

Grass-Fed Cattle

by Julius Ruechel

Book Summary and Review

Summary

Part 1: The Fundamentals of Grass-Based Beef

Chapter 1: The Great Herds and Their Grasslands

We can learn a lot about the great herds that exist today and have existed in the past. Observing these herds of animals can help us make good management decisions for our own grazing animals. Cattle and other grazing animals have a symbiotic relationship with grass. When herds of grazing animals graze they promote grass growth. In a domestic situation we must use electric fence or other methods to keep our animals bunched together as there is not the same predator pressure to keep the herd together.

Chapter 2: Genetics and Breeding

It is important to learn about genetics and breeding so we can create a healthy herd. Avoid single-trait selection as it can cause a lot of problems. The author gives several examples of how single-trait selection can backfire. The goal of your breeding program should be a well-rounded animal that is low maintenance and highly fertile.

Chapter 3: The Cattle Year on Grass

In order to build a profitable, enjoyable cattle business you should mimic the patterns of nature. The most important thing to get right is calving at the right time. Calving should happen when it is warm and the grass is green in late spring or early summer. There are many other ways to synchronize your cattle herd and activities with the natural patterns of nature.

Chapter 4: Grass and Grazing

Cattle turn solar energy into beef. Managing our grass with cattle is a key to a profitable cattle enterprise. When cattle are fed grain it changes the PH in the rumen and prevents proper digestion of grass. It is important to graze grass at the right time when the grass is not too old or young. Do not graze the grass all the way to the ground. The root structure of the grass is the energy reserves of the plant and mimics above ground growth. When a grass plant is grazed the root structure self-prunes. If the plant is not grazed too heavily it will grow back quickly with the reserve energy of the roots. One of the most cost

effective ways to rejuvenate pasture is to let your cattle plant the seed. Mix your seed with your mineral supplements and the cattle will do the planting and fertilizing.

Part Two: Infrastructure and Management

Chapter 5: Electric Fences and Rotational Grazing

Electric fence is inexpensive and highly effective for managing cattle. When bringing cattle onto your farm that have never been exposed to electric fence before, it is critical to train them in a secure area. Once they are trained they will respect the fence. Make sure you have at least 2,000 volts on all areas of the fence including your temporary polywire. Remember there is a voltage drop especially with temporary polywire. Make sure to purchase a powerful energizer. Install your gates in areas where the cattle will move to naturally, like corners of pastures. Remember that your electric fence is what allows you to keep your cattle grazing in a group so that you can manage your grass properly.

Chapter 6: Livestock Water

Access to clean water is one of the most important things you can provide your cattle. Clean water affects your cattle's ability to gain weight and stay healthy. The book explains how to calculate how much water your cattle herd will need and what your options are for providing it. Using polyethylene pipe is a very cost effective way to move water to your cattle. In rotational grazing, it is important to plan out your water infrastructure properly to make sure all divisions of the pasture will have access to water. Planning for water access in the winter is another consideration. There are several options for providing water during freezing conditions.

Chapter 7: Planning for Winter Grazing

Grazing through winter, rather than buying or making hay saves a significant amount of money and or time and will make your operation more profitable. It's important to plan to leave grass to be grazed during your growing season. The ideal scenario is to start winter with tall grass that has not yet gone to seed. This grass will retain the most nutrition through winter. After winter begins, you can begin to ration the grass. You will not regraze any areas in winter until the spring grass begins to grow again. It's important to plan the flow of where and when and under what conditions you will graze each area of your farm.

Strong shock in your electric fencing can be a problem in the winter if you do not have proper grounding of your system. Also consider how you will drive temporary posts when the ground is frozen. One method would be to drive all your temporary posts prior to the ground freezing.

The book also explains several ways to feed in the winter at a low cost with the goal of transitioning to winter grazing.

Chapter 8: Planning for Drought

It is important to plan for drought. Weather patterns are not predictable and eventually drought will come. You must write down your plan: at what point will you start to destock your herd and which animals will you start with. Often optimism clouds farmer's judgment and destocking happens too late, when prices have fallen dramatically or cattle are unable to be sold. This can be financially devastating. Create your plan, write it down and follow it.

It's also important to set aside financial resources for the time when drought comes. This allows you to follow your plan and recover quickly.

Chapter 9: Managing your Herd

Learn to work with your cattle in a way that does not cause them stress. Causing stress to your animals is dangerous and leads to wasted time, poor weight gains, and poor meat quality. Unlike what you see in a rodeo, the best way to work with cattle is slowly, quietly and patiently. If the cattle are not doing what you want them to do, you should consider what you are doing wrong. The book gives lots of diagrams and explanations of how to move cattle in different situations. One important thing to keep in mind is that if you try to move cattle from behind they will often turn around to look at you. Moving cattle on foot rather than by ATV or horse, gives you much more control.

Understand that cattle have a flight zone or personal space zone. If you move into this space around the cattle they will try to move away. You can use the flight zone to gently move your cattle. If you move quickly or the cattle become startled the flight zone will increase and your cattle will move more quickly. It is better to move slowly and allow your cattle to respond.

Chapter 10: Pests, Parasites and Diseases

Proper management of your livestock will prevent pests, parasites and diseases. If an animal is stressed or in improper conditions it will become more susceptible to disease. Whenever you treat a disease, you should also consider what part of your management caused the animal to become susceptible to the disease. You should spend more time thinking about how to prevent disease than how to treat disease. One practice the book recommends is that any animal that is diseased should be culled as soon as possible. You do not want these genetics to continue in your program.

The book lists many pests and diseases and how to prevent and treat them. Maintaining proper pasture rotations is one way to prevent disease. With daily moves, the cattle move away from their own manure which is a source of disease, pests and parasites.

Chapter 11: Soil Fertility

Improving soil fertility will improve all parts of your operation. The first place to work at improving soil fertility is by using your herd of animals. Invest in portable electric fencing to move your animals around and distribute fertilizer. This is the cheapest way to improve your soil fertility and one of the most effective.

You may need to address deficiencies or imbalances in your soil. The book also gives ways to determine deficiencies and imbalances visually. After determining these deficiencies or imbalances, it is important to take soil samples to determine what needs to be done to address them.

Chapter 12: Weeds

There is no clearly defined line on what a weed is. Many weeds can actually be beneficial to a pasture. Your cattle like to graze many types of weeds and will selectively graze them in order to address certain nutrient deficiencies. Each weed thrives in specific conditions that allow them to outcompete other plants. The book lists many beneficial weeds. The book also lists many weeds and what type of soil condition each weed prefers. When working to eliminate specific weeds with your cattle herd, graze annual weeds when they flower, and perennial weeds just before they start flowering.

Chapter 13: Soil Moisture and Irrigation

By properly managing your cattle and grass you can increase soil moisture and reduce runoff. Leaving a residual grass after grazing helps prevent evaporation, keeps the top layer of soil from drying out and hardening and promotes a healthy root structure allowing more infiltration. Cattle also break up the hard top layer of soil allowing water to infiltrate.

Irrigation is an option, but you should think carefully before doing it. It can be expensive and often your money is better spent on cattle and fence.

Part Three: Business Planning and Marketing

Chapter 14: Land and Equipment

It is easy to get distracted by expensive equipment and tools. You must focus on the essentials of what creates income for you. Purchasing cattle and fencing are two very important ways to spend your money.

Purchasing land can be large drain on your resources and should be avoided if possible when starting out. Try to find land to rent rather than land to buy. The land should be as close to your home as possible.

What equipment is recommended? The author recommends the following: ATV or pickup truck, ATV trailer, electric fence, energizer, corral, water system, fencing tools,

mineral feeders and a stock trailer and pickup truck if you will be moving animals weekly to butcher. A small livestock scale may be helpful if you will be grass-finishing beef.

Chapter 15: Market Options

There are many market options available to you. It's important to determine which ones you will focus on.

You can sell into the commodity market, but you should have a strategy to compete in these markets. The book explains these strategies in detail.

You can also sell into niche markets. These opportunities allow you to get a higher price for your product and a better profit margin.

It is also important to have some diversity on your farm in how you earn income. You can diversify within one enterprise, or add multiple enterprises. Make sure to have multiple customers or channels to sell your beef.

Determining your target market can help you determine how to market and sell your beef.

Chapter 16: Stocker Cattle

Stocker cattle are calves that have been weaned all the way up to just before finishing around 350-850 pounds. If you are basing your operation on stocker cattle, it's important to understand the cattle cycle. The book goes into detail on how and why the price of cattle fluctuates.

In order to have a profitable operation that can weather the storm of price fluctuations, it's important to move to a sell/buy model. You should purchase your replacement stockers right after you sell your current stockers. This makes you less vulnerable to price fluctuations than when you wait till the spring to buy again. You will have to keep your stockers over winter, but this can be done inexpensively with the strategies outlined in the book.

Chapter 17: Grass Finished Beef

In order to finish cattle on grass properly you must butcher at the proper age. As the animal gets older, the flavor of the beef will improve. Smaller framed animals can be finished at lower weights than larger framed animals. Slaughtering an animal early before it reaches weight will result in meat that is tough and lacks fat. Be patient.

Your cattle need to be gaining weight at the time of slaughter. If there is a lack of nutrition for your animals, they will slow down their metabolism and the meat will become tough. Butchering at the right time of year prevents this problem.

Another critical component of finishing beef is to keep the stress levels of your animals low. You should make your daily pasture moves quiet and slow. You should also take special care to not stress your animals when loading them and transporting them to the butcher. At the butcher, the carcass should hang for at least 14 days to age and become tender.

Chapter 18: Organic Certification

Organic certification can be costly and time consuming. If you decide to pursue organic certification, make sure that your cattle operation is already well established. Keep in mind that while organic certification can increase your revenue, your bottom line may actually be smaller when adding in the additional costs to your operation. You also need to make sure you can manage your cattle while maintaining organic certification.

Chapter 19: Dynamic Marketing

When marketing your beef you need to keep your target market in mind. Try to think about what the people who will be buying your beef are interested in and looking for. Always focus on the benefits of your product to the consumer. For example, the customer is much more interested in knowing that your beef is tender, healthy, and flavorful than that you fed kelp and mineral supplement to your animals. It is recommended that you keep your message simple and brief.

The book also suggests many different ways to sell and promote your beef.

Chapter 20: Helpful Business-Management Tools

One method that can be helpful in managing all the tasks on your task lists is to assign each task an importance and urgency of low, medium or high. Work on your high importance, high urgency tasks first. You may be able to skip your low importance, high urgency tasks. As you work this system and focus on the important, you may find many tasks simply no longer need to be completed. This prioritization can help you know where to focus on your list and get much needed rest and recovery. Don't put off family time and rest.

Another useful exercise would be assigning your work a \$5, \$50 or \$500 per hour rating. Think about what you are working on and try to spend more time on the higher level, important business management tasks or "\$500 per hour jobs". It's easy to never find the time for these jobs, but they are the ones that will help you earn more in the long run.

You have limited time; make sure you are focusing your efforts on the actions that will give you the greatest long term benefits. Keep in mind that almost all your results are driven by your efforts. The role of chance is very small in success. Take responsibility for the outcomes on your farm.

It's important to identify your unfair advantage. Often our unfair advantage is what we are currently seeing as our biggest problem. For example, if you are in an area with expensive land you are probably in an area that is great for direct marketing your beef. Or you may be in an area with tough winters, but great finishing grass in the summer. This would be a great opportunity to stop overwintering cattle and focus on finishing animals on grass.

Part 4 Your Business Plan: Putting Principles into Practice

Chapter 21 Your Goals and Market Opportunities

It is very important to decide on your goals and write them down. Revisit your goals at least every year as your values and what you want can change. Without goals, it is easy to quickly jump into whatever is in front of us and make decisions that will not take us where we want to go. The book walks you through how to develop your goals through brainstorming and questions.

Next, you must assess your market. You need to be able to understand your market prior to developing a business plan that will work. Developing a profile of your market will save you time down the road and make sure you don't waste resources. The book walks you through how to develop this profile.

Chapter 22 Your Financial Plans

In this chapter you work through creating financial plans for your business. First you evaluate potential production and marketing options to determine which one is best suited for you. Each option should be evaluated for an average year, good year, and worst case scenario. The book offers many worksheets to work through to develop good financial plans. It also offers a helpful relative comparison of how much grass each type of animal will need (stockers, brood cows, grass-finishing animals, cow/calf pair).

In this chapter you plan your profit and create a plan for your income and expenses. You should monitor these plans to look for deviations through the year.

Lastly, the book walks you through how to calculate cut pricing in a way that is profitable, but also attempts to create a price structure that sells all of your cuts equally.

Chapter 23 Your Cattle Year on Grass

It's important to plan out all the important events of your cattle year. These events should be planned to work well with the natural seasons in your area. You start by creating a schedule of normal seasonal events like grass growth, weather, etc. Then you can add the events of the livestock season like calving, breeding, processing, etc.

The book walks you through this process and shows a sample cattle year plan. I found this chapter to be very interesting and helpful. If you follow this chapter and create a

plan that works with nature rather than against it, you will have a much easier, enjoyable and profitable cattle operation.

Chapter 24 Your Grazing Infrastructure

This chapter focuses on planning your water and fence infrastructure. It is recommended to create paddocks with either permanent electric fence or permanent electric fence that can be divided by temporary electric fence for flexibility. When choosing where to put electric fence and gates, it's important to keep in mind the features of the land. For example you may want to fence on the boundary of two types of land, such as wet and dry. This will allow you to choose when you graze each type of land. For example you could graze the drier land for early spring when trampling damage would be more of a risk.

You will need to plan out how to get water to each paddock. Planning your water infrastructure can require some math to make sure you have the proper pressure to each paddock. The book explains how to do this math to make sure you are sizing your pump and pipe correctly.

Chapter 25 Your Grazing Plan

This chapter walks you through how to create a grazing plan. When the grass is growing, you will plan to use your cattle to manage the grass to leave a reserve for the dormant season. During the dormant season, you will be planning to ration the existing grass. This means you need two grazing plans: A summer plan and a winter plan.

During your summer grazing plan you will want to calculate the amount of grass that needs to be grazed based on the rate of growth. As the grass grows faster you will need to cover more ground. As the grass slows down you will cover less ground. The book goes into detail on how to calculate and create your plan. You can learn how quickly your grasses recover different times of year by recording the time of grazing and when they recover.

For your winter grazing plan you will need to calculate the amount of remaining grass and what it can support. Then plan out how you will ration the grass and what areas you will reserve for specific situations, like wet weather, heavy snow, etc. This is important to plan before winter as you need to know if you have to reduce your herd size or not. The book goes into detail about how to calculate and create your winter grazing plan.

Chapter 26 Your Herd Nutrition Plan

It is important to develop a herd nutrition plan. You will need to analyze the forage throughout the year for several years to understand how the nutrition needs of your animals will change during different times of year. It is recommended to work with a livestock nutritionist. The nutritionist should understand that you plan to let body condition scores drop during the winter and recover before calving.

Chapter 27 Your Grass-Finishing Plan

As a part of your planning, you need to create a grass-finishing plan. Plan target weights for each type of animal. After creating target weights you can plan the time period when you will slaughter each type. Remember that for tender meat, an animal must be gaining weight when it is butchered.

It can be helpful to chart your grass quality on a timeline to help you plan when the slaughter each type of animal. Note that grass quality is different than grass quantity.

The book lays out several questions to ask yourself about your finishing program and questions about your butcher. How your animals are handled makes a difference in finishing quality.

Chapter 28 Your Marketing Plan

It is important to develop a marketing plan. This plan will define how to reach your potential buyer and sell your product.

For each outlet you plan to sell in, list the qualities of the target buyer. Next you can design your advertising strategy. Where and how will you distribute the information about your product?

Chapter 29: Planning for Adversity

It's important to have a plan for when things go wrong. One of the most important things to plan for is drought. The book walks through many questions to help you build your drought plan. It is important that you take action quickly as a drought starts. You must destock early. If you destock late, market prices for your cattle will be very low, which can be financially devastating.

Chapter 30: Planning for Change

It's important to keep a positive attitude as you transition to more natural methods. Be in contact with other farmers who are on the same path and read stories of other people who are on the same journey. Stockman Grass Farmer and Acres USA are two publications recommended by the author.

The author recommends careful planning. After the planning is complete, it is recommended to make the switch to natural methods quickly. This allows you to get the benefits from your new way of raising cattle.

Review

This book is an excellent and comprehensive overview of raising cattle on grass. The book is packed with practical information. It explains exactly what you need and don't need to get started raising grass fed beef. There is no sugar coating of all the difficult things that need to be managed when raising beef. However, the book is encouraging as it gives you strategies to produce a better product, become more profitable, and improve your cattle operation every year.

The practical nuts and bolts how-to combined with the methods for planning your operation make this book one of the best I have read on the subject of raising and selling beef.

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About Josiah Garber (creator of this book summary)

Josiah first became interested in nutrition for health and healing. He started farming to produce the healthiest food for his family and now for everyone! Follow his journey at www.thefarmingpodcast.com or visit his farm website at www.fireflymeadowsfarm.com

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