

Grass-Fed Beef Sales Essential to Growing Regional Marketplace, Illinois Farmland Grazing Operations

Expanding Grass-Fed Beef Market and Regenerative Grazing in Illinois Dependent on Sales and Consumer Education, Securing More Regional Direct-Sales Channels

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Livestock production—in this case grass-fed beef—is one of the many ways that we can bolster Midwestern farm income while having greater access to healthier, nutritious and more delicious food.”

Bill Schleizer, CEO, Delta Institute

and the Wallace Center’s Pasture Project found that Midwesterners view grass-fed beef as a healthy, high-quality, and more humane meat option—but there remains a lack of direct-sales marketplace options to provide direct links between farmers and consumers.

Compounding this, misconceptions remain about what “grass-fed beef” means—with implications for both the kitchen table and the farm. Grass-fed beef usually is defined as cattle that is raised on grass and natural foraging (as the primary food source) for the lifetime of the ruminant animal. Cattle eating grass improves soil health and water quality, pollinator and bird habitats, while

requiring less costly food sourcing when compared to feed corn.

Delta Institute and the Pasture Project, an initiative of the Wallace Center at Winrock International, [spent years analyzing economic and environmental benefits](#) associated with expanding regenerative grazing and grass-fed production in Illinois. The project team developed a clear picture of grass-fed beef supply and demand in Illinois, establishing a target for additional acres of regenerative grazing needed in the coming years to meet Chicago’s growing grass-fed beef market, while identifying market barriers and infrastructure needs so consumers have access to a broader variety of regionally raised grass-fed beef.

“We’re working with hundreds of farmers on thousands of acres to identify and expand market-based conservation practices,” said Bill Schleizer, CEO of Delta Institute. “Demand for locally raised grass-fed beef is increasing among Chicago-region consumers, but access to these products is limited—resulting in a subdued marketplace that is ripe for expansion.”

Research suggests that the Chicago region has the greatest opportunity for expanding regenerative grazing and grass-fed beef markets in Illinois. In 2020, Delta Institute and the Pasture Project published findings that growing demand for grass-fed beef in Chicago between 2020-2025 could be supplied by adding 40,000 acres of regeneratively managed pastureland in Illinois. At that time, nearly 180 grass-fed beef producers were present in Illinois, most heavily concentrated around northeastern Illinois. Most grass-fed producers were within 50 miles of a small USDA-or state-inspected beef processor.

Research and outreach also found untapped market opportunities to make direct consumer sales of grass-finished/grass-fed regional beef at retail outlets, including expanded local/regional farm products to meet buyer demand. Key findings from the project team's research include:

- One out of five Chicago consumers prioritize purchasing grass-fed beef;
- Consumers view grass-fed beef as a healthier, higher quality and more humane meat option;
- Consumer spending habits in the U.S. are slowly shifting toward market channels that favor locally sourced food; and,
- Millennials and urbanites are increasingly concerned with where and how their food is produced.

Despite these findings, the marketplace for grass-fed beef in the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) that covers southern WI, NW Indiana, and SW Michigan remains marginal. Of 156 active farmers markets in the Chicago MSA, none of the surveyed grass-fed beef vendors at Chicago farmers markets were local. This results in grass-fed beef vendors travelling up to 300 miles to sell primarily pre-packaged, frozen cuts that can withstand lengthy transportation. Only two grass-fed beef producing farms in the Chicago MSA sell directly to restaurants and local businesses in the same geography.

The project team evaluated different direct-to-consumer channels for grass-fed beef, including Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), Food Co-Ops, butchers, farm stands/stores, and farmers markets. Research found that customers spend \$28 - \$35 per visit at Chicago's farmers markets, and in 2020, between 26-34% of survey respondents self-reported as first-time buyers at farmers markets.

"The Midwest region is fortunate to have a vast array of farmers markets, farm stands, independent butchers, and CSAs," said Josh Zuckerman, Resilient Agriculture Lead, Delta Institute. "However, creating more linkages between farmers and these many sales outlets is essential so that more consumers have healthier, local, grass-fed beef readily available to them."

Findings illustrated consumers are looking for more local, regenerative, and humanely raised cattle to provide more grass-fed beef options in their stores, restaurants, and dinner table.

"There is tremendous potential for Chicago consumers to encourage regenerative agriculture practices in Illinois through their purchases," says Pete Huff, Co-Director, Wallace Center. "By

developing stronger value-chain relationships, the growing demand for grass-fed beef can help increase the number of regeneratively managed pasture acres in the state – creating environmental, economic, and social benefits for different farmers, consumers, and communities.”

Delta Institute and the Pasture Project are hosting a free, public [webinar](#) tomorrow, Wednesday 9/14 at 12:00PM CST to discuss and examine the barriers, solutions and resources the project team identified to expand grass-fed beef within the Chicago Metro Area.

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