

Grass Finished Beef

by William Lipsey

Grass fed beef is one of the hottest “new” trends of the beef industry. “New” is in quotes because there has always been grass fed cattle eaten – most cull cows ground up for burger are “grass fed” – and honestly some of the beef sold that way is similar, just with a heartwarming story behind it. However, finishing cattle on grass or pasture can provide a consistent, high quality product, but it’s not easy. Pasture finishing requires a well thought out plan that starts with the proper genetics and continues with a forage production system that will provide proper growth and finishing to the cattle.

Years ago it was thought that any animal would marble and produce quality beef, it just needed to be fed long enough. Today it is recognized that genetics play a role, different breeds marble better and within a breed certain lines do better than others. Unfortunately we do not have a lot of data or EPDs in the Highland breed to help identify and select the right genetics. Visually you can look for certain traits that will help. Big volume, easy keeping cows are what you want. If you have a cow that needs lots of extra hay or grain to keep in good flesh, then her progeny will probably not make the best beef off pasture.

Nutrition throughout the steer’s life is important. Again, years ago it was thought that mar-

bling was put on only during the finishing stage. Today it is recognized that marbling is a lifelong process, so it is important to meet the animal’s nutritional needs all through its life. The winter months are one of the biggest challenges. If you are in the growth stage of the animal’s life you should be looking for at least $\frac{3}{4}$ -1 pound per day of gain. Poor or average quality hay will not provide adequate nutrition! Have your hay tested. Work with your cooperative extension or nutritionist to make sure you have a balanced ration. If you are marketing grass finished cattle and need to supplement your hay, consider alfalfa pellets or haylage/baleage.

Most purebred Highlands that are on a grass only system will be “finished” between 24 and 36 months of age. Realistically with a grass finished system you should expect Select or Low Choice grade as your goal. Having a proper pasture management plan is essential. Just as finishing in a feedlot, you want the animal to gain consistently in the finishing phase. Pasture tends to have high quality early in the spring, with quality decreasing in late summer. You want your cattle to gain consistently, particularly in the finishing phase. Take soil tests and forage samples. Many believe that calcium levels in the soil help balance the mineral levels which then helps improve the taste of the meat. Make sure you are providing high quality pas-

ture. Consider annuals to get through the slow summer growth. Some grass finishing experts promote the idea of grazing corn in mid summer. This gives the animals a high quality feed during mid summer months.

Heat can also be a factor. If your animals spend the whole day under the trees panting, then they are not gaining and putting on finish. Some Highland producers will clip their steers to alleviate the summer heat stress. In the southern states you might want to finish in the winter with annual forages to beat the heat. Another consideration for grass finishers is slaughterhouse capacity. In many areas of the country it is hard to get an animal harvested in the fall. Some grass finishers are going to programs where in the fall they finish them on high quality haylage for a few months so they can harvest them in the early winter. Another option is to put them on better feed their second winter – as yearlings – and then harvest them after a month or two of pasture.

An important tool is a scale. Most Highland steers will be looking at a finished weight of 1000-1200 pounds. By knowing what your animal weighs and when you are planning to harvest it, you can determine the proper feed program. Pasture finishing beef takes some planning and knowledge. Doing it right can produce excellent results.