

# From factory farmer to free-range rancher



How one Georgian farmer is going against the grain

When pointing out the problems with industrial livestock production, Compassion in World Farming is often asked how farmers can improve their systems. One bold Georgian has led the way in his decision to walk away from factory farming in his quest for greener pastures: Will Harris, who owns White Oak Pastures. This fifth-generation farm in the south of the state was, until 1995, a large-scale industrial farm raising calves for beef. But after sending some of his livestock off on a 30-hour journey to slaughter, he began to realise that something was wrong with this system.

The seed of change was then planted so Mr Harris began reverting to his ancestors' roots; that is, to farm *with* nature, not against it. And it just so happens that what's good for nature is also good for livestock and for people – a true triple win. Going full circle back to what his great-grandfather had practised, he now has pasture-fed cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, sheep and rabbits under rotational grazing, as well as a 5-acre organic vegetable farm growing over 40 kinds of vegetables. By eliminating pesticides and fertilisers (instead using homemade compost), the soil matter is growing, which sequesters huge amounts of carbon every year.



## Thinking like a Mountain

The farm uses a multi-species rotational grazing system, mimicking the plains of Africa. The poultry are protected from predators by seven Great Pyrenees guard dogs and laying hens go through natural moulting instead of forced. Mr Harris has gone the whole hog in ensuring that pigs are cared for in the best possible way too. Their heritage breed hogs are allowed to roam around the wooded pastures, rooting and wallowing as they do.

## A Life Worth Living

When it comes to his commitment to sustainability, Mr Harris does not just talk the talk; he walks the walk. He has created an environment that allows animal to express its natural behaviour. Calves are born on the farm and only have their mother's milk, grass and hay. He also built two on-site USDA-inspected red and white meat processing plants, which limits the distance animals travel before slaughter. These were designed by Dr Temple Grandin, who is the internationally recognized authority on humane animal handling and slaughter. The bones from the abattoir are ground to make bone meal, whereas the hides are shipped to a tannery for leather, cooking oil is recycled to fuel the tractors and treated waste water irrigates the pastures. This regenerative closed-loop system ensures that the farm is within a circular economy, where nutrients are recycled rather than wasted.

“If the Southern organic crowd were made up of teenage fan girls, Mr Harris would be their Justin Bieber” – New York Times ”

## A Triple-Win System

Along with the environment and animals, the social pillar of sustainability is paramount at White Oak Pastures. The farm employs 100 individuals and promotes fair, ethical working conditions. Workers pay just \$1 for their lunch in the restaurant and are urged to take home fresh produce every week

Mr Harris believes that many Americans are disconnected from food systems so has developed what he calls the LASH model: local, artisan, sustainable and humane. Relying on science to fix what nature can solve is what he feels has gone wrong with the food system. Decentralisation of meat packing industry allows for a localised, vertically-integrated model that integrates the costs of production - the end result being a premium product tailored to sophisticated consumers that want food to be raised with good animal welfare, environmental stewardship, and who treat their employees fairly

White Oak Pastures received the Governor's Award for Environmental Stewardship, The University of Georgia's Award of Excellence, named the Most Respected Business Leader in Georgia and received the Growing Green Award. The products are certified organic and humane

For further information, check out [www.whiteoakpastures.com](http://www.whiteoakpastures.com) or this short film, 'Cud', at <https://vimeo.com>.

## And now for the science bit

Serengeti rotational grazing systems like those used on White Oak Pastures replicate a natural ecosystem, where ruminants, monogastrics and omnivores forage alongside each other grazing the grasses, browsing the bushes and gobbling up the grubs. This holistic process is good for the environment and the animals, whilst producing meat of higher quality. A 2009 USDA study showed that grass-fed beef is lower in fat and higher in beta-carotene, vitamins B and E, omega 3, calcium, magnesium, and potassium.

Due to this grazing management, organic matter in the soil has increased from 0.5% to 5%.

Although the animals take longer to reach slaughter-weight, pasture-fed meats can obtain a 100% increased sale price. The US grass-fed meat is a fast-growing industry, with 350 certified members and each year the market grows by 25%. Despite a \$7.5million loan and 8 years to turn a profit after conversion to a pasture-based system, by 2014, White Oak Pastures were earning \$28 million.

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"The cows graze the grass, the sheep eat the weeds, and the chickens peck at the grubs and insects. All three species naturally fertilize the land, and our soil is again a living organic medium that teems with life."

