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Start playing on an even pasture

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The Andersons own Anderson Grass-Fed Custom Beef in Bland County.

Great news! Big Fat Food is attacking our small lean farm.

We receive four monthly farming magazines. About six months ago, we noticed a trend. Sprinkled among articles and ads for feeds, seeds, semen and sprays were articles and ads opposing non-industrial food. "They" are even making false claims that "we" are making false claims. It's as if talking points are being released. When Michael Pollan, author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma," spoke in Wisconsin, the Farm Bureau bused in several hundred industrial farmers to protest. How cool is that?

Why are such attacks good? The average grass-fed farm sells 12 steers a year locally. This old-fashioned farming was once below notice. To be targeted by agribusiness means the "real food" effect is now effect. In spite of Big Fat Food being heavily subsidized by Big Government, more folks are becoming aware of what they eat, and buying local is helping more small farmers to return to the old ways.

Modern small farmers are armed with science -- science that enables us to be productive with a few acres and science that says "they" are fouling the public sandbox. Ag-biz products that have "cide" suffixes have side effects. Fat food is not good. For that reason, Big Insurance may become a lean ally. This is the kind of health reform we need.

Virginia's No. 1 business is still agriculture. The top 10 counties for beef production are here in Western Virginia. The average farmer is age 58 and owns fewer than 200 acres. There is too much work and not enough money to attract young farmers. Can grass-fed be the model for the return of the family farm? We think so.

At the recent Mid-Atlantic Forage and Grass Conference in Staunton, we were encouraged by the participation (sold out) and by the youthfulness of the 250 participants. Many were females. The conference attendees are advocates of small, intensely managed, multigenerational farms, and old-fashioned values. It was surprising some of the attendees were from the far right and others from the far left. Grass-fed appeals to both libertarians and environmentalists.

It appeals to these writers because we didn't inherit the family farm. It was sold to pay debt. We are fortunate to have one son and his family here on the new farm, and our other son is plotting his return. If three families are going to make it on a few hundred acres, grass-fed farming is the way.

We confess that we began farming as cattle-huggers. While animal welfare was our first concern, we have become more educated to the health and ecologic benefits of grass-fed animals. Feedlot production has the advantage of faster growth, but most of the fast weight gain is in fat, not protein. Cows are naturally grass eaters, not corn eaters. A diet of corn alters the pH in the rumen of cows, causing more digestive problems and changes in the bacteria that live in their gut. Sub-therapeutic antibiotics are used to overcome feedlot stress.

From a humanitarian perspective, no cow should have to spend 24 hours in a double-decker trailer traveling to Iowa to be fed on subsidized corn in a manure-filled feed lot. Cows should be in green pastures, eating grass and just being cows.

Grass-fed beef has other health advantages, like higher Vitamin E, greater quantities of anti-oxidants, and a much better ratio of Omega 6/Omega 3 (those heart healthy fats). And grass-fed beef actually has less fat than chicken thighs and "buffalo wings." And in blind taste tests conducted by Clemson University, grass-fed beef was judged comparable in flavor and tenderness to fatty meats.

Each pasture-raised animal returns 50 pounds of fertilizer per day to fields. Cows trampling the field help oxygenate the soils and keep weeds trampled. The chickens follow the cows, and spread the cow pies, keep insects under control and return nitrogen to the soil.

Our dream is to have grandchildren farming here. We have a long way to go, but we do not look for government help. Sustainable farming is where the civil rights movement was in the 1960s. As former Virginia Gov. Doug Wilder observed, "We didn't look to the government for help. The government was the problem; we wanted government to get out of the way."

Imagine taxpayers not giving big money to big food -- farmers playing on an even pasture. Not going to happen. But we will make it anyway. You can help by buying local and buying directly from a farm.

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