

Florida Farmers Can Provide Alternative Beef Products

Elena Toro, Suwannee County extension agent, 386-362-2771

Brad Burbaugh, Duval County extension agent, 904-387-8850

We're all familiar with the slogan "beef, it's what's for dinner."

These days, many consumers are choosing to feed their families beef produced under specific conditions. These products are sold under a variety of labels, including natural, organic, naturally raised, grass-fed, locally raised and hormone/antibiotic-free.

According to The Jacob Alliance, a branded-beef consulting firm, the U.S. market for natural and organic beef is \$350 million annually and is expected to reach more than \$1 billion within 5 years.

Consumers who prefer alternative beef products are willing to pay more for them. So Florida beef producers with small or medium-size operations may find success in these niche markets. But it requires a shift from conventional production systems, as well as skill in relationship marketing—most alternative beef producers sell their products locally and directly to consumers.

According to Chad Carr, a University of Florida extension meat specialist, farmers and consumers are often confused about the meanings of terms such as organic, natural, naturally raised and grass-fed. Newly adopted U.S. Department of Agriculture standards will help producers understand what's required.

Beef that's sold as organic must be certified by the USDA. There is no certification process for naturally raised or grass-fed beef. However, producers will need to prove they are following USDA guidelines if they market beef under these claims.

Developing a successful alternative beef program is a combination of science, marketing and economics. To address these core aspects producers must determine what products they might be able to offer, based on their current assets and interests.

For example, those with plenty of pastureland may find that grass-fed beef is a good option because Florida's forage base remains viable for eight months or more each year.

Another example: An organic beef production system takes about three years to put in place, something that may not be practical for farmers seeking a quick transition.

Other issues that must be addressed by any potential alternative beef producer include assessing the uniqueness of the products the farmer could offer, determining potential buyers, finding harvesting facilities and conducting a cost analysis to determine break-even margins and profit margins.

It's also important to keep in mind that alternative beef production is generally more labor-intensive and time-consuming than conventional production, and it often requires additional skills such as sales expertise. Adding value begins with being informed—knowing the genetics of your animals, having a production strategy specific to your environment and implementing pre-sale marketing programs.

On Aug. 1-2, 2009, the first Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference will be held at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. The event will feature exhibitors, educational sessions and more. All Florida farmers are invited to attend. Visit the conference Web site at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu/floridasmallfarmsconference/index.htm>. For information on conference sponsorship or being an exhibitor, contact Bob Hochmuth, 386-362-1725 or bobhoch@ufl.edu.



Florida beef producers may find success by pursuing niche markets such as natural, organic or grass-fed beef. The grass-fed production system often uses breeds with medium-size frames, such as these Murray Grey cattle, seen at Shepherd's Hill Farm in Lake City. (Photo by Elena Toro)