

## Ranchers of grass-fed beef talk up its virtues

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Colorado Springs - "Fast Food Nation" author Eric Schlosser, in examining how to restore the disconnect between farm and table, wasted no time getting to the point as he spoke to the third annual American Grassfed Association conference held here last weekend.

"It should come as no surprise that American beef can't be sold in Japan, Korea and the European Union," he said. "A recent report showed that 75 percent of Japanese consumers didn't want to eat American beef because the USDA has succeeded in giving American meat a bad name. This room is the solution."

While praising the assembled ranchers for their commitment to open-pasture grazing, he reiterated the importance of connecting food producers with consumers. In doing so, Schlosser reaffirmed his disdain for factory farms that produce much of the nation's meat.

Ranchers from as close by as Utah and Wyoming, and as far away as Texas, Georgia and Missouri gathered here over the weekend to explore a range of eco-friendly, sustainable ranching and marketing techniques at the conference, "Grazing America."

Schlosser's book has been hailed by environmentalists and dietitians as a well-researched critique of so-called "factory farms." Written in 2001, it also raised hackles among large-scale cattle growers and the lobbyists who represent them. A film based on the book is due to be released in October, and his most recent book, "Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know about Fast Food," is directed toward a younger audience.

"A lot of people are asking, 'How did we get to a point where American beef came to be regarded as an inferior product?' To get an answer, we have to go back several decades when the government realized we had an excess of corn, and decided to get rid of it by encouraging ranchers and farmers to incorporate corn into a cow's diet.

"Cows don't normally eat corn. They can't digest it. So we had to feed them antibiotics because they were using up valuable energy to process corn, resulting in weakened immune systems. So then we had to give them baking soda to deal with the subsequent indigestion."

As heads nodded in assent, it became apparent that Schlosser was preaching to the choir. Schlosser has become the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's nemesis, reportedly trailed wherever he speaks by at least one of its members.

Among those agreeing with Schlosser were Dr. Patricia Whisant, a veterinarian, and her husband, Mark. The Whisants have a 4,000-acre ranch in Doniphan, Mo. Patricia Whisant is president of the Grassfed association.

"We feel the organization is important because it's an umbrella organization for a number of issues," she said. "From a veterinarian's point of view, grass is healthier for the animals because ruminant animals were intended to live this way. Not only that, it is a sustainable practice that is better for the environment. This isn't unique.

It's more like a return to the basics. Cows always ate grass until the USDA decided to let ranchers finish herds with grain.

"This organization wouldn't have come into existence if it hadn't been for the USDA deciding that animals could be on forage for 80 percent of the time and put in feedlots for the last 20 percent - from 120 to 180 days - during which they are fed corn. And I don't want to tell you what those lots are like."

Waste from animals that graze in pastures spread that waste over the pasture area, creating a natural fertilizer for the fields. However, in commercial feedlots, manure is collected and trucked to fields. Sometimes excess manure is washed into a storage lagoon. Otherwise, cows stand in their own excrement, Whisant says.

The ongoing debate over all-grassfed vs. grain-finished beef moved ranchers interested in sustainability issues to join with other like-minded groups to explain why the 80/20 program wasn't going to work.

That coalition includes groups as diverse as Slow Food, an international organization devoted to preserving traditional foodways and educating people about food as a center for social-, political- and family-centered life; the Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance; several university agricultural science programs; and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The two-day conference included workshops on managing soil fertility; low-stress animal handling from the farm to processing; fencing and paddock design; and processing and packaging issues.

Terry Gompert, a University of Nebraska extension expert in grazing education, recently became a certified educator for holistic management. He discussed a 12-month forage system similar to Argentina's that would produce higher weight gain and protein balance in cows.

Allen Williams examined the ways technology can advance productivity through ultrasound evaluation of carcass traits that increase yield.

Kate Clancy, a specialist in food and the environment with the Union of Concerned Scientists, is particularly interested in making consumers aware of environmental issues related to sustainable food systems. Her research has focused on CLA, a newly discovered good fat called "conjugated linoleic acid" that might be a potent cancer fighter.

The most significant amounts of natural CLA are found in the meat and dairy products of grassfed animals, with three to five times more CLA than animals fattened on grain in a feedlot.

"Steak and ground beef from grass-fed cattle are almost always lower in total fat, which is a concern for consumers," Clancy said. "And there is decreased soil erosion and increased soil fertility because cattle graze naturally, a concern for environmentalists."

Those are only two areas of concern that have emerged over the years among a steak-loving population living in the country that is world's largest beef producer. Increasingly, people are asking questions about the safety of the meat they eat.

"The time was right for us to launch our association, Patricia Whisant says. "Consumers were ready to listen because e.coli outbreaks and the 'mad cow' scare frightened people about eating beef. There are a number of reasonable concerns, and we want to address them in a reasonable way."

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