

Grassfed Meat—No Warning Label Needed

By: Dr. Patricia Whisnant, DVM – Owner- American Grassfed Beef and RainCrow Farm
President – American Grassfed Association

Did you know that one-third of all Americans has consumed hamburger in the last 24 hours? Eighty-two percent of Americans report that they eat a hamburger once a week. The average American eats 100 hamburgers per year. Yet continued recalls on tainted meat lead us to wonder if the next step will be the U.S. Surgeon General Warning that *“Consuming this beef may be hazardous to your health.”*

Since the Sunday *New York Times* article that presented a scathing report on the ground beef industry in this country was published, many consumers are again being scared out of ordering that All American food icon, the hamburger. The tragic stories over the last two decades of people who have contracted food-borne illnesses from eating ground beef contaminated with E.coli O157:H7 have rocked consumer confidence in U.S. food safety.

Consumers are challenged to look at safety as well as moral and ethical questions about eating beef and ground beef in particular. The new consumer no longer takes health and safety for granted but has begun to ask tough questions and make tough demands. Today’s consumers do their homework to learn where their food originates, who grows it, and how they grow it. Is government regulation and oversight the answer to U.S. food safety?

While government regulations and inspection have their role, obviously it is not enough or U.S. commercial food safety would have improved since the first publicized E. coli outbreak in the mid-1990s. Health-conscious consumers will be discerning about the food they put on their tables. Their research will, as it is already beginning to do, lead them to close their wallets to meat produced by industrial meat factory farms and seek agricultural models that they consider safer and healthier options.

Go back to the root of U.S. agricultural and to a time when Americans had confidence in the food they ate. Much of this food was grown on their own farms or at least in the local area. Agricultural practices worked with nature, rather than distorting natural cycles in order to produce food faster, cheaper and more profitably, as is the norm today.

Solar-based systems such as the grassfed model produce locally sourced products from sustainable farming and ranching operations. This is better for the animals who are allowed to grow and develop in fulfillment of their natural instinct to graze. These practices end up being better for the consumer as well, as it produces meat and dairy products that are healthier and safer. This production model is better for the environment and in many cases actually improves the soil and prevents erosion. In addition, it is far better for the family farms and the rural communities they support.

The alternative to a grassfed system is industrialized agriculture, which favors specialization over diversity, large over small, hired workers over owner-operators, and quantity over quality. Under these factory farms the behemoth operations enjoy the economy of scale to provide cheaper inputs and more

profitable outputs based on minimal unit profit but huge volume. This cheaper food has been pushed on the consumer as the new norm, but at what cost? Such operations compromise the health and humane treatment of farm animals, as they are fed an aberrant diet leading to feedlot illnesses. Environmental costs are huge, as these operations heavily depend on fossil fuel and the logistics of waste management. It costs the consumer who is now fed food treated with antibiotics, synthetic hormones and acid resistant E. coli. Modern, industrial agricultural practices have changed the face of American agriculture, and we are just beginning to learn how truly damaging these changes are to animal health, human nutrition, and to the environment.

As producer going against the grain of industrial agriculture, we need to continue urging consumers to seek their own truth and have confidence in their choices by comparing the systems themselves. Discerning consumers need to ask from which model they want their food to come. Ultimately, the consumer votes with his dollar, and those who choose grassfed can be confident as they enjoy their next hamburger.