

State's largest grass-fed beef producer diversifies

White Oak Pastures practices Serengeti model of pasture management

by Sustainable Food News

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White Oak Pastures, Inc., Georgia's largest grass-fed beef producer, said Thursday it has diversified into free-range Bronze turkeys this year.

The Bluffton, Ga.-based company has the largest USDA-certified organic farm in Georgia and now has several hundred turkeys for sale for the holidays.

The turkeys follow the same free range production system that White Oak practices with its cattle.

They have been raised on pasture all of their lives, and never given any growth hormones or antibiotics.



Turkeys at White Oak Farm

The turkeys also play an important role in the company's pasture management program.

White Oak Pastures practices the Serengeti Model, which means large ruminant (cows) followed by small ruminant (sheep) followed by bird (chickens and turkeys).

The company said it does this to allow the pastures to be grazed in three different ways.

The turkeys weigh on average 15 pounds at processing.

Because the turkeys are raised in a natural setting, White Oak said it can't guarantee specific weights.

The cost is \$7.49 per pound.

White Oak also recently installed the largest solar barn in the Southeast, which is saving 30 percent in energy costs for the entire farm.

White Oak Pastures Owner Will Harris said the installation at the farm, where he raises over 675 head of cattle, means savings between 65 to 90 percent of the total cost of the barn will be returned in the first year.

The cost of the photovoltaic solar barn, which consists of 225-watt Siliken panels providing power to the farm and beef processing facility was \$320,000.

In addition to designing and installing the system, Hannah Solar, an Atlanta-based solar and renewable energy firm, helped Harris obtain a USDA Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) grant to fund the project.

White Oak Pastures cranked up operations at its \$2 million, on-farm, USDA-inspected processing plant in the spring of 2008 allowing it to significantly expand production and distribution of its beef, as well as beef raised by ranchers in the region.

White Oak Pastures is one of only two on-farm, USDA-inspected grass-fed beef plants in the country.

All White Oak Pastures cattle are raised under two sustainability standards: the Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) program, which is a free certification for farms raising their animals with high welfare standards, outdoors on pasture or range, and a standard developed in 2008 by the American Grassfed Association (AGA), which represents more than 300 grass-fed livestock producers.

The AGA standards are primarily based on four precepts: total forage diet, no feedlots, no antibiotics and no added hormones. The AGA grass-fed claim applies to ruminants only – cattle, sheep and eventually goats – not poultry or pork.

The AWA audits AGA members' grass-fed meat operations. AGA members who adhere to both the AWA and AGA standards are able to use both American Grassfed Association and Animal Welfare Approved labels on their products.

The annual audits are provided to the farms at no cost, and, additionally, farmers bearing the seals are provided free technical advice and marketing support.