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### Beef with a story

By John Maday | Monday, March 15, 2010



As national winners of the 2007 Environmental Stewardship Award, the Stone family of Yolo Land & Cattle Co. gained a reputation for caring for the land. Today, Scott Stone says the family applies that reputation, and some specialized production practices, to supply locally produced beef to consumers who want it.

Yolo Land & Cattle Co., headquartered near Woodland in California's Sacramento Valley, manages about 700 commercial Angus and Baldy-cross cows, divided into fall- and spring-calving herds. In addition, Stone says his father maintains a herd of about 450 registered Angus cows, selling bulls to commercial operations including some that go into the family's commercial herd.

In the cow herd, the Stones select for modest-framed, easy-marbling, early maturing, low-birthweight females that are adapted to the environment and will wean calves at about 50 percent of mature weight. "Some of our cows are bigger than we'd like," Stone says, "and we're working toward consistent mature weights of 1,150 to 1,250 pounds.

"We winter the cows on three ranches in the mountains, then bring them down to irrigated pastures for the summer and fall," he adds. One of these, a 450-acre parcel, irrigates with rinse water from a nearby tomato cannery, providing abundant water during the 110-day tomato-canning season each year.

For the past 10 years, the Stones have adhered to natural-beef production standards, refraining from use of antibiotics and hormones, and documenting their production practices. Process verification has helped them gain access to a variety of buyers as the calves qualify for numerous branded-beef programs. Stone says the family has marketed calves through several channels, including retaining ownership through finishing. Today they typically sell most of their calves via video auction, attracting buyers from natural-beef programs such as Harris Ranch and Niman Ranch.

A couple years back, the Stones decided to experiment with a new marketing channel for a portion of their calf crop. Noticing a rise in demand for locally raised foods, including meat, they began finishing some cattle on pasture to market beef directly to consumers. In the first year, Stone says they finished a group of calves in confinement, feeding harvested forages and supplements. They processed the finished cattle through a nearby USDA-inspected plant and marketed the beef at a local farmers' market. Carcass quality and consumer acceptance were great, he says, but cost of gain was way too high.

So the family switched to a pasture-finishing system using 700 acres of irrigated grass and legume pasture. They currently finish about 25 head of cattle on the finishing pasture and graze them to their genetic potential for quality grade rather than a specific weight. "We weigh and ultrasound the cattle every month," Stone says, "and send them to slaughter when they reach high Select or low Choice grade." They offer sides, quarters and smaller packages of beef directly to consumers at the farmers' market in Davis.

The Stones currently are working with the University of California–Davis on a comprehensive study comparing grass-finishing versus grain-finishing systems. For the study, they sorted off their top 30 steer calves and split the group in half. One half went to the university for conventional finishing, while the Stones finished the other half on pasture.

Some results are still pending, as researchers plan to work to evaluate growth characteristics as well as meat quality, composition and consumer acceptance. One early conclusion from the study, Stone says, is that grass-finished steers need a little more time to reach a targeted quality grade endpoint. The grain-finished steers reached Choice grade at 15 to 18 months of age, while the grass-finished steers needed 20 to 28 months to reach the same grade.

The beef from the Stones' grass-fed cattle, he says, bears no resemblance to lower-quality grass-fed beef imported from South America or other regions. These cattle are selected for their ability to mature early and deposit marbling on pasture. "I'd put our grass-finished beef up against any grain-fed beef any time," Stone says.

The Stones operate their grass-fed beef company as a separate entity from the ranch, purchasing the 800-pound steers from Yolo Land & Cattle Co., then paying the expenses for finishing, processing and bringing the beef to market. All told, he says, production costs are nearly double those for conventional cattle, so premiums in the market need to account for that.

The biggest challenge, he says, has not been in raising high-quality grass-fed beef or in finding a premium market for it. Instead, the difficulties arise at the steps between production and marketing — namely slaughter, inspection, processing and storage. With the program in just its second year, the family is on its fourth processor, currently trucking cattle 70 miles for slaughter and USDA inspection.

The family markets grass-fed beef as an alternative — it's locally produced, natural and raised in environmentally sound conditions. But, Stone stresses, they do not disparage other beef or production practices in the process of promoting theirs. After all, he says, the family still markets the majority of its cattle into grain-finishing systems, resulting in a wholesome

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and high-quality product for consumers. The way he sees it is that if some consumers are willing to pay premiums for beef with additional attributes such as locally produced and grass finished, there is an opportunity for producers to capitalize on their preferences. Demand from local consumers has been phenomenal, and the family hopes to expand to other farmers' markets this year.

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