

## Health, environmental concerns fuel popularity of grass-fed beef

By [SUSAN SALISBURY](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Monday, March 31, 2008

Will Harris, a fourth-generation Georgia cattle rancher, began producing grass-fed beef in 2000, but no one was buying it.

Most people didn't even know what it was.



Harris Georgia rancher sees demand outstrip supply.



Richard Graulich/Staff Photographer

William Powers stocks meat at Whole Foods in Palm Beach Gardens. Grass-fed beef costs more in stores, but some consider it healthier.



"I was talking to people and giving it away," Harris said recently from his White Oak Pastures farm near Bluffton, Ga., where his family has raised cattle since 1866.

Today, Harris, 53, has more demand than supply for his beef, which is born, reared and slaughtered locally. Unlike the vast majority of U.S. cattle, his animals spend their entire lives in pastures and are never trucked to distant feed lots to be fed growth hormones and corn.

Harris is part of a growing trend in which business and consumers are beginning to move away from the factory-farming model that has dominated American agriculture - and the food we eat - for decades.

"Grass-fed beef is from cattle that are raised the way cattle were raised before the industry became industrialized after World War II," Harris said.

Interest has sharpened during the past few months, with the largest beef recall in U.S. history - 143 million pounds - following revelations from an undercover video that showed workers at Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Co. in California kicking and ramming sick or injured cows at the slaughterhouse.

Such cows have been banned from the food supply since 2003, but almost as urgent a question as safety is that of humane treatment, experts say.

"Now the consumer not only wants safe meat ... she is looking for what we are terming 'compassionately raised,' " said Lochrane Gary, Hardee County's agricultural extension director, who works with nearly 450 cattle ranchers. "She is looking for humane treatment."

Or, like Kathi Ragozzino of Wellington, she also is looking for something healthier to eat.

"We'd like to try it and see if there is a difference. We're not crazy fanatics," said Ragozzino, 50, who was checking out the organic and grass-fed beef case at the Publix Greenwise Market in Palm Beach Gardens recently along with her husband Pasquale, 65. "We just try to eat healthy. We don't eat processed foods."

U.S. residents consumed more than 28 billion pounds of beef last year, and less than 2 percent of it was grass-fed. But demand for grass-fed, also known as grass-finished, rose 30 percent from 2006 to 2007.

Whole Foods Market, the Austin, Texas-based chain of natural-foods supermarkets, has added grass-fed beef from Chile to its offerings and has seen high demand.

"We are having problems keeping it in stock," said Russ Benblatt, a Fort Lauderdale-based spokesman for Whole Foods. "I don't think that anyone could have guessed how popular this was going to be."

Most of the nation's beef, including Florida's, starts out on a diet of grass and hay and is fattened later on corn feedlots in Midwestern states. The average product travels 1,300 miles to get to market, Gary said.

### **Traditional method costly**

The soaring costs of corn and fuel, with no relief in sight, are making the traditional beef production method increasingly expensive. But Florida, with its large population and year-round growing season, is perfect for the grass-fed beef industry, Gary said.

"It could be done here in Florida more easily than anywhere else in the country," he said. "It's a natural thing for livestock."

Among the most passionate of Florida grass-fed-beef producers are Erin and Al Rosas, who own Rosas Farms, an organic farm on 100 acres in Sparr, just north of Ocala.

In their early 40s, they are pioneers who have been producing grass-fed organic beef since 1990. They also work with 177 farmers in Florida, Wisconsin and the Midwest, helping them run sustainable operations and market their products.

The Rosas say they are witnessing a growing interest in grass-fed beef from consumers.

"Now people are paying attention. Now they are saying, 'OK, I need to know this,' " Erin Rosas said.

High on consumers' lists are the greater healthfulness of grass-fed - Clemson University meat scientist Susan Duckett says it has about half the fat of traditional beef - and its environmental advantages, which include saving topsoil and reducing water use and carbon emissions.

The grass-fed industry also is helping to preserve family farms, which are being lost at the rate of one an hour in the United States, Rosas said.

"It is beyond organic. It is about going back to being sustainable," she said. "Agribusiness is not going to do that."

Jo Robinson, creator and owner of a Web site called [eatwild.com](http://eatwild.com), said the number of grass-fed-beef ranchers in the U.S. has jumped to more than 1,000 from fewer than 50 in 1999.

"More and more people know how to do this right," said Robinson, who lives on Vachon Island in Washington state. "In January and February, we were adding one new ranch a day to our Web site."

Almost 20 Florida producers are on [eatwild.com](http://eatwild.com) and another site, [localharvest.org](http://localharvest.org).

### **Some buy year's supply**

Marie Peters, a grass-finished-beef producer in Pasco County, is a former attorney who began producing the beef about 10 years ago after buying 70 acres near Dade City.

"I'm not sure how I got started," Peters said. "I had been sick and learned about organic food. I started eating organically. It kind of made sense to raise the cows that way."

About a dozen families buy animals from Peters each year for \$1,600 apiece, plus a \$175 slaughter fee paid to the packinghouse. There is a waiting list. Customers end up with about 300 pounds of meat, about a year's supply.

"It comes out to \$5 to \$6 a pound," Peters said.

Customers such as church office worker Karen Williams, 58, and her husband Noah, 56, a store manager, select their cow each year. They pick up the custom-cut meat at Weicht's Custom Slaughter Inc. in Zephyrhills.

Weicht's owner Joe Weicht said the firm has seen its grass-fed, organic beef business double during the past three years, to about 90 animals raised by a half-dozen producers. "Ten years ago, you didn't hear of it," he said.

Karen Williams said she thinks grass-fed beef is safer.

"I know it was not fed any dead animal parts. It was not pumped full of hormones or antibiotics," she said.

Before she happened to bump into Peters at a real estate closing about five years ago, Williams had stopped eating red meat because it made her sick.

"I realized some of my health problems were coming from the cows and the antibiotics and hormones they were giving the animals," Williams said.

### **State lacks infrastructure**

Gary, the Hardee County extension agent, believes large Florida producers will enter the grass-fed arena once they are assured of a 20 percent to 30 percent premium price. Not having to send cattle out of state could save \$60 to \$75 a head, he said.

But there are problems. Florida, with about 18 slaughterhouses on the USDA's approved establishments list, most of them small, lacks the infrastructure needed to support large-scale beef processing.

That and high land prices were among the reasons Dave Roffey, 66, a former St. Lucie County grass-fed-cattle rancher and veterinarian, sold his 250 acres and moved to Lebanon, Va., in 2004.

Three meat-packing facilities are within 30 miles of his 300-acre Virginia ranch. He considered starting a slaughterhouse in Florida but found the USDA regulations complicated and the cost too high.

Florida's pasture grasses are not as high-quality as grasses in other states and also need to be fertilized four times a year, Roffey said.

"To do it with any kind of scale, Florida is not the place," Roffey said. He has little doubt the sector will grow nationally, citing its healthfulness.

Gary said record corn prices have made cattle feeding "less profitable by the day" and that the country needs to come up with another way to raise beef.

"My attitude is, we ought to produce it as natural as we can and close to home as we can, then process and eat it close to home. Everybody wins," he said.

Grass-fed beef also will encourage the growth of additional businesses in the state, Gary said.

"I think it can grow beyond a niche market," he said. "I think it is the trend of the future."

## **Grass-fed beef: What you need to know**

### **What are the various types of beef?**

**Conventional:** This is the most widely produced beef. Cattle are fed grass for most of their lives, then moved to a feedlot during the finishing stage. There they are fed grains, primarily corn, plus vitamins and minerals. They are given growth promotants or hormones and may have been given antibiotics.

**Grass-fed or grass-finished:** This type of beef is from cattle that have been raised in pastures their entire lives. Most grass-fed beef sold in the U.S. is from Australia, New Zealand and other countries.

**Natural/branded:** Most beef meets the U.S. Department of Agriculture's definition of natural, which means it does not contain artificial flavor, coloring, chemical preservatives or any other artificial or synthetic ingredient, and has minimal processing.

**Certified organic:** Beef must be from cattle raised according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program requirements. Cattle must be fed 100 percent organic feed and could be either grass-finished or grain-fed. Cattle cannot be given hormones or antibiotics for any reason.

### **Where is grass-fed beef available?**

**Groceries:** Whole Foods Market carries grass-fed beef from Chile. Publix sells the Maverick Ranch brand of grass-fed beef. Nutrition Cottage in Delray Beach and Nutrition World in Royal Palm Beach and West Palm Beach also stock grass-fed beef.

**Producers:** Grass-fed beef ranchers can be found at [www.eatwild.com](http://www.eatwild.com) and [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org). Some will ship to customers.

### **Is grass-fed beef any different nutritionally?**

Grass-fed beef is higher in beta carotene, vitamin E, conjugated linoleic acid and omega-3 fatty acids. It is lower in fat, and grass-fed beef have a naturally alkaline stomach that minimizes the possibility of contamination from harmful varieties of E. coli.

### **What's the cost?**

Generally, organic grass-fed beef costs around \$2.50 a pound more than conventional beef. However, recent price checks found grass-fed ground beef as high as \$8.49 a pound.

Sources: National Cattlemen's Beef Association, Publix Supermarkets, Whole Foods Market, American Grassfed Association

