

Workshop Title: Rare breeds for Grass-fed beef

Speakers & their titles: Harry Stoddart, with Elwood Quinn and Stacy Corkum

Executive Summary:

Harry Stoddart offers his experience with profitably raising grass-fed beef, focusing on breeds and pasture management.

Detailed Notes:

To succeed at profitably raising rare breeds on grass for beef, you need good management and good genetics. In brief, the shape of cow you're looking for is something with a big barrel and not much leg underneath. Most breeds have the genetics for good grass feeding, but you have to select for it. You want them to be able to gain about 2 lbs per day.

The slideshow shows some examples:

- White Park, which is not great for grass
- Hay's Converter, which has the right shape
- Belted Galloway, which is critical or endangered in Canada and has the "oreo cookie" colouring
- Scottish Highland, who are quiet and small and have hair (not fat) to keep them warm
- Red Devon, which is popular these days
- Semental, which is what the Stoddart's raise

After you've raised a good grass-fed cow, you need a good abattoir that knows how to properly handle a grass-fed cow. You also need to educate the consumer about how to cook it. The carcass should not be hung for too long or it will dry out because it will have less fat than standard carcasses. It's normal to hang standard cows for 21 days. But, for example, Highland only need 7-10 days. Also, young animals need less hanging.

The Stoddart's sell their beef at about \$5 per pound. For them, demand exceeds supply. They tried a number of breeds before settling on Semental, which they found to be calm and have good milking mothers. The ability of mom to provide milk to young has effect on marbling in the meat. Galloway also provides good marbling; so do Highland, who also have 1/3 less fat & cholesterol than standard beef.

Most breeds do fine in winter. They need some shelter of some sort, even trees. You can't finish an animal in winter, but you can hold an animal during the winter. Avoid killing in April, May, June because spring-slaughtered beef tends to be tough.

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The Stoddart's practice intensive pasture management. Depending on the pasture, they would spend 1-3 days in a single small paddock before being moved on. 800 head would have 2-3 acres of paddock. Pastures need 32-45 days of rest to allow plants to fully recover from being grazed. Avoid overgrazing, which is two bites of the same plant. Aim to take half and leave half of the vegetation. You don't want the pasture to look like a putting green. Force the animals to eat from everything in the paddock, not just their favourites, because otherwise the pasture will eventually turn towards tough grasses.

The result of packing animals densely is that the dung will be pushed into the ground and increase bio-activity in the soil. Legumes are actually able to feed grasses once they have passed through a cow.

The Stoddart's aim for 200 days of grazing. Less hay to feed means better margins. They avoid grazing too early because one day of growth in the spring is equivalent to three days in fall. Don't give them alfalfa 6 weeks before killing frost; do earlier or later. The last paddock offered in the fall is last paddock offered in the spring. You need something growing up before leaving a paddock in the fall. And let something go to seed each year to spread seed through manure.

The Stoddart's have water lines running down the ends of the paddocks with water barrel moved around. Cattle will walk 800 feet alone to get to water, but if the water is more than 800 feet then you're getting the whole herd going to drink at the same time. They have planted windbreaks and in the winter they roll out hay in the field to keep fertility in the field.

Question: What do you do when it gets really wet?

Answer: It's important to move the animals before "pugging" starts; we sometimes move every half day – and change paddocks to half size.

Question: How do you reseed your pasture?

Answer: Besides spreading seed through manure, they do some frost-seeding. Orchard grass is a favourite. But don't try to frost-seed alfalfa into established field – it won't work!