



A glass of organic milk in remote city

ŞAFAK TİMUR - Turkish Daily News

Kelkit is far from the noise and constant movement of metropolitan Istanbul. Located on the eastern Black Sea province of Gümüşhane, this small city of some 20,000 people lies innocuously behind the Toros Mountains, outlined by a small number of fields and grazing herds, in contrast to its harsh climate and geography. However, the city has recently shown movement, at least for those listening and watching for possible changes to be brought by a new project, as well as by charity work.

The Aydın Doğan Foundation has built a vocational school in Kelkit, affiliated with Erzurum University, offering a two-year pre-university education to provide businesses and industry with intermediary technical personnel. However, this is not only a charity investing in the city, but also the foundation for a promising future when you combine it with other developments in the city. Almost simultaneously with the opening of the vocational school, at the end of 2003, a new cattle herd entered the city; not to be raised as another grazing herd, but to be the beginning of a very novel business for the city, producing purely organic milk. The company, Doğan Organik Company, has opened an organic cattle farm in the city. Meanwhile, the first group of students in the organic farm department of the school began their education in Turkey's first organic farm department during the 2003-2004 education term.

The project did not finish with that, but expanded, as the company offered contract milk production in 2007 with the first six farmers who invested in organic milk production. The company provided the farmers with automatic milking machines, and assisted in the construction of new animal pens, which would be appropriate for organic farming. The program is funded by the European Union, the Gümüşhane governorship, Aydın Doğan Foundation and the United Nations Development Program.

"We came here to teach how to fish," said İlhan Başaran, the general manager of the company. First, said Başaran, this is a serious project to encourage social responsibility,

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profit comes later. Those six farmers began their new business with 300 cows. The company helped the farmers in a variety of ways including constructing cow pens, learning procedures to apply for bank credit and buying the herds. Also, professors from the organic farming department at the school taught farmers new methods of production.

"I am so happy that I entered this business," said Çetin Savaş, an on-stock farmer. "My income is clear. I have stability now." Savaş has farmed for some 20 years.

"Now we have learned what raising real livestock is. We actually are doing the opposite of what we did in the past," he said. They had been tying the animals close to the farms all day or keeping them closed in the cow pens, he said.

Strict 'organic' control

Habib Güler, another farmer producing milk for Doğan Company, is also happy. His 30-animal herd has increased to 39 following the latest births. "We did not have a market for our products in the past. Now we find the market and we can sell what we produce. That is the important thing, he said. Doğan Company signed a five-year agreement with farmers to buy the milk they produce.

All six farmers received their certificate for organic farming at the beginning of this year. With the certification, farmers agree to participate with very strict supervision over their busi-

ness. Agriculture inspectors from the Institute for Market Ecology (IMO) – an international certification organization for organic agriculture – regularly reviews the farmers' work, as well as Doğan Company. As an example, a farmer, Güler, wants to expand his herd. He was just in the middle an inspection when he met with the Turkish Daily News reporter and was bargaining with the inspector to increase the number of animals in his herd. The rules for certified farmers are harsh. The inspector asked for a couple of conditions, including changing the location of a cow pen, which was too exposed to the wind. What has changed, the TDN asked Güler? "The procedures changed most," he answered, "We previously have not had inspectors or other things."

See the money, enter the business

Cafer Hirik, the head of Kelkit Chamber of Commerce and Industry, plants organic vetch, like the other 29 farmers who dedicated their fields only for organic hayvan yemi and sell their products to the company. "I wanted to be a leader for other farmers," he said. Hirik sees the project as 'a model of standing up' for Kelkit.

While the people of Kelkit are open to change, there would certainly be resistance to this new farming method, said Hirik. However, "...they will change when they see that they can earn money from this business", he noted.

The family of farmer Yaşar Yılmaz could be an example proving Hirik's prediction. "It was so stressful when I entered that business," Yılmaz said, recalling that his brother, a partner in their farm, refused to switch to organic farming. "I said I was entering alone," he said, and now he is happy about it. "The biggest problem was that we could not receive our money on time when, in the past, we sold animals. Now we do not have a problem of markets," he said. "Now it is far better than the most profitable period in the past." The project is going to expand with new farmers in the near future, Başaran said. They completed the first part of the project's production goals; the rest depends on the market for organic milk. By the end of 2008, 30 pilot farms are targeted to produce milk. By 2010, building a facility to process the raw milk is among the goals of the project.

A foundation inspiring teams of organic farmers



Aydın Doğan Vocational College with the first organic agriculture department in Turkey aims to raise working force to develop organic farming in Turkey. Giving a three-year long pre-university education, the school teaches English as well by foreign teachers. The college has two private fields and 13,000 m² greenhouse for its students to practice and cultivate their own organic plants.

Along with the project with Doğan Organik Company and other institutions, the college organized different organic agriculture projects as well with various funds from the European Union. Under the framework of those projects, four professors from the department went to Spain to examine organic farming practices there. 15 students went to Greece as well for weeks long internships.

Organic milk production in the city stands out as an opportunity for many organic agriculture students too. Many of them make their compulsory internship in Doğan Organik Company and some plans to stay there for a permanent job in the future. However, although students look happy about their school, they live the difficulties to be the leader students of organic agriculture in Turkey. As the department gives two-year vocational education, the graduates have difficulties in being recognized. "We could not really step in as organic technicians," said student Gökhan Kenanoğlu. Because of this problem some of the students thought to be transferred to agricultural engineering faculties that give university education.