

Farming Fit for the Future at Low Sizergh

As the Commission for Rural Communities 'State of the Countryside' report concludes that rural businesses are more likely to survive the recession, Low Sizergh Farm announces new plans to ensure the future of their 138 hectare (341 acre) family run farm.

The respected family run business, earning awards and accreditations for its very high standards of food, care of the environment and its tourism offer will again be adapting the way it farms to respond to the increasing costs of organic farming in a static market. As from the 1 November the farm will be managed by combining the best and most viable aspects of organic farming with more conventional farming practices.

In this way the family will maintain their standards of exemplary environmental stewardship whilst remaining a viable business - part of a network of 75 inter-dependent suppliers and providers of services within a 50 mile radius of the South Lakeland farm. The farm shop will continue to carry items from 78 current and active local suppliers as well as those who offer up seasonal food items for sale in the shop. Growing Well, the social enterprise based on the farm, will still grow organic vegetables as a Soil Association licensee.

This is not the first time the family has changed the way it farms. In 1986 the family planted three acres of strawberries as a pick your own diversification from the main dairying enterprise. This was as a direct result of the imposition of milk quotas that capped the amount of milk the farm could produce. The farm shop and tea room overlooking the milking parlour opened in 1991 and has successfully traded and invested for 19 years, now employing 60 full and part time staff. This decision will protect full and part-time farming posts.

Low Sizergh has been run as a successful organic farm since 2002. Further investments were made in 2008 when more cows, buildings and land were brought into the business. The family's decision to change the way they farm reflects financial pressures linked to the cost of new investment, two price reductions for organic milk, three exceptionally wet summers where home grown feed has had to be supplemented with expensive bought feed and the organic milk market not achieving the growth predicted.

The decision to revert to farming conventionally is based on lessons learned during 10 years of farming organically. Farmer Richard Park comments:

"We will still have our herd of 150 Holstein and Swedish Red cows and look after them to the same high standards. Environmental stewardship was integral to the farm's management prior to organic conversion and will continue to be so as we move into this new phase for the farm business."

The family is committed to leaving an enhanced environmental legacy for the next generation. Their practices continue to replenish and enrich the soil; encourage biodiversity; lead the way on animal welfare and offer food that secures jobs and continues to be part of its community.

Looking to the future the family realise that they must adapt in order to sustain the business in the widest sense: “we operate in a turbulent climate” says Richard Park “everything from price to rainfall varies and we need some resilience in the business to see us through.”

Alison Park, along with her brother Richard, dad John with mother Marjorie, a partner in the business, speaks for the family in saying: “Changing the way we farm has been a carefully considered but positive decision. We have always been passionate about ensuring the long term viability of the farm and we are very aware of our wider community responsibilities and expectations.

Notes

Background to the decision:

- The timing of the announcement allows for the organic businesses supplied by Low Sizergh Barn Dairy to make necessary changes once the busy tourist season is over
- 3 full-time and 4 part-time jobs on the farm and in its wholesale dairy round remain secure.
- The 75 businesses that supply products and services to the farm within a 50 mile radius range from vets to agricultural engineers, hoof trimmers to contractors, accountants to pest control.
- Low Sizergh Farm’s farm shop and tea room, Low Sizergh Barn, was an award winner in Enjoy England’s England for Excellence 2010. It will continue to stock its full range of farm, local, speciality and organic food.
- Low Sizergh Farm has also won: National Trust Fine Farm Produce Award 2009; Westmorland Agricultural Society Conservation Award 2009.
- Less than 5% of the items sold in the farm shop are organic however in volume sales the figure is more significant.
- Anyone wanting to find out more about the impact of this decision on farming practice can join Richard Park for a farm walk on Tuesday 26th Oct 2.00 - 4.00pm.

Figures:

Highlights from the Soil Association’s 12 April 2010 report of organic sales:

- Sales of organic products in the UK fell by 12.9% in 2009 to £1.84 billion, according to the Organic Market Report published today by the Soil Association.
- Yet despite the toughest economic climate for 20 years, the report also indicates clear signs of increasing confidence amongst consumers. Based on evidence from the early months of this year, the Soil Association predicts a modest market expansion of between 2% to 5% in 2010.
- The most comprehensive study of UK organic trade, the Organic Market Report shows that in line with other retail sectors, shoppers spent less on organic food in the recession. In addition, leading retailers reduced organic ranges and shelf space.
- The three biggest categories of organic food – dairy, fruit and vegetables, and fresh meat – saw supermarket sales fall by 6.5%, 14.8% and 22.7% respectively. However sales of organic milk grew by 1% (2009 was the best year for organic milk sales on record), and organic baby food sales, resilient throughout 2009, grew by 20.8% passing the £100m mark.

Details of bodies who say rural businesses are the key to economic survival:

- Rural Communities 'State of the Countryside' report link
<http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/recoveryandgrowth.pdf>
- The New Economics Foundation (Nef), an independent think-and-do tank that inspires and demonstrates real economic well-being says: *"We aim to improve quality of life by promoting innovative solutions that challenge mainstream thinking on economic, environmental and social issues. We work in partnership and put people and the planet first"*. Small and medium-sized businesses employ 58% of the private sector workforce and £50,000 spent in a small local shop will create one job as opposed to £250,000 spend in a supermarket.