

Major grass-fed beef producer turns on Southeast's largest solar barn *White Oak Pastures to see energy costs lowered 30%*

by *Sustainable Food News*
July 26, 2010



Solar barn under construction behind the White Oak Pastures building

White Oak Pastures, Inc., Georgia's largest grass-fed beef producer, has installed the largest solar barn in the Southeast, which is now providing about a third of the power needed to run its plant.

White Oak Pastures Owner Will Harris told **Sustainable Food News** that if the 50-kilowatt system works as expected, he plans to add enough capacity to power the entire operation next year.

Harris said the installation at the farm in Bluffton, Ga., where he raises about over 675 head of cattle, will save 30 percent in energy costs for the entire farm, which is also the largest USDA-certified organic farm in Georgia.

The savings means between 65 to 90 percent of the total cost of the barn will be returned to Harris 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 \$323,000.

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. Harris said that he is petitioning the USDA to allow his company to process chickens at a nearby, retired red meat plant that he leased.

If approved, the operation would be the only poultry plant that is available for use by farmers in Georgia, Florida and Alabama.

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.