

Grass-fed beef producer to open 'certified-humane' facility

Whole Foods lends White Oak Pastures \$450K for new building

by *Sustainable Food News*

January 21, 2008



White Oak Pastures nears completion of its new processing plant

Seeking to reverse the trend of industrialized beef production, Will Harris is set to open his own certified-humane processing facility in April.

The fifth-generation cattleman raises about 650 head of cattle on his family's ranch, White Oak Pastures, in Bluffton, Ga., which is also the brand name of his company's 100 percent, certified humane, natural ground beef product.

The soon-to-be-opened processing facility is just over 5,300 square feet.

[Watch Video](#): Will Harris talks about raising grass-fed cattle at White Oak Pastures

“That’s about as small as you can build one and have everything in it that you have to have,” Harris told **Sustainable Food News** Monday.

“These types of plants have been closing up [for years] as the beef industry industrialized and consolidated production,” Harris said. “So, this is a giant step backwards, and there is no template for the best way to do

it, but I'm betting the farm – literally betting the farm -- that this one can work.”



Aside from his own money, Harris is funding the \$1.5 million project with a \$461,000 low-interest loan from the state of Georgia and a \$450,000 low-interest loan from Whole Foods Market, Inc. that's just about finalized.

The Whole Foods amount is significant given the Austin-based retailer loaned just over \$1 million to 22 separate producers in 2007 through its new Local Producer Loan Program.

For the past three years, Harris has been busy marketing and selling his product to supermarket chains and distributors including his oldest customer, Tree of Life, Inc., which sells his product predominantly to health food stores.

Harris began selling to Publix Supermarkets, the Deep South's \$20 billion supermarket chain, operating 770 stores in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Tennessee, just over two years ago. The company's White Oak Pastures Grassfed Ground Beef is currently sold at over 200 Publix supermarket stores throughout the southeast U.S. for \$6.99 a pound.

"They've ordered for 106 weeks straight and we never had a complaint," Harris said.

Another big fan of White Oak's products is Whole Foods, which has ordered beef every week since becoming a customer in May, Harris said.

While the focus is on grass-fed beef, Harris said the facility can also process other ruminants including goats and sheep. He's plumbing and wiring the facility to enable hog processing but will hold off purchasing that specific equipment initially.

Once open, the plant will handle between 50 and 100 head of cattle weekly. White Oak produces between 12 and 15 head a week. Harris said there are plenty of local cattlemen interested in processing at his facility.

Along with the processing plant, Harris also erected an 18,000-square-foot building adjacent to the processing facility to house pens for the animals, both were designed by the world's foremost expert on humane treatment of animals Dr. Temple Grandin.