

## Georgia's White Oak Pastures Opens an On-Farm Processing Plant

Source: <http://www.ssawq.org/Newsletters/SSAWGnewsOct2008.html#Georgia>



Will Harris owns and operates a grassfed beef operation in Early County, Georgia, that has been in his family for 142 years. His commitment to the principles of sustainability and stewardship has led them to open an on-farm state-of-the-art, USDA-inspected processing plant. "We no longer pollute the environment and stress our cattle by hauling them all over the country for harvest and distribution," he explains.

Describing the operation as a gamble that he hopes will pay off, Will says, "I literally bet the farm. I never wanted to be in the beef processing business, but to stay in the grassfed business, it became a necessity." He explains that running a processing plant is a very specialized and complicated business, and requires "jumping through a number of regulatory hoops." However, hauling cattle to the nearest facility 100 miles away was not something that he liked to do, nor did he consider it sustainable. It also limited him to processing twelve head a week. To stay in business, he had to get production up and eliminate the stress and cost of transportation. Will is now aiming to process fifty head per week.

Will credits the Georgia Department of Agriculture, which he found to be entrepreneur-friendly, as well as [OneGeorgia Authority](#), for supporting the project. He also is glad to have recruited Brian Sapp, a talented artisan meat-cutter with a Masters degree in meat science, to run the processing plant.



In addition to meeting Certified Humane and USDA-approved grassfed protocol, which forbids the use of artificial hormones, confinement feeding, animal by-products, and antibiotics, the Harris farm is now certified organic. The cattle are locally born and raised, and the farm and packing plant are Animal Welfare Approved by the Animal Welfare Institute. Another feature of the operation is that the processing plant is a zero-waste facility, using a digester to transform waste into organic fertilizer, and a 30,000 gallon septic system to recycle wash-down water.

The Harris's market their products through Whole Foods, Publix, and natural foods distributor Tree of Life, and their on-farm retail store is now open for business. They also are working with SYSCO's Buckhead Beef to sell to restaurants. Their beef has won a number of awards, including the Grand Prize in the [2008 Flavor of Georgia](#) contest.

Will has a well-tuned sense of humor, but he seemed to be only partially joking about his advice to others who may want to open a processing facility: "Don't try this at home!" As for his outlook for the future... "I'll get back to you."

*Will Harris shares his time and expertise with other producers, educators, and business people, and serves on the Board of Directors of Georgia Organics. He was featured as a presenter at the Grazing Georgia workshops that were held in Tifton and Watkinsville, Georgia, in the spring of 2007, as part of Southern SAWG's Professional Development Program supported by Southern SARE. Be sure to catch Will at Southern SAWG's [upcoming conference](#) in January in Chattanooga, where he will participate in one of our excellent sessions, Rebuilding Local Livestock Infrastructure and Processing: Reshaping Policies and Regulations.*