

## **Farmer adjusts cattle venture**

An Early County cattle farmer raises grass-fed cattle for consumers who want organic beef

By Valerie Benton

*The Albany Herald*

Sunday, November 26, 2006

BLUFFTON — An Early County cattle farmer worries about the future of his farm, White Oak Pastures, which has been in his family for five generations.

How will the 2007 Farm Bill impact his farming operation?

Will any of his three daughters step up to take over the farm?

At 51, how much longer will he be able to raise cattle?

These are questions that weigh heavily on Will Harris' mind. Instead of getting mired down in his concerns, however, he began several years ago implementing a business model that he hopes will ensure a successful and profitable future for his farm just south of Bluffton.

Harris began looking outside his farm for ways to keep his farming operation healthy without relying on government subsidies.

As he looks out over White Oak Pastures from the driver's seat of his late model Jeep, he talks briefly about the future of the U.S. Farm Bill and wonders aloud what the next one will hold for farmers.

"I just know I don't want to be dependent on it," Harris said while steering

the Jeep over a slight hump in the road, which winds through his pastures.

### **NEW MARKET**

To lessen his dependence on subsidies, Harris, in 1995, began reading about sophisticated consumers who wanted natural or organic foods.

Raising cattle organically was not a new concept to Harris since his family "always grass-fed the ones we ate."

But Harris decided to apply the business model to his cattle farm.

The startup business of selling grass-fed cattle to be processed and packaged for organic markets is in its second year and is proving to be profitable, Harris said.

His product can be purchased at Tommy Mc's Produce in Albany, located at 2537 Lake Park Drive. Owner Tommy McDowell said the beef, sold in 1-pound packages, is "pretty good. It's lean and healthy."

McDowell said about 75 percent of the packages he sells are to repeat customers. He thinks if more people knew about it, they would opt for the leaner meat.

Outside Albany, it is located in about 140 of Publix's 220 Georgia stores located above Warner Robins.

Harris also distributes the organic meats to natural grocery stores and health food stores from Florida to Virginia through Tree of Life, the nation's leading distributor of natural, organic, specialty, ethnic and gourmet foods.

White Oak Pastures' grass-fed beef sells for \$6.99 per pound, said Harris, who also said he makes no apologies for his product.

"I do think there's sophisticated consumers who want to eat beef differently, and I can do that," Harris said. "I don't blame folks who don't. That's a lifestyle choice folks make.

"I want people to add my beef to their diet," he said, touting its health and safety benefits, among others.

## **NATURE'S WAY**

Harris' product is advertised as healthier because it contains lower saturated fats and higher levels of unsaturated fatty acids and fatty acids that help lower cholesterol. He says his product is safer because there is not the risk of E coli or mad cow disease (BSE).

A March 7, 2006, study released by the Union of Concerned Scientists confirmed "that beef and milk from animals raised entirely on pasture have higher levels than conventionally raised beef and dairy cattle of beneficial fats that may prevent heart disease and strengthen the immune system."

The union called pasture-based meat production "a fledgling industry." The union's Web site, [www.ucsusa.org](http://www.ucsusa.org), said in a March 7 news release announcing the study that, "Increasing demand can encourage greater adoption of grass-fed production methods and keep more small farmers and ranchers on the land."

Harris sells more than 200 grass-fed cows a year and saves about 100 heifers a year from the offspring of his 650 cows. Each of his cows gives birth to one calf a year, he said. About 80 percent of the stock is outbred from Angus bulls.

He loves his herd, but he also enjoys eating beef. He said the average American eats 70 pounds a beef a year. Harris chuckles when he admits to eating 70 pounds of beef in one month. He includes beef in at least two meals a day.

As a cattle farmer, he said, he thinks there is a lot wrong with raising beef herds through conventional methods, both for the consumer and the cow. He regrets that the cows he does not harvest at 18-30 months old for organic processing are grown through conventional methods. He calls it "a shame."

Through the conventional method, 500-pound calves are hauled on a truck about 1,200 miles to Nebraska and placed shoulder-to-shoulder in a feed lot with nearly 100,000 other calves. They are fed a principally high-carbohydrate diet and injected with hormone implants and sub-therapeutic levels of antibiotics to prevent diseases. The result, he said, are 1,250-pound obese animals.

"That's not what I want to do," Harris said, his pure Southern dialect possessing a gentile quality. "I want to raise cows the way nature intended. They are raised to eat grass."

## **BUILDING THE FUTURE**

Cows prefer sweeter wheat, oats, rye grass, rye and clover to the perennial Bermuda and Bahia grass that Harris plants. Hay is an accepted feed, he said.

The cattle farmer, peering out from under the brim of his felt hat, said he wants to "sell them to people who appreciate them."

Harris also has plans to build a more than 5,000-square-foot processing plant in one of his pastures. He plans to break ground next year on the plant, which may cost as much as \$1 million to build.

"I've got this bottleneck in processing," Harris said of his current situation.

He sees a plant of his own is the solution. Harris has applied for a \$500,000 OneGeorgia loan to help offset the costs of building the facility.

The OneGeorgia Authority was created to assist the state's most economically challenged areas with one-third of Georgia's tobacco settlement funds. Since OneGeorgia was founded in 2000, more than \$150 million has been distributed to 114 counties and has led to the creation of more than 31,000 jobs.

Even plans to build the plant cause him some additional concerns. "I can't raise enough cows to service the plant," he said. He's moving forward on building the plant with "a lot of trepidation."

He said many smaller packing plants have folded. To increase his likelihood of business, he has tentative plans to also open the plant up for processing of hogs, sheep, goats and possibly deer. He expects to process 10-20 cows a day.

The next steps in his business plan are to include a retail store in the processing plant and to later develop an agri-tourism component that would draw tourists from Highway 27, which is proposed for four-laning and which cuts through his farm.

Harris has no reservations about implementing business practices and inviting outsiders to his farm if it helps ensure its future. But the farmer has no desire to go elsewhere in the world. He's content to drive his jeep over the 1,000 acres of farmland, which he is in the process of having certified organic, and gazing out over his herd, which is stratified by age.

Harris says from the driver's seat, "I'm just not happy anywhere else but here."

Source: <http://www.albanyherald.net/frontsarchive/2006/1106/front112606.html>