Biemonds to begin shipping organic milk

by Nelson Zandbergen
Chieftain Staff Reporter

Ontario has about 6,000 dairy farmers, and of those, only nine produce milk that crosses the checkout counter as a certified 'organic' product.

The family farm of Pieter and Marja Biemond, north of Iroquois, will join those rare organic producers, come Nov. 1.

On that date, the Biemonds will be among the first three Eastern Ontario dairy operations to start pooling their milk with the OntarBio Organic Farmers' Cooperative, which sells the only organic milk and milk products in Ontario under its Organic Meadow label.

Organic milk is produced on farms that don't use antibiotics on their cows, and don't feed their cows any crops on which pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers have been used. Those farms are tapping into a health-oriented and environmentally concerned segment of the consumer marketplace.

And it's a growing market, Pieter says from his sprawling farmhouse on the fourth concession, a tall raised-ranch with a red metal roof, vaguely reminiscent of a Pizza Hut restaurant, that he and Marja built themselves.

"Their market is expanding 100 per cent a year," he says of the Organic Farmers' Cooperative, his words marked with a Dutch accent.

"They know already that if we join them in November, by Christmas they're short of milk."

The Durham-based co-op presently has nine producers, all of them in southwestern Ontario. With the addition of the Biemond farm and farms in Merrickville and Smiths Falls, the number of organic milk producers will stand at 12 in Ontario.

Biemond adds, "They're begging for more farmers, but not everybody qualifies."

What it takes

In order to have their milk sold as organic, the Biemonds must adhere to a stack of regulations. The rules for organic farmers are overseen by either of two independent agencies, the O.C.P.P. or the O.C.I.A. (Organic Crop Producers & Processors, and the Organic Crop Improvement Association); the 275-acre Biemond farm is certified by the former. An inspector visits yearly. Every sale and transaction is reported and extensive records kept.

The rules? Keep chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides off your land for at least three years, and the crops can be certified organic. Keep your herd off antibiotics and feed them at least 80 per cent organic crops for eight months, then make the final switch to 100 per cent for another two months, and the cows and their milk can be certified.

"I can't use any antibiotics. If I do use them, the cow has to stay out of the tank for the rest of her lactation," Biemond says.

And any cow purchased from an uncertified herd can't have its milk mixed with the rest of the herd for at least a year, either.

Neither does genetically engineered seed make the organic grade. "All the seed you buy has to have an affidavit with it that states the seed is not genetically engineered," he says.

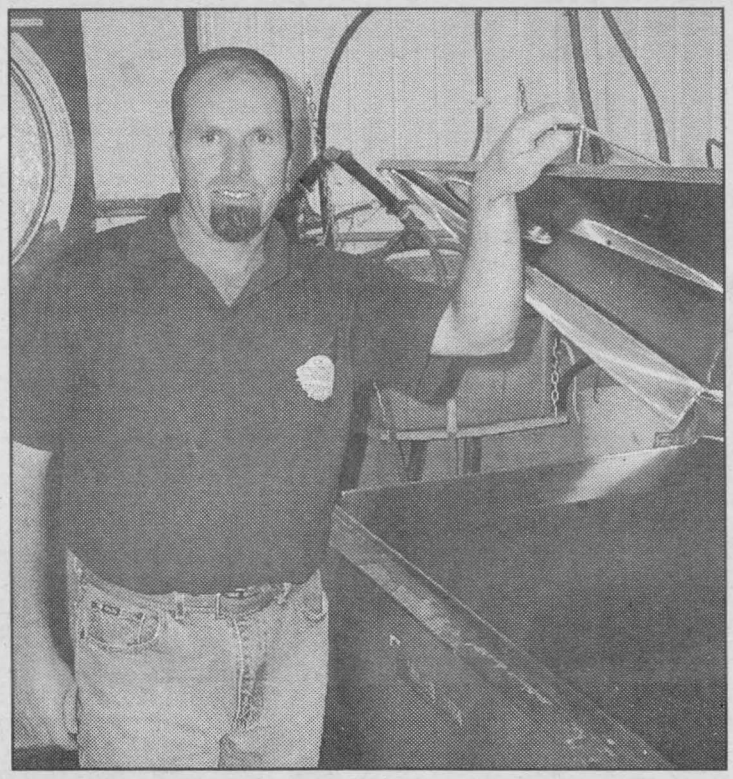
A few conventional farmers may be tempted to curl their lips into a wry smile at the sound of such ideas, but it is Biemond who smiles when he reports that he sells his organically certified soybeans — 33 acres worth this year — for about $675 a tonne, compared to about $150 for the regular variety. The premium on corn is about $50 a tonne.

Producing milk, however, is the farm's staple source of income. Although they've been doing it the organic way since 1989, the Biemonds didn't bother to get their certification until three years ago because the Milk Marketing Board of Ontario — now called the Dairy Farmers of Ontario — wouldn't allow organic milk to be kept separate. That policy changed about five years ago, allowing OntarBio to expand its line of organic produce to include milk.

As with any farmers' co-op, members own shares in OntarBio, which distributes the profits from retail sales of the organic milk in the form of a yearly dividend. Members, like the Biemonds, are still part of the supply management system and are paid the going rate for their production by the Dairy Farmers of Ontario. D.F.O. owns the milk, picks it up, processes it, and then sells it back to OntarBio.

Biemond points out the arrangement is no different than that afforded conventional milk co-ops, such as Agri-Food in Quebec.

"They're actually doing quite well," he says, adding the co-op has been profitable for the last four years.



Piet Biemond, shipping this Nov.
Chieftain photo by N.H. Zandbergen

Organic milk garners a substantial premium on the grocery shelf.

The technique

By going organic, the Biemonds, who milk a herd of 40, have undertaken practices that some oldtimers might find familiar. Things like spreading manure in August and September, rather than spreading it raw — when it stinks — in the spring, and extensive crop rotation.

Raw manure is "sour" and acidic, says Biemond, who composts the stuff in windrows before it gets spread. The acidity actually spurs weed growth, which conventional farmers then treat with chemicals.

His fields undergo a seven-year cycle of crop rotation. Crops like corn, oats and barley are alternated with nitrogen-fixers like soy, alfalfa, red clover and peas. The seasons are book-ended with cover crops like winter wheat, fall rye, a grain called spelt, and oil radish.

"A good organic farm is all green on the first day of November," Biemond says, explaining the need to lock up every available ray of sunshine if chemical fertilizers aren't to be used. The farm should also be green once the snow melts.

"It's hard to do, but you aim for it.

He controls weeds by mechanical means only. Harrowing and cultivation are done a couple of times each, after planting soybeans or corn. Admitting his labour and equipment costs are higher, he says the yield and quality of his crops are easily comparable with the chemically enhanced variety.

He drops back the number of cows he milks, a mixture of holsteins and brown swiss, to about 25 in the winter — a common practice of yesteryear.

Definitely non-traditional is the innovative barn where milking takes place. Built just a few years ago, the long "greenhouse" barn, with its plastic skin and steel ribs, houses a nine-at-a-time milking parlour. Cows rest on a thick pack of straw that will eventually make up the next batch of manure compost.

Every time the milk truck pulls in the driveway, the animals will have pumped another 1,000 litres of milk into the Biemonds' bulk tank.

The philosophy

Biemond said he twigged on to the organic idea ten years ago when he grew tired at looking at his fertilizer bill.

He attended a special seminar in Kemptville and it "blew me away.

"These guys were talking about the land with respect, the soil with respect, they talked about the creator. And I'm sitting there, 'Hey, I'm a Christian. I should be talking like these guys.'"

The philosophy carries over into their personal lives, Marja pointing out that her excellent coffee cake uses only unbleached flour. "All around you meet people that say, 'Oh, my children are sick,' or I'm not feeling well,' and our kids have never been sick," she says.

The Biemonds immigrated to the area from Holland in 1981 with four children, and were raising seven by the late 80s. Three presently live at home.

"Healthy soil gives healthy plants, healthy plants give healthy animals ... give healthy people," Pieter says of the organic concept.

"We're small farmers. For us the choice is made; you better sell a little for a lot as a lot for a little.

Pieter adds: "I know that when we leave this farm to our children or whomever, the soil will be in better condition than when we got it. I didn't mine it, and that feels good."

Organic Meadow products: Organic cow milk sold under the Organic Meadow label is distributed in Eastern Ontario by Bill and Coby Zandbergen's Family Farms business in Brinston. Closer to home, it can be found in health and specialty food stores in Chesterville, Cornwall, Kemptville and Ottawa.

*The Biemond farm will be featured in a **TV Ontario documentary** on organic farming, slated to run on the **Oct. 11** edition of **Studio 2 at 8 p.m.***

*Want to learn even more? Farmers and others interested in the organic industry are invited to attend a **Nov. 20th symposium put on by the Ecological Farmers' Association of Ontario.** It will take place at **Community Christian Reformed Church from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.** (registration in the first hour). Speakers will cover topics from organic market gardening to non-chemical weed control.*



Vanden Bosch clan, at their open house.

Open House at Vanden Bosch Farms

by Sandra Lee Johnston
Chieftain Staff Reporter

Vanden Bosch Farms in the Chesterville-area expanded their facility and showcased their locale with an Open House. On hand for the festivities as farmers and others came to check out the operation, were Stan, his wife Betty and their sons, Greg and Brent who collectively ensure the smooth operation of the entire facility.

Looking around at the facility it is hard to imagine the difference from when they started in 1970 when Stan would dry some corn for a neighbour and now some 17,500 tonnes can be stored on the premises. A modern facility, the Vanden Bosch's can be proud of the advances they have made.

The expansion includes an additional 5,000 tonnes of storage space and a second unloading pit, which will help rid the elevator of some of the congestion experienced in previous years when the situation arose where they were trying to unload both corn and soybeans. Included in the operation now as well is another dryer. The Zimmerman Tower Dryer is capable of drying over 30 tonnes an hour and will handle one and a half times that of the original dryer. Two 2,000 tonne bins will supply the much needed storage space and coupled with the original bin will provide 500 tonnes more. Finally a new bin to hold wet corn has been constructed too.

The expansion was necessitated as business has steadily been on the increase. According to Vanden Bosch, the harvesters are getting faster and the acreage tilled in the area is also on the growing. "We have been handling more and more each year, for instance we handled over 20,000 tonne of corn alone last season," he adds.

The family would never say anything about their generosity, but we know that they are also a big part of the Canadian FoodGrains Bank. They handle (truck) and dry the corn after it is harvested in this area free of charge and then take care of the paper work as well. They do it for everyone locally involved in the FoodGrains Bank. Lending a hand to help those in developing countries who are staving off hunger each and every day is a very special job, and as they go about their business almost unnoticed efforts, we want to express thanks to them on behalf of everyone here and abroad.

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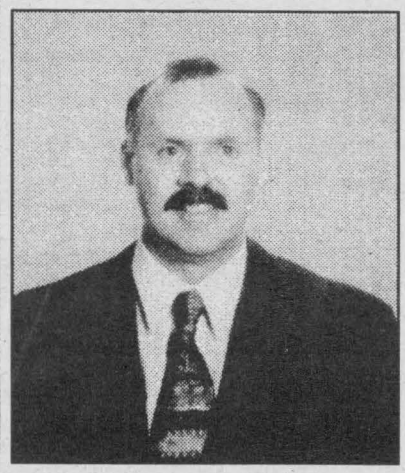

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The Ontario Veterinary Profession Celebrates 125th Anniversary this year

The veterinary profession in Ontario celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, marking its simple beginnings serving Upper Canada's Loyalist agricultural community, to its progress into a modern, multifaceted science. Today's veterinarian can be found serving the public through an amazing array of practice specialties, education, research, and food safety sectors. The evolution of veterinary medicine touches all aspects of our lives from our dinner tables to our medicine cabinets. It reaches out to us from the pets who greet us at our door to the latest medical research breakthroughs the daily news brings us.

We have come a long way from 125 years ago on September 24, 1874, when 27 pioneering veterinarians met in Toronto to form the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association. This launched a new era of organized veterinary medicine in Canada and the association would later become incorporated by statute in 1879 as the Ontario Veterinary Association. This important date in the history of Ontario's veterinary profession marked the beginning of a long, hard struggle to attain "true professional status and their privilege of self-governance that the profession enjoys today. The inception of organized veterinary medicine in Ontario came about early in the province's history, considering Upper Canada had been virtually an empty region only 90 years before. Across the border, in the older states, veterinary organization was still in its fledgling stages and in Great Britain, Queen Victoria had approved of the Royal College of veterinary Surgeons only 35 years earlier.

The beginnings of veterinary work in Ontario are rooted in the history of its agricultural community. Settlers required growing veterinary attention for their livestock and by the 1860's, the advent of travel by steamship and railway stimulated a greater need for better animal care as livestock became more vulnerable to European diseases. Hog cholera, foot-and-mouth disease, anthrax, and other serious animal diseases were breaking out in the U.S., causing heavy losses and threatening to infect Canadian stock.

Unease over this situation and the lack of scientific training and diplomas to practice veterinary medicine prompted the establishment of a veterinary teaching college for Canada. Andrew Smith was appointed to head the new college and in 1862, he began by giving supplementary lectures in veterinary subjects to agricultural students in Toronto. Smith went on to form the private Upper Canada Veterinary School, and its successor, the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC), which is today, the oldest veterinary school in Canada and the United States. The first class of three young men received their diplomas in 1866. In contrast, the 1999 graduating class of the Ontario Veterinary College has 99 students, and 67 of these are women.

In 1871, the veterinary profession reached another milestone when the Agriculture and Arts

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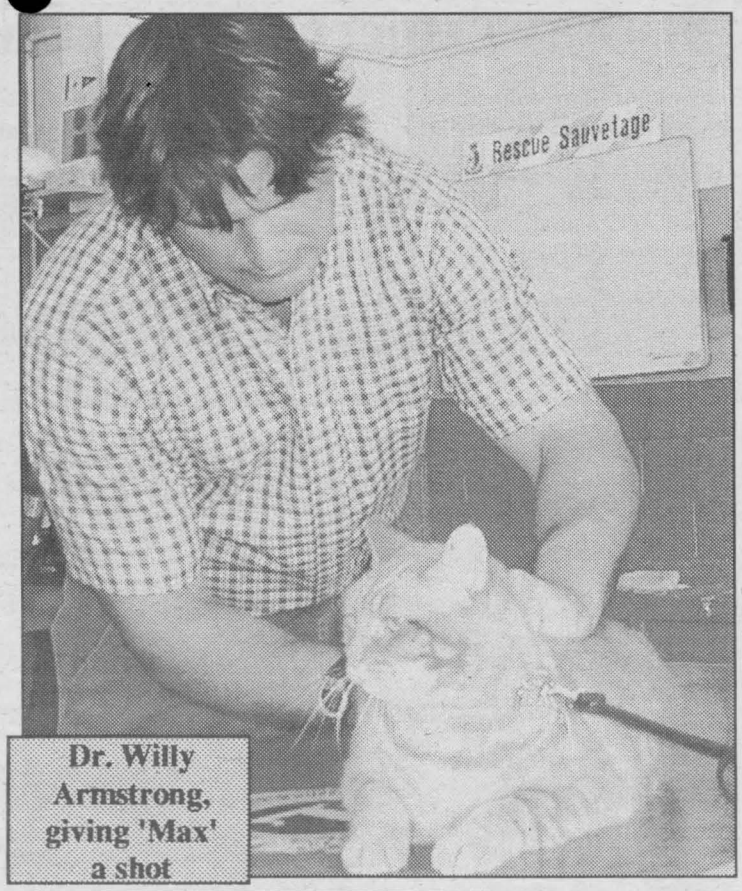

Dr. Willy Armstrong, giving 'Max' a shot



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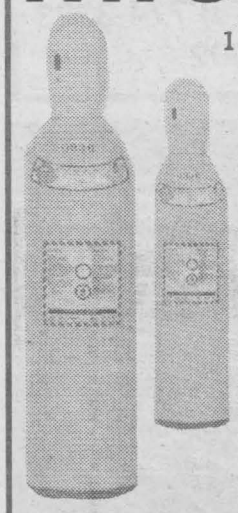

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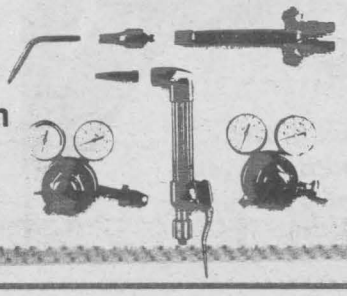

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HARRIS

Seaway Project receives financial support

by Sandra Lee Johnston
Chieftain Staff Reporter

The Agricultural Adoption Council (AAC) has announced approval of $4 million in funding from Agricultural and Agri-Food Canada's CanAdapt Program for the Seaway Valley Farmers Energy Co-operative Ethanol Plant project in Cornwall. This funding is provided for CanAdapt through CARD, the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund, an initiative of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

"On behalf of the 2,500 members of the Seaway Valley, I would like to express our appreciation for the support and confidence expressed by the Agricultural Adaption Council in our ethanol venture," said Bud Atkins, President of the Seaway Valley Farmers Energy Co-Operative Inc. "The support announced today takes our project very close to meeting the financial requirements of our long-term lender, substantially strengthens the equity position of the Co-Operative and takes us within reach of starting construction of the plant."

"This is another example of all the members of our community pulling together to improve their economic standing and work to take control of their economic future," said Atkins. "Our application for CanAdapt funding had a lot of support from the community. I would like to express our appreciation to our local Member of Parliament, Bob Kilger, who has voiced his strong support for our efforts." Kilger, MP for Stormont-Dundas and Charlottenburgh, noted, "The Seaway Valley project is an important initiative for Cornwall and eastern Ontario and will play an important role in job creation, new markets for farmers and our efforts to address air quality and global warming issues, the CARD program, administered by the Agricultural Adaptation Council is designed to support projects which will become self-sufficient and play an important role in our agri-food industry."

The members of the Seaway Valley Farmers Energy Co-Operative Inc. have been working since 1992 to raise equity financing for a value-added ethanol manufacturing facility in Cornwall. The $48 million plant will produce 66 million litres of

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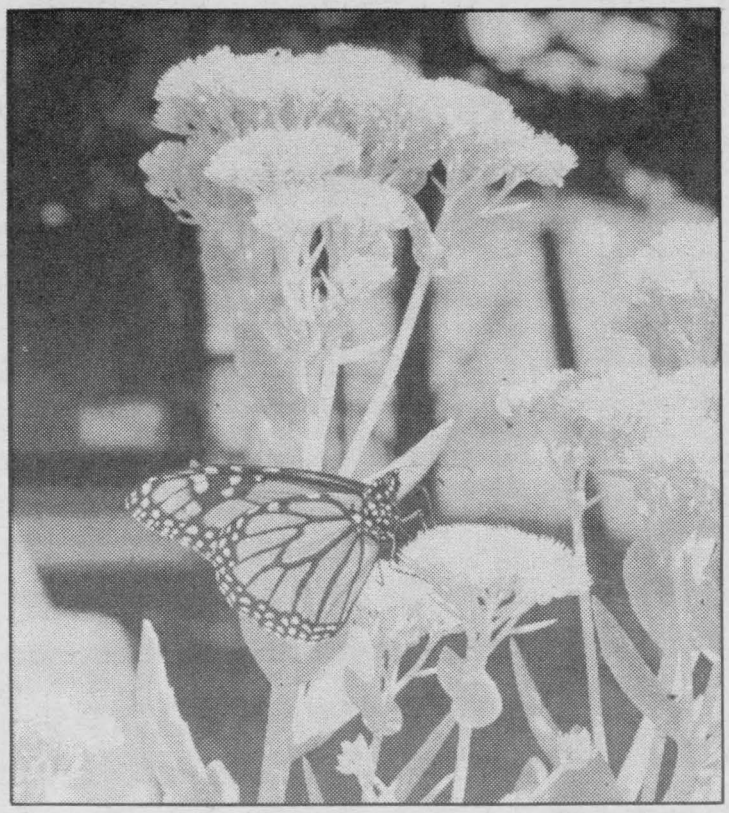
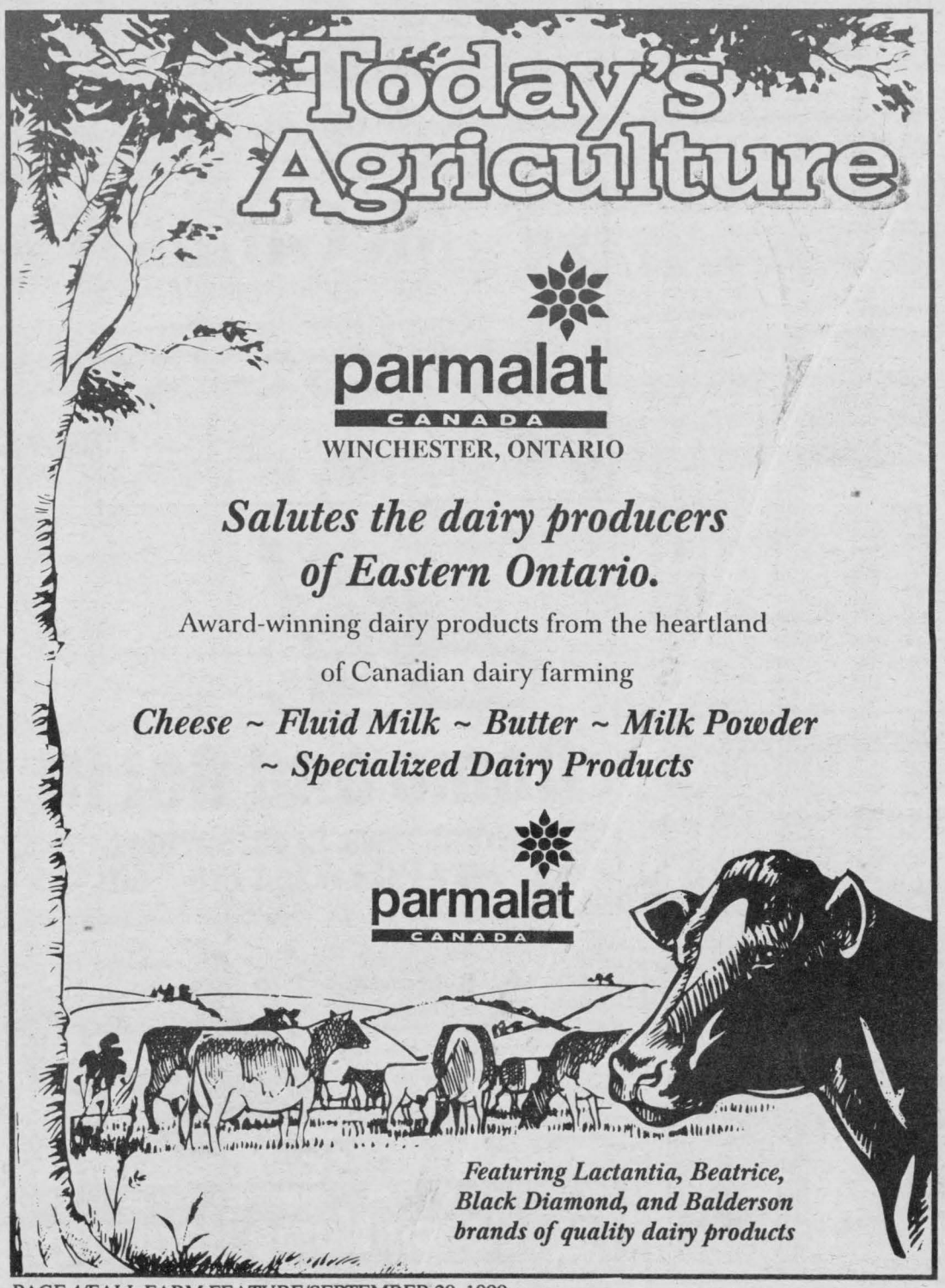


A Monarch Butterfly takes a breather on a plant.





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CONTINUED

Anniversary

Continued from page 3

Act of Ontario was amended to provide that no one should append their name to the title of veterinary surgeon unless certified by a veterinary college. The Veterinary Science Practice Act of 1931 broadened the scope of veterinary medicine by extending to include domestic animals as well as livestock. The Ontario Veterinary Association, now the College of Veterinarians of Ontario, became a corporate body empowered to govern its members and issue licenses to practice. Veterinary medicine had grown from its origins in blacksmithing and horseshoeing.

Today, Ontario, "The cradle of veterinary science in America" has 3061 licensed veterinarians. We are proud to celebrate our 125th anniversary of serving the public across the province and look forward to an exciting future in the new millennium! -30

[Contact: Dr. John Henry, Registrar; Martin Fischer, Chair 125th Anniversary Committee College of Veterinarians of Ontario, 2106 Gordon Street Guelph, Ontario NIL 1G6 Phone: (519) 824-5600; Fax: 824-6497; e-mail: questions@cvo.org]

Ethanol

Continued from page 4

ethanol every year for fuel and industrial markets, with additional byproducts (dried distillers grains and carbon dioxide). The project will utilize up to 6.5 million bushels of corn per year valued at over $20 million.

Fuel ethanol is an additive and octane enhancer used in 10% blend with gasoline and sold at 1,000 gas bars across Canada. Ethanol, a renewable fuel produced from biomass, reduces carbon dioxide and monoxide emissions and is viewed as an important player in the fight against global warming. The market for ethanol continues to grow in the United States as part of the government's clean air initiative.

In 1999, members of the co-operative, from across eastern Ontario raised more than $6.5 million in equity funding as part of an arrangement to secure long-term financing. "The Council (AAC) is very impressed with the achievements and goals of the co-operative and has approved a substantial equity position in the project," said Murray Porteous, Vice-Chair of the Agricultural Adaptation Council.

The project was first developed to create a new market for farmers in eastern Ontario by adding value to their crop through the production of ethanol. In addition the demand for locally produced crops would increase the local price and impact on supply and demand across the province. The construction and operation of the plant will create jobs, with increased indirect employment in local trades and business.

The AAC is a 47 member industry driven coalition mandated by the AAFC to administer three funds totalling over $70 million: CanAdapt, the Ontario Research and Development Program and the National Soil and Water Conservation Program and the CanAdapt Small Projects initiative.

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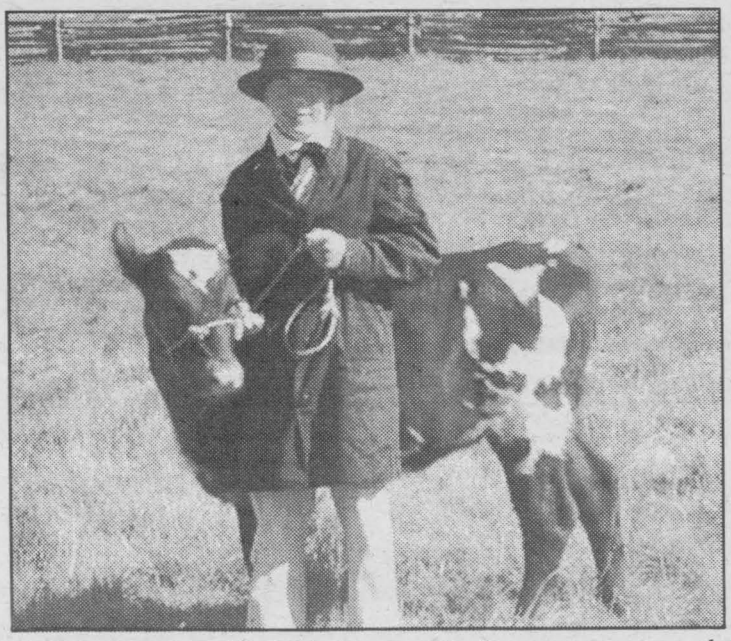

Fall Fair at UCV had this young interpreter cowed.

Strengthening Ontario Agriculture

Ontario farmers work hard to succeed and they deserve fair treatment from government in order to prosper. Over the past four years, the Harris government has consistently listened to farmers' concerns and taken action to support this important industry.

Repealing the previous government's Bill 91 which would have unionized the family farm, reforming the property tax system so farmers no longer have to pay first and wait for rebates, continuing to increase funding for agriculture; the province will spend $365 million this year through the Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs (up from $258 million in 94-95), the Harris government has brightened the horizon for farmers.

Ontario farmers saved $21 million through the sales tax rebate on farm-building materials that was implemented in 1996. Perhaps of special note in our part of the province is that farmers benefit from Mike Harris' leadership in eliminating bureaucracy so government can respond more quickly in times of crisis.A s a result, farmers who

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CONTINUED

Agriculture

Continued from page 6

were hard hit last year by the Eastern Ontario Ice Storm received immediate assistance of up to $2000. This was the first instalment of a $30 million disaster relief effort allocated specifically to farmers.

In response to unusually low commodity prices, pork farmers, cattle farmers and others are receiving $40 million through the Whole Farm Disaster Relief Program.

Ontario leads the nation in agri-food exports. Last year, Ontario exported a record $6.3 billion in agri-food products.

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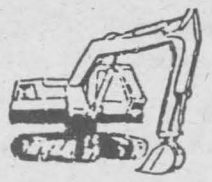

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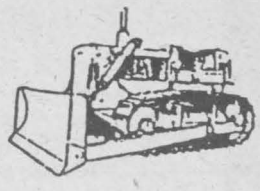

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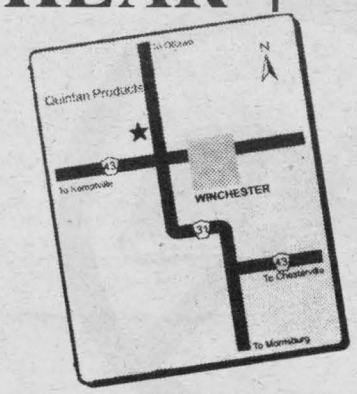

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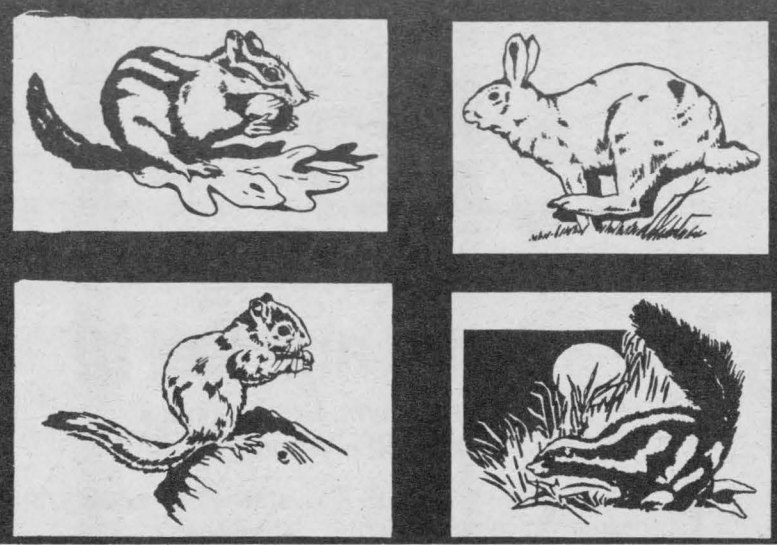

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