

“Solutions for Your Life”



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Pasture Raised Beef

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As many people have heard, there is a new resurgence of people requesting grass fed beef products. With their being a niche market available this is a new venture that many of the smaller producers are considering. Unfortunately, there is little current research that has been done on this type of beef cattle production along with no USDA or FDA regulations as to labeling of grass fed beef. Currently cattle that are promoted as grass fed range anywhere from 80 – 100% grass fed products.

As with any new venture that is going to target a select portion of the population you want to ensure that you are meeting their needs and wants. Common public perception of grass fed beef is that it has an increased nutritional value with an increase in omega – 3 fatty acids and increased conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). However, research still needs to be done to prove just how much the chemicals in grass fed beef improve human health. Consumer demand will set specifications such as the portion and packaging size along with the quality of meat.

The ideal fat content of a finished animal is 20 – 25% empty body weight for good eating quality. In order to reach the standards set by the consumer the producer must be willing to make operation changes where needed. This may include changing the type and breed of cattle in which they are producing. The ideal cattle for a grass finishing operation are small, early maturing cattle. Some breeds which may meet these criteria are Angus, Hereford, Murry Grey, and Devon cattle. Cross breeding cattle may be necessary to reach the market goals. Producers may also look at harvesting heifers as well as steers since they mature at an earlier age than their male counterparts.

These cattle will ideally finish at approximately 1,000 – 1,200 pounds at two years of age. The ideal harvest age to reach the individuals genetic potential for tenderness is two years of age. As the animals age increases the potential for tenderness decreases. Some tenderness can be achieved through aging beef for 14 – 21 days at 39 degrees F. After 21 days the tenderness is only slightly affected.

The main component for grass fed beef is the pasture management. Forages used must be able to grow and finish the cattle as rapidly as grain. The final 30 – 60 days cattle should be gaining a minimum of 1.5 – 2 pounds a day. This makes pasture management a priority for grass fed beef producers.

The producer must maintain forage quality and intake by providing a mixture of forage types to reach the needs of the cattle. The pastures should contain some type of legume to assist in the daily gain of the cattle. To ensure high forage intake the pastures should have a low grazing pressure. To reach the 1.5 – 2 pounds per day of gain the finishing season should match the environment to achieve the increased intake and high quality forages.

The goal is to produce a quality product with the desired fat content to add flavor, tenderness and moisture to the product as it is prepared at a young enough age not to harm the genetic tenderness and profitability for the producer as well as satisfy the consumer.