



Transitioning to Organic with Pastured Pigs and Poultry

Okoboji Organics
Kate Mendenhall
Dickinson County
Okoboji, IA

Practical Farmers of Iowa Conference
Friday, January 17 @ 12:30 - 1:40 pm.



Quick Overview of Me

- Grew up in Okoboji, left at 18, returned 5 years ago.
- Studied Biology in Undergraduate & organic agriculture in graduate school.
- California: for Ferry Plaza Farmers Market and Pesticide Action Network.
- New York: NOFA-NY for almost 10 years
- Iowa: Moved back in 2014 to apprentice at Seven W Farm in Paulina (O'Brien County)
- Iowa Organic Association (3yrs) & helped start Organic Farmers Association
- NOW:
 - Work part-time for Organic Farmers Association (20 hrs/week), farm part-time, and raise two little kids with my husband in Okoboji.

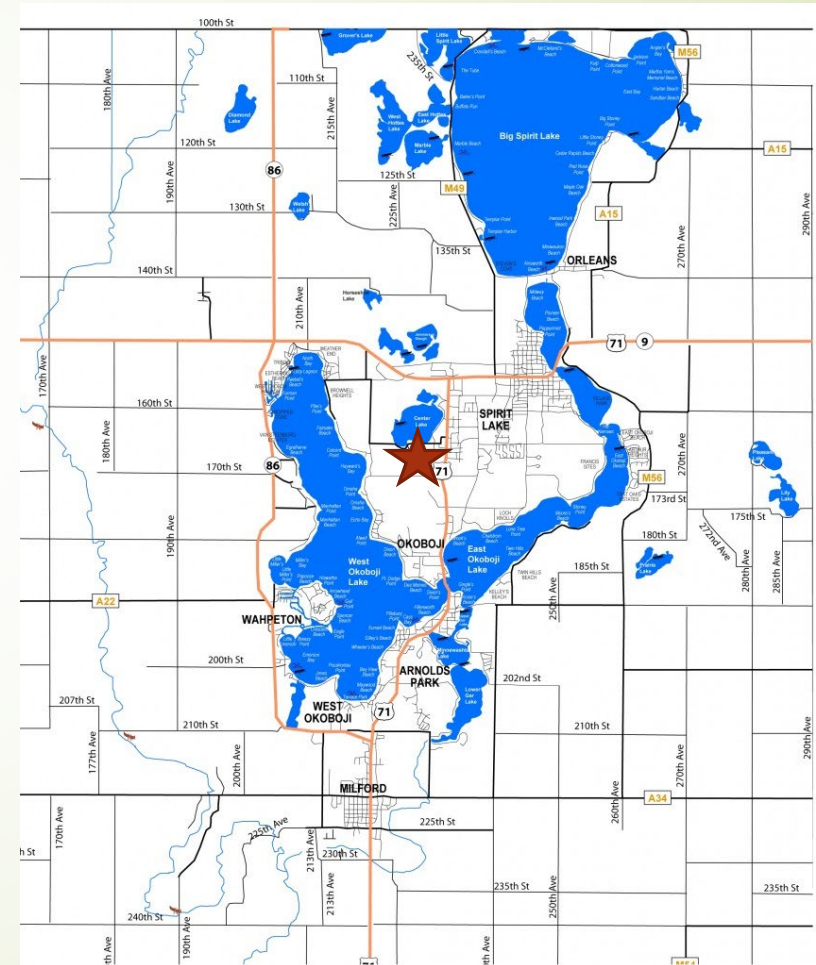
Quick Overview of My Farm

- 18.5 acres; small farm. Contributes to my income but is not my sole income.
 - Purchased 2016
 - 2016: Cover crops
 - 2017: Perennial pasture + 200 broilers
 - 2018: 300 broilers + 10 Pastured pigs in rotational grazing system
 - 2019: 300 broilers + 10 Pastured pigs in rotational grazing system + 3 Turkeys
 - NRCS EQIP program helped me establish my pasture rotation system for pastured pigs and mixed livestock.
 - Certifiable Sept. 1, 2018. Received certification August 2019 on land.
 - Work: Me & some help from my dad (not a farmer). Systems have to be workable for me to do alone.
- Market: all direct.



Farm Location

Iowa



2014 - 2015

- ▶ Started looking for land to lease.
- ▶ Started looking for land to buy.
- ▶ Started PFI SIP Program to work on business plan & prioritize goals.
- ▶ Apprenticed on diverse livestock farm: 2014
- ▶ Had a baby in 2015.



2016 - FARM

- ▶ Purchased farm in Spring 2016.
 - ▶ 18.5 acres slated for development.
 - ▶ No infrastructure
 - ▶ History: 20 years as a turf farm, then about 20 years in conventional corn & beans
- ▶ Traded planting the farm in a 5-species cover crop mix for one cutting of hay.
- ▶ Applied for NRCS EQIP project to install rotational grazing system. Created needed relationships.
 - ▶ Dickinson County is a priority area for Rotational Grazing.
 - ▶ Younger commissioner interested in diversifying county projects
 - ▶ Applied with the organic program within EQIP. Project ranked 3rd in state
- ▶ Contracted on infrastructure: barn, water, electric.
- ▶ Bought a used loader tractor.



2016 – ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

- ▶ Began transition file with MOSA.
 - ▶ Got Prior Land Use Affidavit from prior tenant (season 2015) & last date of application of prohibited substance.
 - ▶ Last date of prohibited substance was September 1, 2015. Three years from then I would be eligible for certification: Sept 1, 2018
 - ▶ Started seed, planting, harvest, amendment records in excel & online file system.
 - ▶ All seeds planted: NON-GMO, untreated. Planted an Albert Lea conventional cover crop mix. Asked for Non-GMO & Untreated documentation for file.



2017 - FARM

- Built barn & put in water & electric.
- Built 2 chicken tractors (Salatin style)
- Purchased broiler & processing supplies- most used.
- Created Brand
- Rented no-till planting drill from NRCS.
- Worked with Certifier, NRCS, Seed Suppliers to select seed plantings.
- Planted 13 acres of perennial pasture – Non GMO, Untreated seeds from Green Cover Seed.
- Planted 5 acres of annual pasture mix from Albert Lea Seed. Non-GMO/Untreated seed.
- Raised, Processed, Sold 2 batches of 100 broilers.
- Local education –Rotary, Kiwanis, Email. Diffuse controversy with facts.



2017 – Organic Certification

- ▶ Planted 13 acres of perennial pasture – Non GMO, Untreated seeds from Green Cover Seed.
 - ▶ Got approval from MOSA on some OMRI-approved seed treatments. This was complicated & time-consuming. Glad to have the pre-verification.
 - ▶ Saved seed tags, seed labels, save receipts-electronic files.
- ▶ Planted 5 acres of annual pasture mix from Albert Lea Seed. Non-GMO/Untreated seed.
- ▶ Received Verification from certifier to call farm: Okoboji Organics via phone consult. Finalized branding.
- ▶ Called certifier regarding frozen chicken label & found out there was no record of branding OK. Created alternative sister non-organic label.
- ▶ NRCS Cap- 138: Conservation Plan Supporting Organic Transition.



Perennial Pasture Mix

2 lb chicory,
1 lb plantain,
3 lb alfalfa,
1 lb ladino clover,
5 lb sainfoin,
3 lb red clover,
4 lb persist orchard grass,
2 lb smooth brome grass,
4 lb Kentucky 32 endophyte free
tall fescue,
2 lb big bluestem,
2 lb Indian grass.





2018 - FARM

- Finally got perimeter fence in.
- Purchased polywire & temp. fenceposts for internal fencing.
- Purchased hay wagon, hog troughs, hog field waterer
- Ditched hog nipple waterer system.
- Rented no-till planting drill from NRCS.
- Planted 5 acres annual pasture: Non-GMO, untreated.
- Custom hayed perennial pasture for weed suppression & pig bedding.
- Raised, Processed, Sold 3 batches of 100 broilers.
- Raised 10 pastured feeder pigs. Processed at Story City. Sold by W, H, Q & retail cuts.

My dad.

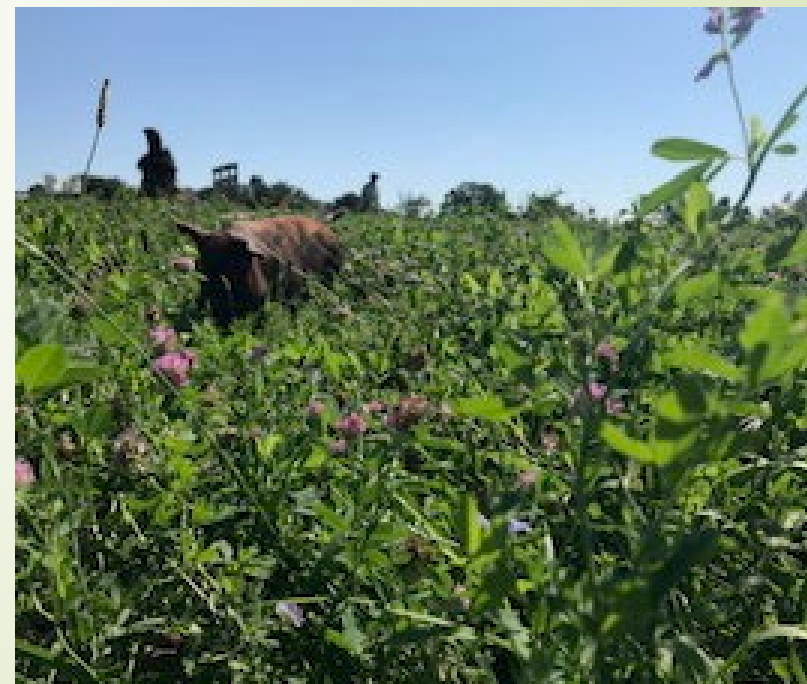
A complete
Rockstar.

Best farmhand ever.

Retirement never
looked so good.

2018

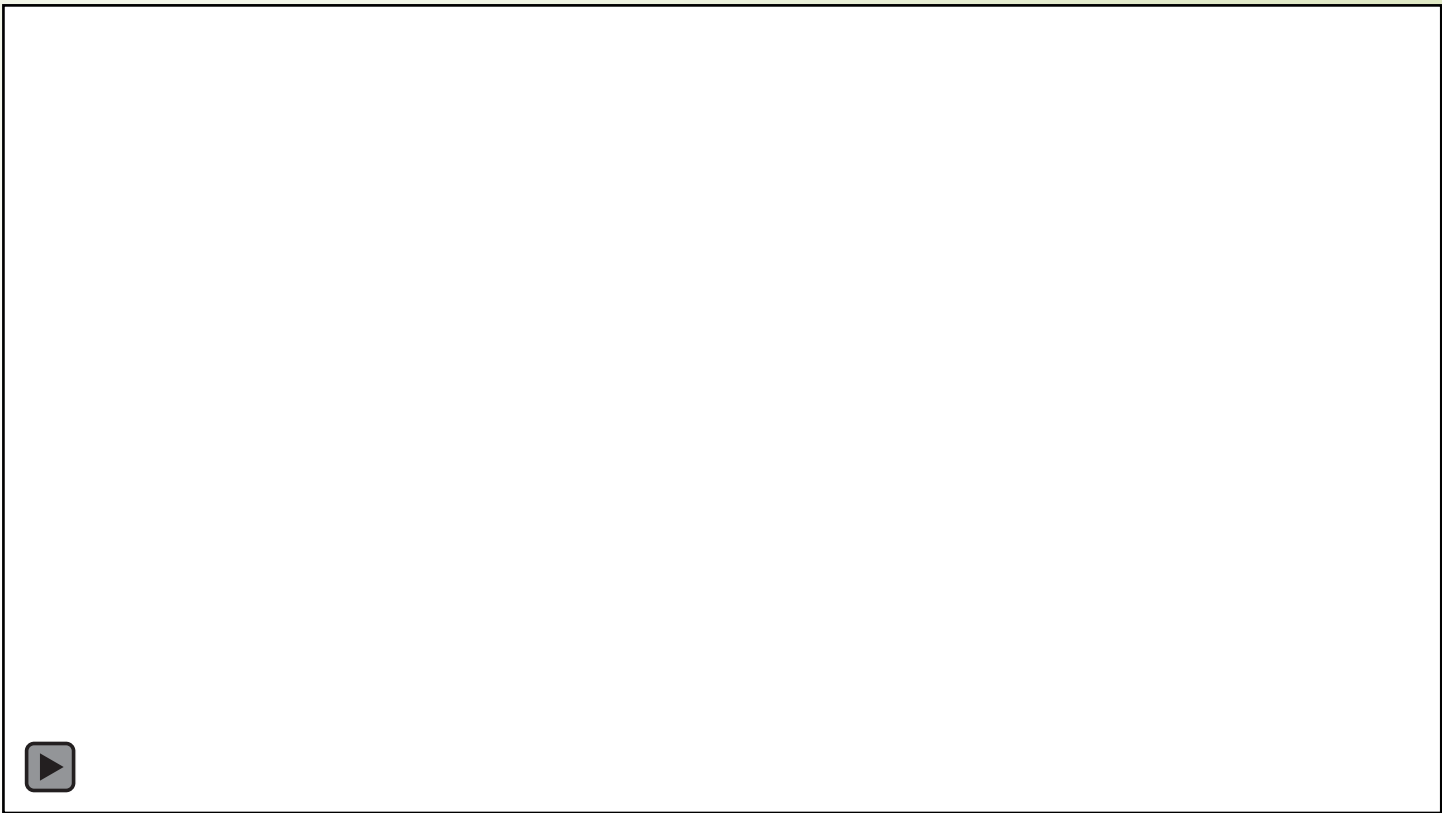
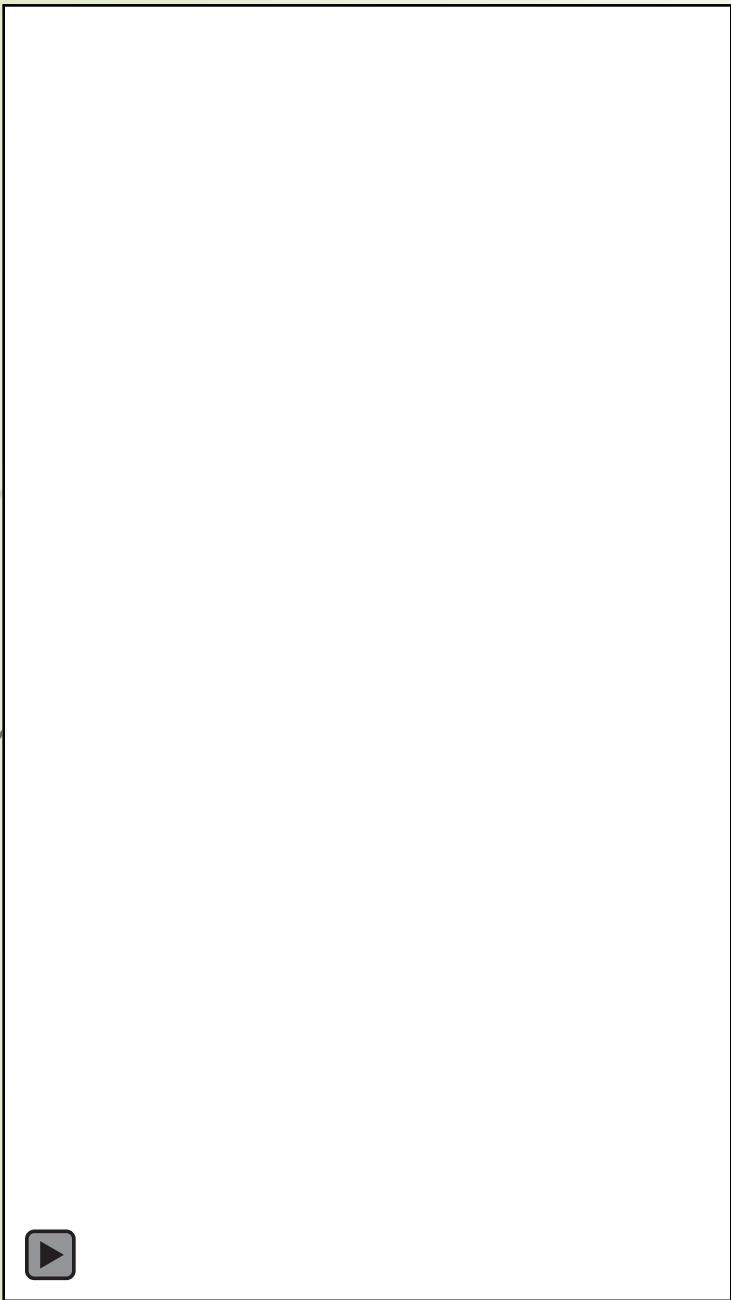






Late Fall/Early Winter





2018 – Organic Certification

- Certification Agency shopped at 2018 PFI conf.
- Realized I should apply in 2019, because I wouldn't have any product in 2018 I could sell as organic. (3 years after prohibited substance would be September 2018).
 - Pasture could have been certified end of 2018. 3rd batch of chickens would have already been on farm by then, same with hogs.
 - Made sense to save the \$800 until 2019.
- Fall 2018 did more extensive certification agency shopping and fee comparison for my size & needs. Decided on OCIA.
 - Why did I switch?
 - Cost. My farm is so small & I sell direct to small customer base.
 - Wasn't so keen on MOSA certifying hydroponic farms.
 - OCIA has a local contact.
 - Know other farmers that work with OCIA and like them.
- Inquired late 2018 for application.





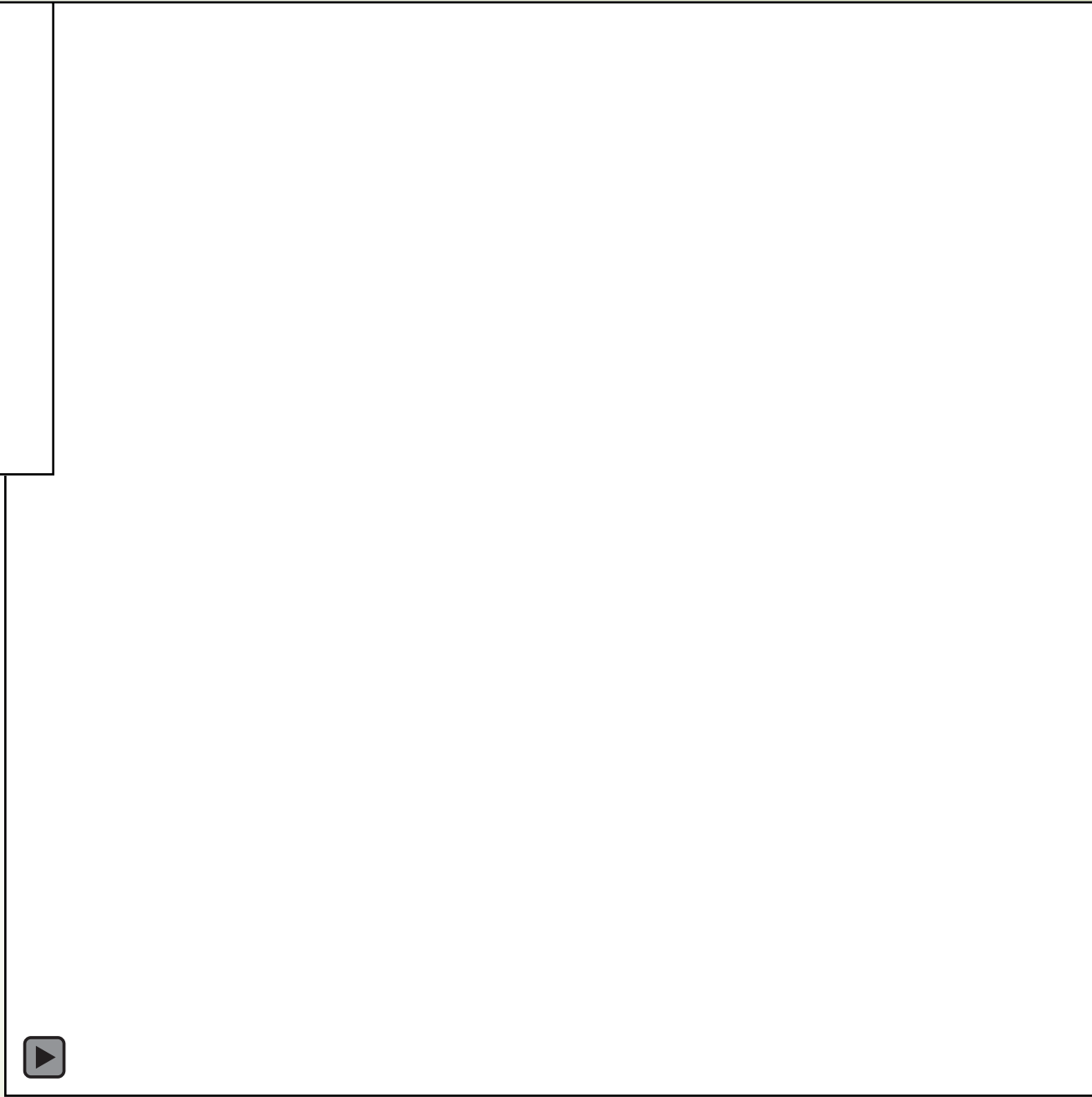
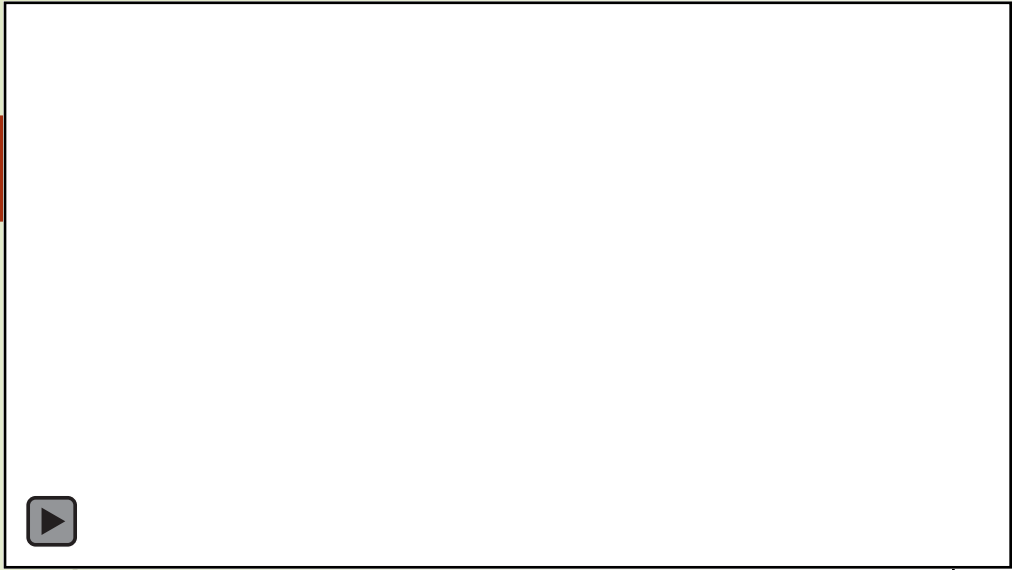
2019 - FARM

- Rented no-till planting drill from NRCS.
- Planted 5 acres of annual pasture to perennial certified organic grazing mix.
- Custom hayed perennial pasture for weed suppression & pig bedding.
- Raised, Processed, Sold 3 batches of 100 broilers.
- Raised 10 pastured feeder pigs. Processed at Story City. Sold by W, H, Q & retail cuts.
- Raised 3 pastured turkeys to try them out.
- Sold retail pork cuts at summer farmers market and one-time holiday market before Thanksgiving.
- Created website. Got a sign.

Marketing Improvements









2019 – ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

- ▶ Completed organic application with OCIA in March.
- ▶ Updated all my farm records & organized them for the real organic deal. Took some time.
- ▶ No Animals Certified in 2019. Called to schedule early inspection so that I could get it done before my animals arrived. DID NOT WORK OUT. Inspection occurred in July 2019.
 - ▶ Resigned to the fact that my animals would be certified in 2020.
 - ▶ They have to be on certified organic pasture 100% of their life.
 - ▶ Certification does not start until you have your certificate in hand.
- ▶ Received certification for the land in September after many calls to certifier.



2020 Organic Considerations

- 100% Certified Organic Feed.
- Chicks: No food before delivery, no debeaking. Verify hatch date & arrival date for each batch. Records of chick numbers.
- Pigs: Born certified organic (seller certification verification & receipt), 2 kinds of animal ID methods (ear tags, ear notches, photo).
 - Health Records – individual pigs.
 - Certifier approval of all health care products.
- Chicken Processing: Verify processing is up to organic par–check all cleaning products with certifier. Get approval of new label from certifier.
- Organic Processors: Chicken & Hogs

Certification Lessons Learned

- Connect with a certifier when you start your transition.
- If you are using CAP 138- make sure your TSP had done other organic plans.
- Have your certifier approve all materials BEFORE you buy. Save approvals. Leave time.
- Certifier fees vary widely. Do the work.
 - 4 Scopes, Acres, Gross Sales, etc.
 - Organic Certification Cost Share Program.
- The application process takes longer than you think.
- It's better to have more documentation than less. SAVE everything.



Resources



- ▶ Iowa Organic Association Resources Page
<https://www.iowaorganic.org/resources> Has so many resources for transitioning.
- ▶ More info on creating a successful CAP 138 Plan that is user friendly.
<https://www.carolinafarmstewards.org/sample-cap-plan/>
- ▶ PFI SIP program for beginning farmers.