



Why grass-fed should mean 100% grass-fed

The labelling of meat as 'grass-fed' has become increasingly common at the point of sale, reflecting increasing consumer interest in grass-fed¹ produce. Wholly grass-fed meat has been shown to have certain nutritional, animal welfare and environmental properties (see overleaf) that underpin this level of interest. It is likely that the first of these, the human health benefits are the key drivers of demand.

The production of grass-fed beef and lamb is not unique to the UK. However, the UK is known around the world for its pasture-based livestock, and it is this element of production that is seen as adding value to many of the potential export markets, especially for higher-value cuts². Grass-fed has been formally defined within many of these markets, including the United States³.

In a consumer survey carried out for the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association in 2017, 93% of the 600 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that labelling laws suggesting the term grass-fed can be applied to animals that have been fed grass for just 51% of their lives, could be misleading for consumers and needs to be changed.

In the absence of an accepted, enforceable definition within the UK of grass-fed (and pasture-fed) meat as meaning 100% grass-fed (ie no grain), there are three specific risks to UK livestock farming:

1. That consumers will be misled, purchasing meat labeled as grass-fed that does not have the demonstrated human health, animal welfare or environmental benefits of 100% grass-fed meats; with consequential damage to the reputation of and trust in the livestock sector.
2. That farmers will not benefit from adopting grass-fed systems, because those with more intensive, grain-fed systems will free-load on the perceived benefits of grass-fed, thereby removing the incentive for farmers to take any advantage from wholly pasture-fed production systems.
3. That the UK's export markets will be damaged, since there will be no assurance in those export markets that meat labeled as grass-fed is in fact 100% grass-fed.

Providing a robust definition of grass-fed as meaning 100% grass-fed, backed by Defra and the FSA, will help to protect consumers, it will help to bring money into the livestock industry and it will help to strengthen our export markets.

Whilst food labelling in the UK has been underpinned by EU Regulations⁴ there has been no requirement to date to provide a definition of grass-fed. The exit of the UK from the EU provides an opportunity, within Domestic Agricultural Policy, to introduce a definition of grass-fed that protects consumers, benefits farmers and underpins higher-value exports.

¹ For all references to 'grass-fed' we include the terms 'pasture fed'

² http://www.ahdb.org.uk/brexit/documents/BeefandLamb_bitesize.pdf

³ It is of note that the USDA's food labelling regulator has determined that 'grass-fed', in the absence of further qualification, means 100% grass-fed (see:

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/Grass%20Fed%20Conference%20Call%20Notes%2001%2014%2016.pdf> page 6, question 4)

⁴ For example, EEC 1907/90 on farming methods used in egg production and EEC 1274/91 on the labelling of eggs, together provide the definition and application of 'free range'; EEC 2092/91 provides the definition of organic or biological farming.

The benefits of 100% grass-fed meat

□ For human health

Pasture-fed meat tends to be lower in total fat, to have higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids and to have a lower, more balanced (and healthier) ratio of omega-6:omega-3 fatty acids, than meat from grain fed animals, together with significantly higher levels of conjugated linoleic acid⁵. Milk and meat from pasture-fed animals also have higher vitamin levels, particularly vitamins A and E, and minerals. Of note, many of the health benefits associated with pasture-fed meat decline after only a brief period of grain feeding⁶.

□ For the environment

On a complete life-cycle analysis the carbon footprint of grass farms is characteristically lower than that of farms where cereal crops are grown to feed the animals, and where demand is capped 'could yield multiple benefits in terms of ecosystems management, biodiversity preservation and GHG reductions'⁷. Pasture for Life standards specifically prohibit the use of soya, the production of which is often associated with land use change and the resulting environmental damage. Pasture for Life standards encourage the use of legumes such as white and red clover to enhance production and reduce the use of synthetic fertilisers, and herbal leys that benefit insect and wildlife populations.

← For animal health and welfare

The Pasture for Life certification standards have been developed to provide animal welfare assurances equivalent to the leading schemes within the UK⁸. Pasture-fed livestock are given the freedom to express their normal behaviours and their diets fit with their natural growth and productivity. Extensive, pasture-based production is expected to reduce the incidence of metabolic and respiratory diseases, and so lessen the extent and prevalence of the use of antibiotics for farmed livestock.

The Pasture Fed Livestock Association

The Pasture-Fed Livestock Association (the PFLA) is a Community Interest Company that encourages the raising of ruminant animals wholly on fresh or conserved pasture and forage. Over the past six years, it has worked with its producers to develop a practical set of Production Standards that clearly defines the term 'Pasture-fed', based upon the principles of good animal and grassland husbandry.

In 2015 the PFLA launched the Pasture for Life certification mark, based upon these Standards, to capture the benefits that wholly pasture-based ruminant production can generate; for human health, for the environment and for animal health and welfare.

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⁵Van Elswyck, M. & McNeill, S., 2014. Impact of grass/forage feeding versus grain finishing on beef nutrients and sensory quality: The U.S. experience. *Meat Sci.*, 96, 535-540

⁶ Duckett, S.K. et al, 1993. Effects of time on feed on beef nutrient composition. *J. Anim. Sci.*, 71, 2079 - 2088

⁷ Garnett, T., 2010. Intensive versus extensive livestock systems and greenhouse gas emissions. *FCRN Briefing Paper*

⁸ The leading assurance schemes for animal welfare are recognised to be RSPCA Assured and Organic