

SusCatt - Increasing productivity, resource efficiency and product quality to increase the economic competitiveness of forage and grazing based cattle production systems

Building the market for *Grass-fed*

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Challenge

There is no denying beef farming is a hot-topic with overwhelming negative associations for many consumers. However, not all beef is the same and growing evidence supports the many benefits grass-fed offers – not least for animal welfare, positive for environment and consumers' health – not to mention economic sense for farmers. The more we sell, the greater the cumulative benefit from these positive impacts.



Organic beef sirloin. Photo: Peelham Farm.

Background

There's no denying the positive messages grass-fed offers farmers, cattle, environment, consumers and society at large, however this note does not cover such details – these can be found on the Pasture Fed Livestock Association or PFLA website, covering: [farm returns](#), [nutritional benefits](#), [animal welfare](#) and [environmental impact](#). Instead, we explore how farmers might encourage more consumers to buy grass-fed - another note in the series, targeting consumers and policy makers, summarises these benefits.

Aim

If we are to expand grass-fed production and reap the many benefits this offers society; we need to develop the market. Understanding which provenance claims are important to consumers, how much they know about different farming systems and what currently stops them buying grass-fed will all help. This note gives a brief outline of some of this information, which might be helpful to build future demand – we need to identify relevant messages.

What did we do?

Information was gathered in 2 ways: i) an on-line poll to judge consumers' knowledge of certified grass-fed beef and its potential health benefits and ii) a review of published academic papers on triggers for consumer meat purchasing decisions.

What did we learn?

The online poll reached 138 beef buying consumers across the UK in 2017, mostly in SE and SW England. As a baseline, about 25% were aware of the PFLA, 19% claimed to have bought certified meat and 28% were aware of its potential health benefits compared with other beef. Encouragingly, after reading information about health benefits from enhanced omega-3 content, 60% stated they [definitely or probably] would buy grass-fed and 43% were willing to pay a premium. However, there is a BUT - bas to why they hadn't before; which was dominated by a combination of 'sourcing' (52%) and 'too expensive' (43%). Products need to be accessible or visible and, whilst we can't price match commodity products, we can educate consumers about true

production costs and the principle of consuming less-but-better dairy and meat.

The academic papers were less focused on grass-fed but also quite revealing, however findings need to be viewed with care. Studies were conducted in many different countries over a number of years and we do know that decisions on food purchase are not only complex, but attitudes or expectations vary and also change over time, influenced by topical issues.

One disappointing issue with all the studies, although 'grass-fed', 'free-range' or 'pasture access' were generally ranked highly overall, none of the papers described, explored or explained what these terms mean - I doubt if any relate to 100% forage feeding, in consumers' minds. That said, more positive lessons can be taken from the fact most other priorities reported to be important can, or could, be applied to grass-fed meat and milk. There were common threads reinforced by many studies, many of which can be found in the table below, taken from fairly recent review by an Irish group, covering 15 different consumer studies - only 3 of the top 12 priorities don't directly relate to grass-fed.

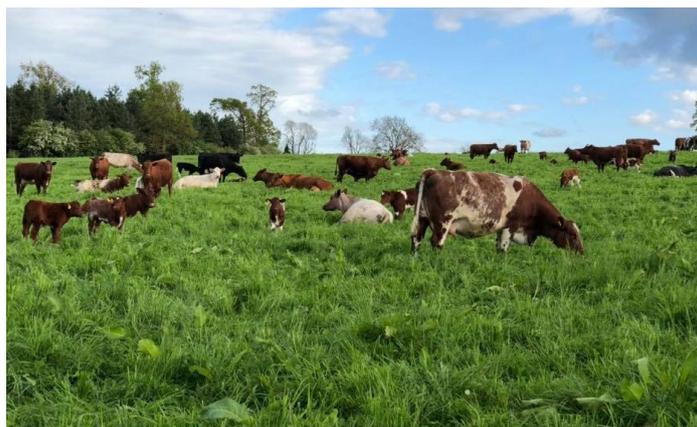
Ranking of attributes and their potential for *grass-fed* - adapted from Henchion et al 2017 'Beef quality attributes: a systematic review of consumer perspectives'

Quality attributes	Overall ranking	Applicable to <i>grass-fed</i>
origin / local	1	potentially
price	2	no
certification, labels, brand info	3	yes
visible fat	4	yes
flavour	5	yes
animal welfare	6	yes
production system/feeding	7	yes
freshness/wholesomeness/shelf life	8	no
natural (GM & hormone free)	9	yes
tenderness	10	no
health, nutrition, body weight	11	yes
meat colour	12	yes

Another relevant point echoed in many studies was the importance to consumers of certification or independent verification of provenance, to instil credibility to claims. However, they also report messages or labelling needs to be simple & understandable.

So what

Looking into the scope of using this literature to enhance sales of grass-fed products shows a major challenge. Any delivery to potential customers has to be simple and understandable but at the same time needs to convey complex messages about the production systems.



Crosslane cattle herd. Photo: Crosslane Organic Farm.

Guidance suggests:

- Working on educating consumers about:
 - benefits grass-fed offers over 'mainstream' products, linked to
 - +Nutritional
 - +Environmental
 - +Welfare
 - True cost of production
 - Less-but-better principles
- Make products accessible and visible with clear certification labelling
- As the market builds, encourage more farmers to get involved, expanding grassland areas - possibly including short term leys in arable rotations.

Imprint

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