

Grain Finished Beef

by William Lipsey

The majority of cattle in the US are finished on grain in feedlots. The goal of these feedlots is maximum gain and turnover as profit margins are tight and slim. Gains of 3-4 pounds per day are not uncommon and often times animals will be finished at the Choice grade weighing 1200+ pounds at as little as 11-13 months of age. While these systems work well in the commercial cattle business, Highlands do not fit into them well. However, this does not mean that you cannot utilize a grain finishing system for your Highland cattle. Finishing Highland cattle with grain supplementation, either on pasture or in a confined lot can be easier, offer more flexibility and produce a more marbled product than pasture finishing alone. Depending on your marketing strategy and philosophy this may or may not work for you.

No matter what finishing system you choose certain “rules” stay the same. You need to start with good genetics and good cattle. A poor, slow growing, hard doing animal will lose money and produce sub par beef no matter how its finished. You must be consistent with your feeding, your animal should be growing throughout its life and during the finishing period gaining at a rate of 1.5 lbs./day or more.

Most grains are high in energy and low in protein. Protein is most important for growth while energy puts on finish (fat). Using grain to help finish cattle on pasture can offer the best of both worlds. 10-15 lbs. per day of corn, oats or barley fed to grazing cattle is a good finishing ration. This fed to a 900-1000 pound steer for 3-4 months should will you a nicely finished animal. If you do not have access to pasture or if you are finishing during the winter, you might increase the amount of grain to 15-18 lbs. per day. Smaller levels of grain can be fed also. The most important factor is the overall ration and the rate of gain you are looking for.



Make sure you have plenty of bunk space so all animals have access to feed.

Photo by Angus Mackay

Animals can also be finished on a high grain diet. This type of diet requires limiting forage. A 1000 pound steer could be fed 20-25 lbs. of corn per day plus 2-3 lbs. hay for 90 days as a finishing ration.

A word of caution about feeding high levels of grain, anything over 3-5 lbs./per day. Start slowly. If the animal has not been on grain, start at 3-4 lbs. per day. Increase the amount 1 pound every 2 days. Make sure the animals are eating all the feed each day. If you miss a feeding then decrease the amount and slowly build it back up.

Finishing a Highland on grain can change the age and weight of finishing versus grass finished. If you push your animal straight from

weaning you can get your Highland to finish at 16-18 months at around 1000-1100 lbs. Or with a slower approach have them finished at 20-24 month of age at 1100-1200 lbs. In a later article in this issue, we will look at steers that were supplemented with grain starting at 26 months and harvested at 30 months.

Finishing with grain can give you the added flexibility of easier year round harvesting plus increase the marbling of your animals. Costs and market acceptability can be factors in deciding on this strategy.