

Grass-fed beef

Implications for animal welfare, the environment and human health

Free-range, grass-fed, pasture-raised, naturally-raised; these terms are frequently displayed on meat products, and although these label claims seem fairly similar, the farming practices may not be. So how do we as consumers choose a meat product that will benefit human health as well as improve animal welfare and environmental sustainability? The secret is reconnecting animals with nature.

Since the early 1950's, the conventional way to raise beef cattle has been to send 6-10 month old animals to a feedlot to be 'finished' (i.e. fattened) on grain for 3-6 months. Feedlots are typically large dirt lots sectioned into large pens. Each pen has a feed and water trough and maybe a small shaded/covered area, but often little else. During their time at the feedlot, cattle are often given growth enhancing hormones.



Though customary, the social acceptability of feedlots and the use of growth enhancers at finishing have become increasingly undesirable to consumers due to the concerns around animal welfare, human health and the effects on the environment. Many farmers share these concerns and are turning to alternative ways of farming, such as “grass-fed” or “grass-fed and finished” beef.

Raising grass-fed and finished beef begins with putting cattle back on pasture and eliminating feedlots from the production equation. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines “grass-fed beef” as meat obtained from cattle that have eaten only grasses and forage (hay/roughage) throughout their lifetime, with the exception of milk for calves. Grass-fed cattle must have continuous access to pasture during the growing season, and are not fed any grain or grain by-products.

Grass-fed beef farms typically use a rotational grazing system, which involves a large pasture area that is divided into numerous smaller individual paddocks. Cattle are placed in the first paddock to graze a variety of grasses. Pasture growth is monitored to prevent overgrazing. Once the pasture has been sufficiently grazed, the herd is moved to the next paddock, leaving behind an evenly distributed, nutrient-rich spread of manure. Manure is a natural fertilizer that replenishes top soil, spurring new growth of pasture grasses. With proper timing and rotation, the first paddock should be ready for re-grazing once the last paddock has been grazed through. Then the rotation is repeated.

So why choose grass-fed beef over conventional grain-finished beef?

Animal Welfare Benefits for Grass-Fed Cows

- Fewer health problems than feedlot cattle
- Grass is easily digested by cattle; a sudden change in diet to include large quantities of grain (starches) can upset a cow's digestive system (becomes highly acidic) and can lead to more serious health concerns if left untreated
- Freedom to express normal behaviours and exercise continuously, improving animal welfare
- Fewer problems with pests (flies, rodents) and related health concerns
- Grass-fed cattle live longer, more natural lives because they put on fat more slowly than cattle fed a grain-based diet (it takes longer to reach market weight)

Benefits for the Farmer

- Lower input costs (feed, labour, fertilizer)
- Cattle feed themselves by grazing (with heavy snow cover cattle may require additional forage on pasture, e.g. baled hay).
- Cattle fertilize the pasture naturally as they go through the rotational grazing system by recycling nutrients (through manure) which improves plant vigour and provides nutritious grasses to cattle during the next grazing cycle
- Value-added product: consumers get lean, 'clean' beef

Benefits for the Environment

- The carbon footprint is lower when raising grass-fed cattle. This is because the carbon footprint of raising beef cattle comes from the growth of grains for feeding feedlot animals, which requires fossil-fuel-based fertilizers, pesticides and transportation.
- Rotational grazing improves soil fertility, decreases soil erosion (loss) and has the ability to protect sensitive areas (i.e. riparian zones) with proper paddock placement/planning

Benefits for Human Health

- Leaner meat with a greater proportion of cancer-preventing agents, like omega-3's and conjugated linoleic acids (CLA's)
- Grass-fed beef is significantly higher in Vitamin E
- Grass-fed beef is a unique meat product that is very lean, has a different flavour, a darker colour and unique cooking qualities

Meet SPCA Certified farmers who raise grass-fed beef cattle at www.spcacertified.ca/farmers.