

Grass-fed beef producer pins hopes of new processing plant on Publix

140-year-old White Oak Pastures turns from science to nature in creating new livestock production model

Dan McGovern, Sustainable Food News

Source: http://www.sustainablefoodnews.com/printstory.php?news_id=262

July 26, 2006



A Georgia cattleman meets this week with representatives from Publix Supermarkets to convince them to buy more of his grass-fed ground beef.

If they do, Will Harris would see his dream of building a new processing plant on his family's 140-year-old ranch become a reality.

Harris raises 650 head of cattle on the green fields of his family's ranch, White Oak Pastures, which is also the brand name of his company's 100 percent, certified humane, natural ground beef product.

Expanding his ranch's grass-fed beef operations means coming full circle for the fifth-generation, self-described "full-time cattleman."

Will Harris never liked raising cattle for the 'industrial complex'

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

The Harris family has been raising cattle at White Oak Pastures for the marketplace since 1866 when James Harris established the ranch.

For the first hundred years or so, cattle on the ranch were raised without supplemental hormones or antibiotics. They were handled and harvested in a humane manner, pasture-raised and grass-fed, then slaughtered on site and sold to area markets, Harris said.

Of course, there was no real market for grass-fed beef then – beef was beef. But that all changed as 20th century livestock production models took over. *(Story continues below)*

It started with Harris' father and continued when Harris went to college and learned the science of raising cattle.

Harris lamented the days when he would feed countless antibiotics to his animals and inject their ears with hormone implants to increase yields. He's loaded generation after generation of calves into packed 18-wheelers for 30-hour hauls to massive feedlots where they would await slaughter.

"When I raised cattle for the industrial complex, I didn't like it," he said.

Then, in the early 90s, Harris began reading about a strange phenomenon starting to creep into consumer's buying habits.

"I started reading about sophisticated consumers that want to eat food that is healthier, safer, more nutritious and raised in accordance with nature's way," he explained. "I always longed to raise cattle the way we used to, but I never thought it would be that way again."

A couple years later, Harris had made up his



White Oak Pastures' operations are certified humane, grass-fed

It wasn't an easy choice given the litany of costs associated with selling to major buyers such as product liability insurance, bar coding and Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), a computer-driven, paper-less exchange of information, which can reduce handling costs.



mind to begin transitioning all his cattle to a grass-fed regimen and went about it with "irrational exuberance."

But getting his product in front of his customers proved to be difficult given his location in

Atlanta, Harris wrestled with how to best get his product in front of consumers.

"I'm in a very rural place here," he pointed out. "I don't have a lot of sophisticated consumers coming to my farm to buy meat."

The idea of selling his beef to consumers over the Internet and shipping it by mail held no appeal for Harris, so he got more ambitious.

"I decided to be in mainstream distribution," he said.

Nevertheless, by 1994 his cattle were certified grass-fed and certified humane. Harris then shipped out samples of his products to the nation's leading distributor of natural and organic food products, Tree of Life, and to Whole Foods Markets, the world's largest retail chain of natural and organic foods, which rang in nearly \$5 billion in sales last year.

He also sent some to Publix Supermarkets, the Deep South's \$20 billion supermarket chain, operating 770 stores in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Tennessee.

Whole Foods passed. But Tree of Life and Publix soon began carrying White Oak Pastures grass-fed beef.

Harris said Publix now stocks his ground beef in one of its Florida warehouses, selling it in stores for \$6.99 a pound.

He meets this week with Publix representatives to convince them to stock his product in the other three warehouses the supermarket chain maintains in Florida.

He said if the company agrees, he would begin construction on a new processing plant he wants to call Harvest House.

The new facility would not only allow Harris to increase production capacity four fold to 12 head per week, but reduce the expense of transporting his cows to a processing facility 100 miles away.

"My cattle will never be loaded into a truck their whole life," he said. "I want to raise cattle and sell them to people that appreciate the way I do it."

White Oak Pastures is selling only ground beef since the grass-fed beef is leaner than feedlot beef. That makes the meat of steaks and roasts tougher, he explained. "I think I tastes great, but I know I can't sell tough steaks and survive," he said.

But when Harvest House is built, Harris said he can start dry-aging beef so he can sell more tender muscle cuts.

Harris said his experience going from mass-producing cattle with hormones and antibiotics to grass-fed made him realize that when crafting a production model, one could look for guidance from science or nature.



The Harris Family

"For many, many years, [our family] looked to nature," he said. "My father and I looked to science. Now, we're back to nature."