

THE WORLD PEACE DIET

Mastery Training Program



“Imagine the world we can create...”

with DR. WILL TUTTLE,
author, *The World Peace Diet*



Supplemental Readings

Module 4 – Living the Transformation

Grass-fed Cattle Ranching: Is It Green, Humane, or Healthful?

Gene Sager
Professor of Environmental Ethics
Palomar College

“Grass-fed” has now become a buzz word that aims to connote environment-friendly, animal-friendly, and health-friendly beef production. It aims to contrast with beef produced by Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). In some ways, grass-fed operations cause less environmental damage, involve less mistreatment of cows, and produce beef that is less dangerous for human bodies than CAFOs, and the demand for grass-fed is growing.

How does grass-fed cattle ranching compare with CAFOs? Although there is no universal definition of “grass-fed” at this time, the American Grass-fed Association (AGA) has highlighted some of the major differences between the two methods:

1. Cattle in CAFOs are fed mostly corn and soy during the last six months of their lives; grass-fed cattle consume only “forage,” which usually means grass and hay.
2. Cattle in CAFOs are confined in feedlots, whereas grass-fed cattle have much less restriction of movement.
3. Cattle in CAFOs are given antibiotics and hormones on a regular basis, but grass-fed cattle are not.
4. CAFO feedlots collect vast amounts of manure in a small area, contributing to air and water pollution, including the groundwater. Grass-fed cattle are natural manure spreaders and, if not overgrazed, distribute fertilizer over the pasture.
5. Beef from cattle in CAFOs has high levels of cholesterol and saturated fat but low levels of omega-3 fats. Beef from grass-fed cattle has less cholesterol, less saturated fat, more omega-3 fats, and more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which may be an anti-carcinogen.
6. Beef from grass-fed cattle is less readily available and is more expensive.

How “green” is beef from grass-fed cows?

Consumers tend to mix and blend the terms “grass-fed” and “organic.” Here we enter the murky waters of certification and labeling. Most governmental and independent organizations that deal with these issues do not equate grass-fed and organic. Neither the labels “Organic Beef” or “Certified Organic Beef” mean that the cows were grass-fed. Organic beef may be from either grass-fed or grain-fed cows. Adding to the confusion, some food markets do their own labeling.

How can beef from grass-fed cattle fail to be organic? Sometimes ranchers spray herbicides like Grazon P&D and Redeem R&P in the hayfield or the pasture in part because some weeds are poisonous for cattle and must be eradicated.

All beef production includes inherent inefficiencies. There is massive loss of land, water, and energy resources when converting grains into flesh, largely because most of the food energy is used to grow body parts that people don’t eat and to maintain the daily living requirements of cows. In addition, meat storage involves energy-intensive freezing.

Because grass-fed beef production requires more grazing land for longer periods of time, it exacerbates the problems that grazing has always caused. Whereas CAFO cattle are grazed before going to the feedlot, grass-fed require pasture their entire lives – until “finished,” as in “grass-finished.” Thus grass-fed amplifies existing grazing issues – loss of rainforests and other lands, soil erosion, damage to wildlife habitats, and degradation of public lands for grazing. Regarding the environmental damage due to grazing on public lands, see

<http://www.mikehudak.com/Presentations/PresentationDirectory.html>.

It is difficult to prevent overgrazing, which leads to erosion, pollution of groundwater and streams, and loss of wildlife habitat (including insects, birds, and wild animals). In addition to effects on local flora, over-grazing is particularly harmful to natural drainage ditches, low areas, and streams. The American Grass-fed Association cannot possibly inspect all these matters, and so the AGA simply warns against overgrazing by advising that 80% of a grazing area must be “unbroken,” i.e., plant-covered. This may alert an AGA certified farmer to the complex problem, but it will not necessarily spare the land and its wildlife from the ravages of overgrazing.

Finally, a problem associated with all beef production is methane, a gas emitted from both ends of a cow and a major greenhouse gas. In conclusion, although in some ways beef from cows fed grass is “greener” than that from cows in CAFOs, neither is an environmentally friendly way to generate food for people.

Is Grass-fed Beef Production Humane?

Undercover investigations of modern farms have consistently shown inherent cruelties, including highly stressful housing and mutilations such as castration and branding without painkillers. Frequently there is gratuitous abuse by callous or even sadistic workers. Those less unfortunate cows who experience relatively benign, though short, lives on farms must then endure the misery of transport to slaughterhouses and the terror of slaughter.

Grass-fed cow farms are clearly less abusive than CAFOs, which confine cows in crowded, dirty plots with hundreds or thousands of other animals that stifle the cows’ natural behaviors. Cows in CAFOs are often unhealthy. One reason is that cows’ digestive systems are designed for a leaf-based diet, but they are fed primarily seeds (corn and soybeans) in CAFOs, because corn and soybeans have more concentrated protein to help cows put on muscle mass. In addition, some studies of CAFO cattle indicate that the seed diet causes liver damage. Finally, windy conditions in a feedlot can cause dust pneumonia. Because the animals are stressed and crowded together in unhealthy environments, CAFO operators regularly administer antibiotics, which promote the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Regarding animal welfare standards of grass-fed beef production, the American Grass-fed Association standards statement devotes only two lines to humane treatment. The AGA says grass-fed farmers should “support” humane handling, transfer, and slaughter (Standards

Statement 3.3.1). Such cursory reference to these issues gives little reassurance to animal protectionists that conditions for grass-fed cattle are not cruel.

In general, the moral issues relating to slaughter involve both the problem of the pain caused to the animal in this process, and the issue of the right to deprive the animal of its life. Unnecessarily taking the life of an innocent sentient being is never right. While some slaughter methods are crueler than others, slaughter is never humane.

Is Grass-fed Beef a Healthful Food Choice?

Numerous studies have demonstrated the health benefits of a plant-based diet. Among animal-derived foods, beef is notorious for its association with coronary artery disease. Beef from grass-fed cattle is lower in cholesterol and saturated fat than CAFO beef, but even lower levels of these artery-clogging fats are not healthful. The nutrients found in beef from grass-fed cattle – such as protein and certain essential fats – are readily available in a range of plant foods.

Conclusions

Compared to producing vegetables and grains, beef production involves much more energy and other resources. In some respects grass-fed production exacerbates the problem, because there is insufficient space to significantly increase grazing lands. Also, we must consider a range of issues about humane treatment, issues that arise only in relation to animal products. Finally, concerns about public health and our own well-being favor moving toward plant-based diets.