

## Grass-fed beef producer builds state's first on-farm processing plant

White Oak Pastures ready to ramp up production of humanely-raised grass-fed beef

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White Oak Pastures completes new grass-fed beef processing plant

Georgia's largest grass-fed beef producer White Oak Pastures said Thursday it has completed the state's first on-farm plant designed to process beef according to rigorous humane animal treatment standards while minimizing the environmental impact.

"Having this plant on our farm means we will never again have to load cattle that were born and raised here onto an 18-wheeler," said Will Harris, founder and owner of White Oak Pastures. "It is more humane for the animals and without a doubt better for the environment to have a closed production loop on the farm."

Harris raises about 650 head of cattle on his fifth-generation ranch in Bluffton, Ga., which is also the largest USDA-certified organic farm in Georgia.

The on-farm facility will allow White Oak Pastures to significantly expand production and distribution of its beef, as well as beef raised by ranchers in the region.

The plant will start operating in May, Harris told **Sustainable Food News** on Thursday, and then handle between 50 and 100 head of cattle weekly. White Oak produces between 12 and 15 head a week.

"At least several farmers in our community will now have access to an old-fashioned, artisan-style butchering process," said Harris. "This will allow them to step out of the industrial beef processing complex and give them the ability to market their products as local, a label consumers are seeking."

Prior to completing the facility, Harris transported his cattle to a processing plant 100 miles away, a journey that stresses the animals and contributes to global warming by expending fossil fuels in transport.

Contributing to a small carbon footprint of the cattle processing operation at White Oak is a \$60,000 anaerobic digester that makes liquid organic fertilizer from the waste that would otherwise end up in a landfill.

"George Washington Carver said, 'In nature there is no waste,'" said Harris. "We're proud to be able to say our plant is a zero waste facility."

While the focus is on grass-fed beef, Harris said the facility can also process other ruminants including goats and sheep. The facility will handle hog processing in the future.

White Oak is celebrating the opening of the 5,329 square-foot facility on April 26 with representatives from Whole Foods Market, Inc., the OneGeorgia Authority, and the Early County Economic Development Authority, each of which contributed funds to construct the \$2 million facility.

Aside from his own money, Harris funded the \$1.5 million project with a \$461,000 low-interest loan from the state of Georgia, a \$450,000 low-interest loan from Whole Foods, and \$150,000 from the Early County Development Authority.

Leaders in Georgia’s sustainable food movement point to the new plant as a harbinger of good things for the state’s small, family farms.

“The opening of the processing facility at White Oak Pastures will be a gigantic step in the right direction because it will benefit many small, sustainable family farms in South Georgia,” said Slow Food U.S. Southeast Regional Governor Julie Shaffer. “Will Harris is a brilliant visionary and leader of the local, sustainable food movement in Georgia, and he’s a personal hero of mine!”

For almost four years, Harris has been busy marketing and selling his product to supermarket chains and distributors including his oldest customer, Tree of Life, Inc., which sells his product predominantly to health food stores.

Harris began selling to Publix Supermarkets, the Deep South’s \$20 billion supermarket chain, operating 770 stores in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Tennessee, just about three years ago. The company’s White Oak Pastures Grassfed Ground Beef is currently sold at over 200 Publix supermarket stores throughout the southeast U.S. for \$6.99 a pound.

Whole Foods started carrying the company’s fresh steaks, roasts, and ground beef at its butcher counters last year.

Along with the processing plant, Harris also erected an 18,000-square-foot building adjacent to the processing facility to house pens for the animals, both were designed by the world’s foremost expert on humane treatment of animals Dr. Temple Grandin.

The facility received the Certified Humane designation from Virginia-based Humane Farm Animal Care, a leading nonprofit dedicated to animal welfare.

The Certified Humane distinction mandates that producers raise beef without antibiotics or growth hormones and in a humane environment that allows them to “engage in their natural behaviors.”

