

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS GRAZING CAMPAIGN

Grass-Fed Beef—Green or Green Wash?

Recently there has been a spate of articles celebrating the supposed ecological virtues of free-ranging, “grass-fed” beef as opposed to grain-fed cattle. Consumers are being told that grass-fed beef is ecologically and ethically superior to livestock fattened in feedlots. Who is to say whether beef cattle that are castrated, branded with a hot iron, and forced to search for scraps of grass under a blazing sun or survive the wind and snow of a winter blizzard are “happier” than cows standing shoulder to shoulder at a feeding trough? We will allow others to debate the ethics of beef production. However, there is no denying that grass-fed beef has numerous unavoidable ecological impacts, rendering suspect the claim that grass-fed beef is somehow a desirable alternative to other production methods.

Most of the public mistakenly believes that grass-fed cattle are fed their whole lives by grazing rolling hills of grassy pastureland. In fact, grass-fed cattle typically rely on hay and other feed in winter and other times of the year, and especially during periods of drought. Hay production usually requires the conversion of entire valleys into fields of exotic grasses with an equal and simultaneous loss of native vegetation. In Montana, for example, hay fields make up more than 5.5 million acres or 6 percent of the state, a sizeable commitment to supplemental forage production.

Hay fields must be irrigated, which is typically done by dewatering streams or through ground water pumping. Both reduce the flow of surface water, negatively affecting aquatic ecosystems. Sometimes entire streams and rivers are completely dewatered, leaving fish and other aquatic species high and dry. Often small fish will attempt to escape dwindling streams in (or are otherwise “sucked” into) irrigation canals where they are trapped and die, frequently killing most of the annual recruitment into the population.

Whether on private or public lands, grass-fed livestock cause widespread damage to western ecosystems:

- Grass-fed cattle pollute our streams and foul springs through trampling and deposition of their feces and urine. Livestock production is the number one source of non-point water pollution in the West.
- Grass-fed cattle trample riparian vegetation and break down streambanks, often altering or destroying a stream’s hydrological system. Livestock are the number one cause of riparian damage in the West, and these riparian areas are home to 70-80 percent of all western wildlife.
- Grass-fed cattle trample and compact soils, reducing water infiltration and hastening overflow from precipitation that contributes to flooding and soil erosion.
- Grass-fed cattle are a primary vector for the spread of exotic weeds by transporting weed seeds on their coats and in their feces. Also, by consuming more desirable “ice cream” plants, livestock alter vegetative communities and give a competitive edge to invasive weed species.
- Grass-fed cattle consume forage that would otherwise feed other native herbivores, from grasshoppers to sage grouse to pronghorn and elk. The removal of grasses by livestock also leaves many small mammals and birds more vulnerable to predators by reducing hiding cover.

- Grass-fed cattle are vulnerable to predators, and livestock are the primary (if not the only) reason for predator control in the West. Thousands of wolves, grizzly bears, black bears, coyotes, mountain lions and other wildlife are destroyed each year to protect livestock on public and private lands—at taxpayer expense!
- Grass-fed cattle transmit disease to wildlife, including buffalo, elk and deer.
- Grass-fed cattle interrupt ecological processes like wildfire.

Anyone who suggests grass-fed beef is superior to grain-fed beef is only considering a fraction of the real costs of beef production. Whether grain-fed or grass-fed, beef production is an ecological disaster for the American West.

Finally, most "grass-fed" cattle are "finished" at feedlots on "grain" (mainly corn and chemical supplements), as most consumers do not actually favor the flavor of grass-fed beef.