

Taking stock: Cattle producers adapt to shrinking economy, rising costs, aging owners

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By Karen Ott Meyer, Special to The Commercial Appeal

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Will Harris, a fifth-generation cattleman at his family's White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Ga., converted to grass feeding his stock when he tired of what he considered industry excesses. An active board member of the American Grassfed Association, Harris finished construction on a \$2.2 million processing facility at White Oaks in 2008, right before the economy collapsed.

How is the operation faring today?

"To be sure, our operation continues to be a high-risk venture, and we're just reaching a break-even point," Harris said. "We have to a great extent cut ourselves off from the industrial model and we're not tied to the vagrancies of the system.

"We'll either make it or not make it."

Six area producers raise beef under contract for White Oak Pastures, which serves a niche population of sophisticated consumers who are willing to pay higher prices for the assurance that their meat is grass fed rather than grain fed. Harris said his customer base represents less than 1 percent of the population.

"I believe that the current system that serves 90 percent of the population has a lot of problems, chiefly that it was a system developed in the 1950s and is based on cheap fossil fuel and government-subsidized feed," Harris said. "What we don't have (now) is cheap fossil fuel or grain."

Harris thinks the beef industry's current model is held together only by existing infrastructure.

"At one point, the textile industry in this country remained only because we had infrastructure," he said. "When that was finally exported overseas, the industry vanished."

Harris said a side benefit to his operation is that it creates rural jobs.

"I own about 1,000 acres and lease another 1,000 and employ 17 people, including skilled meat cutters and master's-level individuals," he said. "I have a friend with a much larger operation who employs three people."

Despite the existing challenges, Blossom believes one final factor could cause more damage.

"The worst thing right now would be for the consumer to lose confidence in the product," he said.