

# Profile from the Field

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## Developing Michigan's Local, Pasture-Based, Beef Production System

**Project Title:** A Local Pasture-Based Beef Production System for Northwest Michigan

**Coordinator:** Jason Rowntree

**Location:** Michigan State University

**SARE Grant:** \$181,342

**Duration:** 2012-2016

To read the full project report, go to  
<https://projects.sare.org/search-projects/>  
and search for project number LNC12-345.



*With SARE support, Jason Rowntree and Michigan State University are working to establish a system for grass fed beef production. Photo courtesy of Jason Rowntree.*

Whether it's on dinner tables, in restaurants, in schools, or at markets, consumers are seeking more local food. More than 167,000 U.S. farms produced and sold local food through direct marketing in 2015, representing \$8.7 billion in revenue (USDA-NASS, 2015 Local Food Marketing Practices Survey). In 2010, the Traverse Bay Economic Development Corporation and Michigan Good Food Charter set a goal to source 20% of the food for the Traverse City area within a 100-mile radius by 2020. When Jason Rowntree read that the meat portion of the plan was to be pasture-based if possible, he was inspired. Rowntree, Associate Professor for Beef Cattle and Forage Utilization at Michigan State University (MSU), was

optimistic that Michigan could meet the goal with more education and an improved value chain.

“A recent report from Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, pointed to Nielsen data that indicated retail fresh, labeled grassfed beef grew from \$17 million in 2012 to \$272 million in 2016,” said Rowntree. “Michigan has the opportunity to meet this growing grass-fed beef demand.”

In 2012, Rowntree applied for and received a \$181,342 NCR-SARE Research and Education grant to help connect area beef producers, local processors, distributors, and retailers in order to begin to meet Traverse City's 20% local food benchmark. Together with Jerry Lindquist, Dr. Matt Raven, Dr. Jeannine Schwehofer, and Kable Thurlow, Rowntree set off to develop a local, pasture-based beef production system for Northwest Michigan. Rowntree's plan included identifying producers to participate in a value chain project called the Grand Vision Grass-fed Certification Program (GVGC). They selected 17 producers to participate in the GVGC; the program included an on-farm assessment, pasture development, and a grazing and grass finishing school.

The first year of grazing school involved practical soil and forage management, pasture allocation, and fence and water-point strategies. Year two moved on to advanced strategies on pasture allocation, specifically

residual management along with forage chain and synchrony development. They also included genetics and animal management components and educated producers on the differences between grassfed and grass-finished beef. Participating producers were given pre-tests at the beginning of the project and post-tests at the end, and the results indicated that there was an increase in knowledge in those areas as measured in pre- and post- tests.

After three years of participating in the GVGC program, seven of the producers are now producing grass-fed beef at scale. Rowntree estimates that these producers will produce more than 300 head in 2017. Carcass quality and yield measurements were taken; the average carcass grade of the GVGC cattle was USDA High Select, and the average carcass yield at 19-21 months of age was 53-54%. They received price premiums of 25% above the general cattle market prices for the hanging carcasses. When asked how his operation had changed since the onset of this project, one producer said, “Sold the combine, sold the corn planter, sold the grain semi.”

“By adding value to these cattle by producing grass fed beef, these producers have created an extra value of \$138,600 or an extra \$19,800 per farm over the three year period,” reported Rowntree. “One example of the impact is our work with Bell’s Brewery. Last year Bell’s sold 8,000 pounds of our cooperators’ grass-fed beef. The beef sold on average at \$14 per pound versus commodity prices of \$5. This alone would be an additional \$72,000 in added value with a small amount of product.”

In tandem with the GVGC program, the team brought together 13 representatives of the distribution, culinary, and retail portions of the emerging grass-fed beef value-chain in order to discuss barriers to the market. They met with meat distributors and chefs to devise strategies that utilize greater percentages of the beef chuck and round. The team also hosted the 2015 Grassfed Exchange, the national meeting of

the grass-fed beef industry. Attendees included 230 people from 23 states, Canada, and Argentina. Building on the momentum of this project, the team at MSU is currently working on the development of a grazing app for use with smartphones in the field as well as a grass-finishing manual.

“We are seeing the producers trained through this SARE-sponsored research growing and thriving,” said Rowntree. “They are also giving us input on new projects. I believe these advances generated by our producer-university relationships are important in forwarding long-term sustainability. We have been monitoring grazing impacts on land, including soil carbon sequestration. The data suggests we are growing an awesome beef product and concurrently are improving land—this equates to improvements in quality of life.”

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