

A Look Back as an Organic Farmer, and a Look at Today and the Future as President of Bio Suisse

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the journey of a farmer who took over a dairy farm in the Swiss mountains (900–1,000 metres above sea level) at a young age. Starting as a conventional system, the farm has been converted to organic farming after a few years and benefited from the very dynamic growth phase of the organic market from the mid-1990s onwards.

The organic farm was continuously developed, and animal welfare was significantly improved by converting from tethered housing to a free-range barn. More attention was paid to animal health, and the use of antibiotics was minimised. Feeding was adapted to the location, and concentrated feed was continuously reduced until it was eliminated. Support was provided by various FiBL projects, such as Project Pro-Q, Feed-no-Food, and a Farmers' Field School that was part of the European project Aniplan.

After working in the emerging organic milk market and over 25 years of farm management, the author was elected president of Bio Suisse in 2011. Bio Suisse's strict guidelines guarantee a high level of animal welfare, and, in particular for ruminants, feeds that are appropriate to the location and species. The report lists the most relevant standards for cattle, pig and poultry farming.

Finally, there is an assessment of how livestock farming in Switzerland could or should develop. While the authorities are proposing ambitious measures in their Climate Strategy for Agriculture and Food 2050, politicians often slow down the necessary steps for implementation. Organic farming already largely meets these targets, as confirmed by a FiBL meta-study in 2025. Political framework conditions are also relevant for organic farms, but customer acceptance is much more important – good sales of products at reasonable prices. It is therefore important to identify potential trends at an early stage to continue to meet the expectations of loyal customers in the future. Innovative organic farms are leading the way in organic livestock farming and gathering knowledge and experience that others can benefit from. It is quite conceivable that some developments will later become binding for all Bio Suisse farms via guidelines.

Introduction

Looking Back

At the age of 21, my wife and I took over the Gibelhof farm in Goldingen, Switzerland. It is an organic dairy farm covering around 30 hectares, located in a fertile area at an altitude of 900 metres above sea level. Our son and his family have been running the farm since 2015.

We converted to organic farming in 1994. At the same time, larger areas were extensified and biodiversity was specifically

promoted. Today, this promoted area covers around 25% of the farm. Nevertheless, enough feed can be produced to feed around 30 cows for 9 months. In summer, the animals spend 3 months on an alp.

The old tethered barn was converted into a free-range barn in 1998. Thanks to a great deal of our own work, the costs were kept low. The result was a barn that still functions perfectly after 28 years and ensures a high level of animal welfare.

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At the same time, I gained my first experience with homeopathic remedies and was supported rather than ridiculed by our regular vet! From 2005 onwards, I received even more support in complementary medicine from FiBL and its Pro-Q project. Everything to do with dairy farming was carefully analysed and recorded on around 100 farms. Milking procedures were measured with a stopwatch, the equipment was checked for noise pollution and leakage current, and the visual condition of the animals was recorded using Body Condition Scoring (BCS). Milk quality was recorded separately for each udder quarter, and if action was needed, appropriate homeopathic treatment was administered. The use of antibiotics became the exception on our farm, and this has remained the case to this day. Anyone who doubts the effectiveness of complementary medicine is advised to take a look at Kometian's resource project, which was scientifically supported by FiBL.

As a young farm manager, I also strove for high milk yields, but soon realised that buying expensive concentrated feed was not economical. When FiBL launched the Feed-no-Food project in 2008, they noted during a visit that the use of concentrated feed on our farm was already at a recommendable low level. We have not fed grain since 2012.

In the Feed no Food study, FiBL was able to show that one kilogram of concentrated feed did not result in two kilograms more milk as promised, but only generated an average of 0.7 kilograms more yield. These findings were confirmed a few years later by the state research institute Agroscope. They found 0.5–0.8 kilograms more milk per kilogram of concentrated feed.

Unfortunately, many farmers still believe the promises made by feed mills. One colleague summed up his experience as follows: "In 2008, my organic herd produced an average of around 8,500 kg of milk per year. Today, I have completely eliminated concentrated feed and still achieve a good 6,000 kg. The big difference is that today I earn money from producing organic milk!" He acquired this knowledge in 2008 when he took part in a "Farmers Field School" organised by FiBL. At that time, he realised how uneconomical the use of concentrated feed is and that lower feed costs, healthier animals and better fertility contribute to financial success.

Animal Welfare on Bio Suisse Farms Today

Bio Suisse took up FiBL's idea and in 2014 began to help organise and finance farmer-to-farmer advice. While the initial focus was on organic milk production, this type of direct exchange between practitioners was later extended to other areas of organic agricultural production and given the name ProBio. Supported by experts from FiBL and regional organic advisory services, interested organic farm managers can further their education by visiting other farms or participating in working groups. Around 10% of Bio Suisse members are now part of a working group.

As mentioned, ProBio initially focused on milk production. Bio Suisse wanted to raise awareness among its members and prepare them for further developments in the guidelines. In fact, the 2018 delegates' meeting decided that from 2022 onwards, only feed from Switzerland and a maximum of 5% concentrated feed may be used for ruminants. These are probably the strictest

feeding guidelines in the world – appropriate to the location and species!

Organic animals also enjoy a high level of animal welfare in other respects. They are given more space in their stalls, and in addition, all organic farm animals must/may go outdoors regularly. In concrete terms, this means:

- Ruminants on Bud farms have regular access to the outdoors in accordance with the provisions of the RAUS ordinance. This means that during the growing season, they have access to pasture for at least 26 days per month. In winter, they have access to an outdoor exercise area for at least 13 days. Bio Suisse cattle have at least 234 days of exercise per year. Ruminants receive a particularly large amount of roughage, which is in line with species-appropriate feeding. The grass content is at least 75 percent in the valley and 85 percent in mountainous areas. This means that the proportion of maize in the ration may not exceed 25 percent, or 15 percent in the case of mountainous areas. Feed must come from within the country, and a maximum of 5 per cent concentrated feed is permitted. By comparison, the minimum roughage content for EU organic products is 60 percent.

Fully slatted floors and fully perforated floors in stables are prohibited.

Electric cow trainers are prohibited, meaning that organic cows do not receive electric shocks if they do not urinate or defecate in the designated areas. Unnecessary interventions on the animals and preventive antibiotic treatment are also prohibited.

- Pigs in organic farming are fed almost exclusively organic feed. 95 percent is organic, with up to 5 percent conventional potato protein permitted. All feed is free from genetic engineering and artificial additives. The bedding in the stables is also organic. Perforated floors are prohibited in the lying area. Scratching facilities such as scratching brushes and wooden beams are a must in pigsties. Pigs have permanent access to outdoor areas. Piglets must be allowed outside from the 24th day of life. Pregnant sows, including gilts, must have access to a pasture or a rooting area. Piglets are suckled by their mother for at least six weeks, twice as long as piglets in conventional pig farming. In addition, the preventive use of antibiotics is prohibited.
- Organic chickens live on organic farms. This means that the entire farm produces according to the strict Bio Suisse guidelines. At Bio Suisse, flocks are smaller than in conventional agriculture. Up to 4,000 young animals (hens or brother roosters) per flock are permitted. A maximum of 2,000 laying hens is kept in one barn. Organic poultry must be given twice as much space as required by Swiss animal welfare legislation. In addition, since 1 January 2026, male chicks are no longer killed. The brothers of laying hens are now allowed to live for at least 63 days.

Expected Developments in Organic Livestock Farming

Under the leadership of the Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG), the Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office (FSVO) and the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), a Climate Strategy for Agriculture and Food 2050 has been developed. It aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote a

sustainable Swiss food system that adapts to the consequences of climate change. Organic farming already largely meets these targets, as confirmed by a FiBL meta-study in 2025. It remains to be seen whether the political bodies can agree on measures to implement the climate strategy. Doubts are justified.

The consumption behaviour of many regular organic customers is already helping to maintain the balance between humans, animals and nature. However, the expectations of the most loyal organic customers are likely to continue to rise, especially regarding livestock farming.

Those who shop and consume responsibly attach importance to ensuring that animal feed production does not compete with human food production for land. In the case of ruminants, Bio Suisse guidelines already largely meet this expectation. Feed for monogastric animals, on the other hand, is grown primarily on arable land, even in organic farming. While pig feed increasingly contains waste from kitchens and the processing industry, and the proportion of roughage should be increased, it is difficult to change poultry feed. It is hoped that, in a few years' time, algae products, for example, which contain some of the amino acids that monogastric animals need, will at least significantly reduce the demand for soya.

The highest expectations are likely to be in animal welfare. When a consumer buys organic milk in 2040, they will assume that the calves are growing up happily in a mother- or foster-bonded rearing system. Some farms are already rearing their calves in this way and report much healthier animals and significantly less work. The biggest challenge in switching to this system is certainly the space required and the corresponding investment needed.

Currently operated as a niche market, but with considerable potential among organic customers, stress-free slaughter must be considered. Also known as on-farm slaughter, these meat products are now sold almost exclusively directly from the farm. How long will it take before a retailer adds the first products to its range?

It is mainly organic farms that are gaining initial experience with mother- or foster-bound rearing and farm slaughter. These two examples show that pioneering work is being done and the way is being paved. Many other farms are benefiting from their experience, and it can be assumed that one or two innovations will later become mandatory for all Bio Suisse farms via guidelines.