgia Water Council knew their work was far from over, as the plan next must be approved by the Georgia Legislature before it can take effect.

"This is not going to sit on the shelf. It's not set in stone," said state Rep. Lynn Smith, a Newnan Republican charged with sponsoring the proposal in the state House. "But what we've done is a start."

Gov. Sonny Perdue signed legislation calling for a water plan in 2004, and the final version came at an opportune time. The extreme drought gripping the state has given the plan a sense of urgency, and the council's meetings have been packed with lobbyists, lawmakers and media.

CONTRIBUTED AND WIRE REPORTS



David and Anita are seen in Ohio early on in their trip around the country. After a year in the U.S., they have visited 40 states and ridden their horses in 35.

The land of opportunity

This week is my 52nd column in the Star-Exponent — that's right, I have been writing (drivel for the most part, some would say) for this newspaper for a year now!

I find it incredible that I should still be here, and still writing something each week about the sights and sounds we have witnessed, and the people we have met over our time in America. We have travelled thousands of miles during our time here (33,000 at the last count!), visited 40 states and ridden in 35 of them.

Most of the time we have enjoyed what we have seen and heard; we have seen stunning countryside, majestic wildlife, and incredible structures, both natural and man made. We have seen areas of the country abundant in riches, and others where we are quite frankly amazed to see so many people living at or below the poverty line in this, one of the richest, developed nations in the world.

Quite often we get the feeling that a lot of people are struggling to make ends meet and are scratching around to make a living, yet in all the areas of the country we have traveled, it has to be said that we have always received wonderful hospitality, kindness and genuine friendship.

One very topical item in this presidential election year that always bugs me is how much money is wasted on political campaigning. I am staggered at the millions of dollars that are spent on choosing a candidate to represent the main political parties, never mind that spent on an actual election for the presidency! Just think how many hospitals, schools and, dare I say, veterinary clinics could be built with just the war-chest from the Clinton camp, never mind all the other candidates.

Just as in the U.K., these people for the most part have no experience in the job, and yet are handed \$60 million plus to tell everyone why they should be made president of the United States! In my humble opinion, the very fact that they want the job makes them unsuitable for it.

In the U.K., the front runners are chosen from within the party and we all then get to choose the party we want in power, and we cap the amount each of them can spend on their campaigns to a sensible level.



David and Anita are considering settling down in the U.S., where it is less expensive to keep horses than in the U.K.



DAVID AND ANITA HASBURY-SNOGLES

Even better, we generally only have the campaign run for two or three months at most — simple, isn't it?

We have always kept a careful eye on the horse as we have travelled — not just our own horses, but looking at how other people in differing parts of the country raise and treat their equines.

Sad to say, sometimes we have not liked what we have seen, but we have done our best to try and understand that we are visitors in this country and "our way" is not always "the right way." Without a doubt though, there is a definite shortfall in basic equine education in some parts of the country, and often the poor treatment horses receive is not a deliberate act of negligence or ill will on the part of the owner, but merely a lack of proper knowledge about how to care for the equine in the first place!

It is much easier to keep horses in this wonderful country of yours, where vast areas of land can be owned by the aspiring rider relatively inexpensively. In the U.K., if one were lucky enough to find a house with ten acres or more of suitable land on which to keep a couple of horses, one would need resources equivalent to half the national debt in order to purchase it!

In essence, you need to think long and hard before opting to buy a horse, let

alone keep and train it, in England. Boarding is an option if you haven't got the land, but that proves to be even more costly and time consuming with all the travel involved (Anita and I used to have to drive 50 minutes or so straight from work every night just to go and ride the horses for an hour), and what we had to spend on board each month would be enough to fund the mortgage on a half-million dollar house over here. Of course, in those days we actually had pretty good jobs and earned decent money, so we could just about afford it ... but, mind you, only just!

Now, here in the "land of the free," the situation is so different, which is one of the reasons we are so enamoured with the country. In comparison to England, we can achieve our dream — we can have our 10 or more acres, our "little house on the prairie," our horses and the opportunity to still make something of ourselves — even at our advanced age! It isn't possible everywhere, of course, but there are a lot of areas where we could settle quite happily for less than the cost of a two-bedroom apartment in the U.K. (subject, of course, to Uncle Sam's approval!)

Now, all of this would have been a lot easier a year ago before we'd spent all our money on this crazy trip (and gas hadn't gone up by more than a dollar a gallon). Then again, we'd never have been here in the first place if we hadn't, and we wouldn't have seen so many wonderful things and met so many wonderful new people in the process. Then there are the memories, which, as we all know, remain priceless!

Until next week

David Snogles can be reached at david_hasbury@yahoo.com

High cost of feeding cattle

Beef producers are counting their costs and have figured out that they are spending more than they expected to winter cattle this year. If winter feed expense is 70 percent of your annual cost to keep a beef cow, and we know hay is most of this, then when hay more than doubles in price, it makes you wonder if you can afford it.



CARL STAFFORD

Grain supplements are also eating away at the bottom line by growing cost and shrinking prices. I did some rough estimates this week with some producers that showed a cow may be costing you \$2 per head per day to feed. Your costs will likely be different, so let me know what you have figured out.

In the market we now have an opportunity cost for hay that is making us think about the daily value of our feed. We are watching dollar bills disappear at an alarming rate.

Economists explain opportunity cost as the market value of a product compared to its actual cost of production. The difference is opportunity cost. Your hay could be worth \$100 or more per ton in the market, and if your production cost is \$80, as suggested earlier, your opportunity cost is \$20.

Forgive my simplified example, as I know your actual costs will vary with your level of production, type and age of machinery, labor inputs, etc. In the end, you make hay to feed it to your livestock and its market value is the least of your concerns in a dry year like this one.

However, to realize the actual cost, you would be fair if you charged the actual market value of your feed. In past years, hay has often been equal to or less than production cost and we have grown accustomed to adding value to this product through our cattle.

The reverse is happening now — our cattle are eating hay and are not increasing

enough in value to make up for the expense. Most of this feed is going to maintenance, a big price just to keep a cow alive.

The Livestock Marketing Information Center (LMIC), a newsletter produced by USDA for Extension agents, offers some cow-calf production information that describes your "eroding" financial situation. It shows that "U.S. cow-calf operations have seen profitability decline in recent years due to lower calf prices and higher costs of production."

It reports that southern Plain states have seen a \$100-per-cow decline in profitability since 2004, but still there were modest profits for 2007, the lowest year since 2002. Here in the East, we can expect that our 2008 costs — driven in a big way by hay — will be equally challenging.

Our beef cycle historically runs its course over 10 years, with fairly predictable peaks and valleys. It has prices and costs factored in with the big focus on price change, while costs have been fairly stable and growing at predictable rates.

This current cycle seems to behave in ways we would not have expected based on the past. Unexpected cost escalation, found mostly in hay, fertilizer and fuel, is charting new territory for us. If production drops we would expect prices to rise.

Carl Stafford is Culpeper County Extension Agent, Animal Science. He can be reached at cstaffo@vt.edu.

Report recognizes local breeder for proven bulls

CONTRIBUTED REPORT

Mystic Hill Farm, located in Culpeper, owns seven bulls listed in the Spring 2008 "Sire Evaluation Report" published by the American Angus Association.

Issued in both the spring and fall, the new report features the latest performance information available on 5,299 sires and is accessible at angussiresearch.com.

"This report provides both Angus breeders and commercial cattle producers using Angus genetics with accurate, predictable selection tools for improving their herd," says Bill Bowman, American Angus Association director of performance programs.

Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs) are generated from the performance database of the American Angus Association, which includes

information submitted by nearly 9,800 Angus breeders this past year through the association's Beef Improvement Records program.

EPDs are listed for growth, maternal and carcass merit.

Decision-making tools also include seven values in the suite of bio-economic indexes designed to assist commercial producers in simplifying the genetic selection process.

The semi-annual analysis for the Sire Evaluation Report contains more than 15 million measures used to generate over 42 million EPDs for the Angus Breed.

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