

Permanent pastures and industry policy guide certified grass-fed beef

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Nalpa Downs, Mitchell, Queensland, Australia

I am heavily involved in the beef industry, being a member of the AgForce Cattle Board, the Cattle Council of Australia and the North Australian Beef Research Committee (NABRC).

'Nalpa Downs' lies some 40 km north-west of Mitchell, and is part of the Maudsley family partnership, which includes 'Mackinlay', north of Mitchell and 'Rainmoor', north of Morven. The total area owned is 20 000 hectares with another 400 hectares leased adjoining Nalpa Downs.

The mix of land and pasture types includes native pasture of Mitchell grass (*Astrelba* spp.)—Queensland bluegrass (*Dichanthium sericeum*) downs, black speargrass (*Heteropogon contortus*) on sandy ridges, improved buffel (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) on scrub and soft mulga (*Acacia aneura*), and blade-ploughed buffel grass—Silk sorghum on soils with more brigalow (*Acacia harpophylla*). About 800 hectares are available for grain production, with 600 hectares for forage crops.

The beef operation is breeding and fattening, with additional animals purchased as needed. We grow out steers on grass to a minimum 500 kg live weight—preferably 600 kg—at under 4-tooth, and then finish on winter forage. If necessary after a bad season, some grain might be fed during the final finishing phase.

We have been EU-accredited since the inception of that scheme and so have been using the National Livestock Identification Scheme (NLIS) since its inception.

Grazing management

Challenges in our grazing management include trying to match our annual stocking rate with

the varying carrying capacity of our country under the extreme rainfall variability of recent years. This exercise is greatly confounded by the grazing pressure imposed by macropods (kangaroos), whose movements are not restricted by our fences. As well as increasing the overall grazing pressure on our pastures throughout the year, they interfere with pasture management. We are aware of the positive benefits of rest for pastures and attempt to provide pastures with 90-day rest periods. However, proper rest is impossible under our current management, as kangaroos tend to congregate on spelled pastures during the rest periods, making it difficult for pastures to fully recover. We also have problems with managing uneven grazing on the variable country under native grassland. An additional issue is the control of woody regrowth. The current regulations in relation to regrowth control are a major concern and we need to continue to lobby the government to ensure that control of regrowth by landholders is permitted.

Why grass-fed?

Recently the USA raising claims for beef products were reviewed and, if we are to export to USA, we need to match or better their standards. Other countries are pushing forward in this regard.

In Australia there is no cipher/certification for any product that is not under the GF or YGF (feedlot grain-fed or young grain-fed) or organic classifications. Therefore, there is no cipher to describe pasture-fed animals.

With the changes to the US grading system now coming into effect, and the ongoing growth of niche markets such as organics, it is clear that work needs to begin immediately to develop a specific Australian pasture-fed certification system. A number of commercial interests, at both processor and retail level, have developed declarations to this effect. Clearly, this indicates

that differentiation of beef using extensive production attributes is a viable marketing option. However, unless a harmonised industry standard for this certification is developed, a fragmented and inconsistent product specification may reduce consumer satisfaction. This in turn risks jeopardising this emerging market segment both in terms of export and domestic market opportunities.

Therefore, the cattle industry needs consistent production standards that are defined in either export regulations and/or domestic food labelling codes. In our discussions with AgForce members we have come up with a range of claims to underpin the standards, which may be as simple as a declaration that “stock has not been confined for the purpose of intensive feeding” or may stipulate a maximum allowable percentage of diet using non-pasture feeds (*e.g.* grains). The inclusion of requirements that product be MSA graded also has been considered and determined as a clear ‘must do’. AgForce have pushed these discussions on the general requirements at the Cattle Council of Australia.

In the longer term, consumers will become more discerning about the environmental credentials of beef. The use of a consistent certification process for pasture-fed beef will help alleviate increasing community concerns over grain-fed/grain-assisted beef. A number of marketing groups and influencers, both here and overseas, are already pursuing the health and human diet benefits of grass-fed beef, and the environmental,

small farmer (as opposed to corporate ownership) and animal welfare differences between pasture finishing and intensive finishing. Given this, the industry clearly needs to develop a harmonised standard to meet these emerging expectations.

Finally, the fact that competing countries are pushing forward as well in this area emphasises that these standards are long overdue. The USDA now certifies Uruguay’s grass-fed product (USDA Grass Fed Standard). The label has a few critical details: source verified (*i.e.*, traceability), diet derived solely from grass and forage, no animal proteins in feed (same as our ruminant feed ban), animals not confined (no intensive feeding) and third party audit.

What consumers are thinking

Meat & Livestock Australia have surveyed consumers to get a better understanding of their thoughts when they buy their food. Data in Figure 1 show that consumers are well aware of differing production systems, *e.g.* free-range vs intensive, organically produced food, animal ethics and greenhouse gas production.

Data in Figure 2 indicate that consumers tend to avoid genetically modified food, as well as meat from production systems that use antibiotics and hormones and involve inhumane treatment of stock.

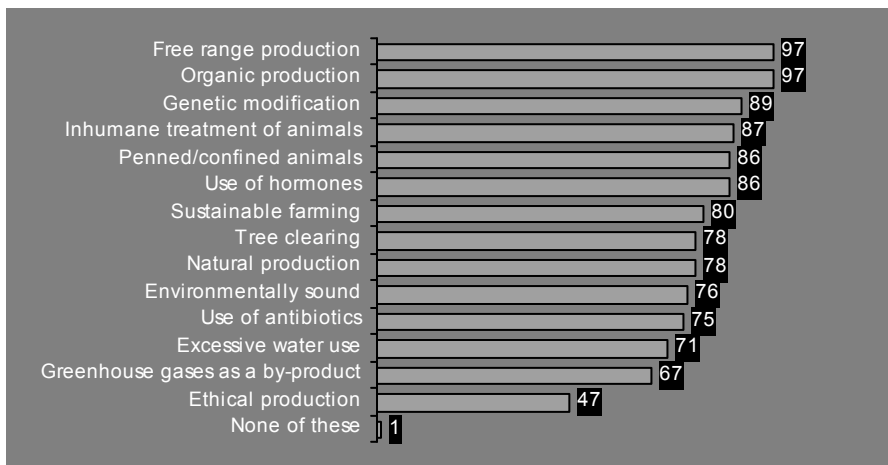


Figure 1. MLA survey on consumer responses to questions on food production. The numbers on the right indicate the percentage of people in the survey group who said they were actively aware of these issues when purchasing foods.

AgForce position

AgForce strongly supports the need for standards for the products marketed by producers. Our grass-fed beef is of a high standard and needs to be recognised as a specific product. The beef industry has standards for certified grain-fed beef but considers that current ‘Natural grass-fed beef’ standards being used are basically uncertifiable. They are mainly marketing claims, which are unverifiable by an audit process. However, a number of elements for an Australian Grass-fed Standard are under negotiation.

Elements of the standard include:

- no separated grain to be fed
- no close confinement of livestock for production
- carcasses to meet MSA grading standards
- no hormone growth promotants to be used
- no antibiotics to be fed
- animals to be lifetime traceable

- a detailed documented quality management system to be in place
- third party audits to be conducted.

Methane under pasture production

At present, it seems that the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme poses large risks to grass-fed beef. Methane emissions from ruminant animals are receiving considerable publicity and the lower methane production levels per kg of beef produced under the quicker turnoff with intensive feedlot production favours this product. Most arguments being advanced present only one side of the equation and make no allowance for the amounts of carbon dioxide removed from the atmosphere by healthy pasture systems and vegetation management.

The Cattle Council of Australia has been involved in discussions on the ability of good-quality improved and native pastures to sequester

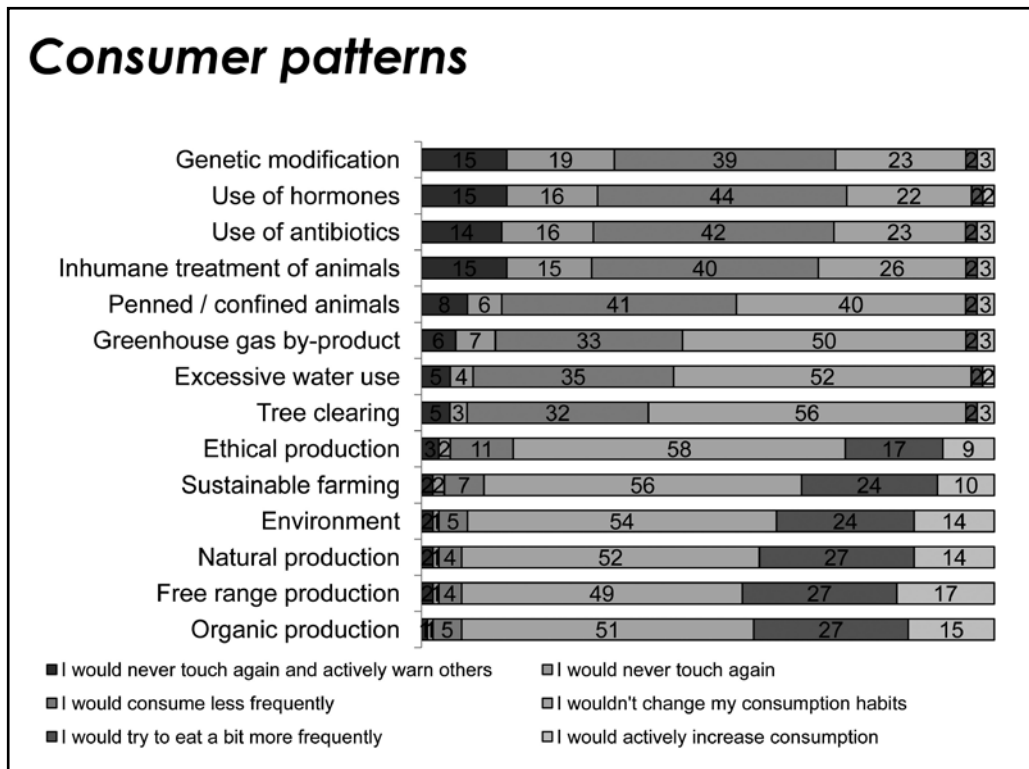


Figure 2. MLA survey on attitudes of consumers to consuming foods produced in different ways. Numbers in sections indicate the percentage of respondents who answered ‘yes’ to that choice.

carbon and on the role of ruminants in the active cycling of carbon. The aim is to ensure that the beef industry is not unfairly disadvantaged by the introduction of levies relating to greenhouse gas production, especially methane, by beef enterprises. Preferably we will achieve recognition of the vegetation management and soil/pasture interface, making our emission profile, both as a sector and as individual businesses, a net sink. We need international and domestic legislation (currently being considered) to reflect this.

It's a great story

Red meat is a healthy and nutritious product, which should be an essential part of the diet. Sug-

gestions that people should eat less meat to save the planet are fallacious and are not based on facts. There is no more sound, logical and sustainable use of our grasslands than to grow and finish beef cattle.

It is important that the program to promote the qualities of red meat in a healthy diet continues and that an Australian Grass-fed Standard for beef is developed as a matter of urgency. As Ian McCamley stated in his address at the Leucaena Conference in Chinchilla, 'Soon consumers will have the opportunity to enthusiastically pay a premium for certified pasture-fed naturally raised beef that looks after their health and the environment and tastes fantastic.' The beef industry must continue its efforts to ensure that 'soon' is not far away.