

Grassfed Beef and Family Ranches: A Vision for Prairie Landscape and Communities

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Pete Ferrell addresses fellow Flint Hills ranchers at the school

I slow and steer the truck gently right and left, winding past the stone fences and green meadows of the Roglers' Ranch on the way to Matfield Green. It is a forty-five minute drive from our ranch in northwest Chase County, and covers some of the loveliest scenery in the world. From ridgetops above Middle Creek and the South Fork of the Cottonwood River, you can see the timbered valleys and bluestem hills in undulating lines of ridges, layered green to graying blue as they withdraw into a dreamlike horizon.

The peace and serenity of this landscape is so enticing that I often want to "fly away" into it as I drive by. Then I remember, I am already blessed to live in this place, with all its serenity and its daily demands. The reason I am driving to Matfield is a desire to hold onto my home; to find a way to support sustainable food production here, and thereby provide a solid economic foundation for the preservation of its beauty. My faith in parks and preserves is weak—their impact is minimal and their fate subject to political winds. I want something self-supporting—something that preserves the prairie because it works.

I was raised in Wichita, the first generation born away from my family's land, and have returned, back in the Flint Hills now for twenty years. Like many urban resettlers, I expected a simple pastoral life, but instead have found complexity and intense economic challenge. Rather than cutting me off from human contact, my rural life connects me to many others in my neighborhood and small community who depend on me, and on whom I depend, to create the culture that makes life satisfying for us and our children. Because there are few of us, we all have to take a larger share of the load. If we want something to happen, we have to make it happen, and a great deal does go on—more community, school, church and other social events than I can certainly partake of.

But, though our community life may be fulfilling and supportive, it belies the underlying economic crisis in this area, where young ranchers are rare as

thunderstorms in winter. Most of their parents in ranching don't have enough income to share with a son or daughter in partnership. The best most young people wanting to stay on the land can hope for is to find a job as a manager or hand for one of the absentee "mega-ranchers." I grieve for their loss of a personal, longterm stake in the land—the bonding and commitment that comes from knowing the hills and grasses they manage are truly their "home" and must be preserved for their children.

Even many of my older, established neighbors with their own small and mid-sized ranches can't survive on the prices for their cattle. As I see them selling out either to the huge landowners or city people wanting vacation homes, I mourn this loss of persons with a deep knowledge of the natural world where we live.

I also mourn the losses these trends inflict on our communities. The mega-ranches typically have a very low labor input, so conversion of ownership to them results in a real loss of population. Although their employees can be excellent contributors to the community, there just aren't very many of them. The weekend, second-home owners may increase the number of houses (often built on formerly pristine scenic overlooks), but with a few exceptions they do not contribute significantly to local culture and institutions. Scenic highways and the proposed Tallgrass Prairie Preserve may attract visitors, but depending on tourism with its low-paying service



Arlene Bailey separating cattle

jobs concerns me, as does the frightening exposure of beautiful, unmarred landscape to development-minded urbanites.

Instead of giving in to these trends, I propose we rescue our rural culture and landscape by reviving our agricultural base. By focusing on grass and cattle we can find ways to improve stewardship and profitability that preserve the prairie and revitalize prairie communities.

So today I am going to the old Matfield schoolhouse renovated by The Land Institute for a meeting of the Tallgrass Prairie Producers, a newly-formed cooperative of "family ranchers," (defined as living on or near your ranch and doing the daily work on it). Our goal is to provide a product that is good for the people who eat it, good for the land it is raised on, good for the animals raised to produce it, and good economically for the family ranches and nearby communities where it is raised. Our idea is to produce and market a product called Tallgrass Beef: lean, grassfed beef raised on pastures and never in a feedlot.

To realize what a "revolutionary" notion this is, some historical perspective may be helpful. Seventy-five years ago, my grandfather's pasture-raised cattle left the Flint Hills "finished on grass,"

shipped up the rail lines directly to packing houses and on to urban kitchens and steakhouses. Then the grain surplus following World War II led the USDA to encourage the grain-fattening of beef, through development of a grading system which said the fatter the animal, the higher the supposed quality and price.

This grading system is obviously upside-down for health reasons alone, but it has had other sinister results as well. In one of the most productive grassland regions of the world, it has created the illusion that we must depend on the grain farmers of Iowa and the feedlots of western Kansas to produce beef for people to eat.

We don't believe it. Instead of relying on grain grown with massive chemical and fossil fuel inputs to "finish" our animals, we raise them on the herbage nature put here for herbivores. Careful attention to modern genetics, forage utilization and beef aging results in tenderness and consistency. Our model is quite different from conventionally raised beef which comes from cattle who spend the last few months of their lives confined with thousands of others in pens devoid of vegetation, essentially doing nothing but eating tremendous quantities of trucked-in grain and hay and producing mountains of waste.

In contrast, the cattle in our program spend their entire lives in a natural grazing system, harvesting their own food by grazing over beautiful, clean pastures. The grassland habitat of our wild neighbors—coyotes, deer, bobcats, badgers, hawks, prairie chickens, quail, songbirds and many more—is preserved, while at the same time sustainably pro-

ducing human food. Instead of relying on annual soil cultivation and monocrops, our production model keeps land in grass—nature's "protective blanket" that holds and conserves soil, protecting it from water and wind erosion. And unlike feedlots where concentrated waste is a serious pollution hazard, our free range animals' waste is naturally dispersed, returning nutrients to the soil, with the thick grass acting as a filter to clean runoff before it reaches the streams.

Instead of relying on fossil fuels to plant, harvest and transport grain to fatten our cattle, our production model relies on renewable resources already in place—sunlight, soil and rainfall which grow the forages our animals harvest by themselves directly from the earth. Instead of highly marbled, high-fat meat, our animals produce lean, healthy beef we can feel good about recommending to people. In fact, we think our grassfed beef has a special delicious flavor resulting from the natural grasses and forages of the tallgrass prairie. Finally, for individuals with particular health concerns, we also do not give our animals any hormone implants or antibiotics.

By directly marketing this higher-quality beef ourselves, we hope to recapture enough profit margin to make family ranching economically sustainable. But the key here is marketing: it is one thing to raise beef, and another to sell it. Ranchers have not traditionally been salespeople. Many are shy outside of their usual realm, less given to the bragging and aggressive behavior they associate with "salesmen" than to reticence and courtesy. For many, "marketing" means driving their animals to the sale barn or taking a cattle buyer out to the pasture; contact with consumers occurs only far down the line of middlemen. The marketing goal of Tallgrass Prairie Producers is quite different: to sell our beef directly to people, creating a connection between producer and consumer. To enhance this, each year we will have a "Ranch Day" inviting customers to come visit one of our ranches.

However, our budget is very limited and we can't afford large advertising campaigns. We've learned that shelf space in grocery stores does not necessarily go to the "best" product, but the one whose distributor has paid a high "slotting fee." Government regulations seem designed to prohibit our success, imposing procedures that are too costly for small marketers. Processing and distribution costs threaten to make us economic casualties in an

industry in which only four corporations control 82% of the fed-cattle market. Big feedlots and packers thrive on razor thin per head margins through massive volume, while small operators are squeezed out.

Our biggest hurdle is trying to re-educate consumers who have been indoctrinated for more than a generation to believe that only "grainfed" beef can be good. We need to let people know there is a real alternative, and to encourage them to exercise the power they have as consumers to buy healthy, quality products that come from land that is well loved and looked after.

I have found complexity and challenge in my rehabilitation of the land, but I have also learned that you find what you seek. If you look for ignorance, failure and despair in rural communities, you can find it. But if you look for depth of experience, compassion and hope, you will find it also. In the members of our cooperative, I have found a shared vision, valuable experience, and the will to work together for the common good. I cannot imagine a more exciting or satisfying place to be.

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Ranchers Annie Wilson and Bruce Spare