

Our Beef With Grass-Fed Beef
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I'm excited to talk to ecologists, farmers, and economists to add different voices to conversations usually led by beef producers. It's an important step in protecting wildlife as we advocate for smarter environmental policy and clarify the direction of the environmental movement and its stance on grass-fed beef...

In a remote corner of far northeast California lies a rugged, dry landscape bordered by the Warner Mountains. A wildlife refuge traces along the south fork of the Pit River. Its dramatic and diverse forest meadows, western juniper, beautiful lakes and lava beds host species like black bears, goshawks, sandhill cranes, snow geese, otters, beavers, snakes and lizards, western toads, elk, cedar, sugar pine and western flowers. It's a corridor that wolves have used to cross from Oregon on a return to their ancient territories. It's also an area where cattle graze native sagebrush ecosystems, leaving a damaged landscape behind.



When I lived in this beautiful place, the return of wolves thrilled me. Wolves coming back here after nearly a century marked a new era, and their survival revealed great insight into conflicts between commercial interests and conservation. I took long walks through the woods with an eye out for wolf tracks crisscrossing the tracks of foxes, mountain lions and deer. I also noticed, though, how cattle had damaged this treasured place of ecological diversity. Unlike native grazers like elk, cattle didn't evolve here. They're an invasive species — and the harm they'd been inflicting was clear in overgrazed range, mucked-up pastures, manure-polluted waterways and trampled vegetation.

Much of what's now the Modoc National Forest in this region was once the home of the Modoc, Pit River (Achomawi) and Northern Paiute tribes before they were forced from the land. Around the same time, wild animals like wolves were forcibly removed too. In the book *Cattle, Capital, Colonization*, anthropologist Rosa E. Ficek shows how cattle ranching was a tool that colonial settlements used to force Native peoples and wildlife from the landscape to make room for cows.

For an environmentalist, it can be as important to understand cows as it is to understand and protect wolves. I quickly learned what cows ate, how they grazed, where they roamed, where they came from, and the part they played not only in U.S. diets but in our ecosystems and our culture wars. Cows were — and still are — an indelible part of our history.

All cows graze for at least part of their lives. Most will be sent to feedlots for fattening prior to slaughter. But some are “grass-finished,” which means they stay on the landscape until slaughter. They're called “grass-fed” even though they eat a lot more than grass, including supplemental forage that requires irrigation (cows are extremely water-intensive creatures). Where I grew up, in cow country, the cows munch away at increasingly drought-impacted hillsides, and they're called sustainable.

But how sustainable are cows when people in the United States consume four times the global average in beef? Can changing the way cattle are grazed accomplish our goals of living with — not at the cost of —

wildlife and healthy ecosystems? How does this work when beef is a leading source of agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, water use, manure pollution, and threats to keystone species like wolves?

Grass-fed beef comes with big questions about its environmental benefits. That's why I'm hosting a webinar series called "[Grazing the Wild: Facts and Fiction About Grass-Fed Beef](#)" with expert panelists to get to the bottom of the controversies.

Join us to help kick off the series on March 23 with the first panel, "[Habitat-Fed Beef: Separating Facts from Fiction in Grass-Fed and 'Regenerative' Beef](#)," featuring ecologists and researchers Tara Garnett, Nicholas Carter and Chris Bugbee. On April 7, check out our panel "[Cows, Climate and Culture Wars: Putting Bad Policy Out to Pasture](#)," with climate scientist Jonathan Foley, environmental scientist Matthew Hayek and agricultural economist Silvia Secchi. And in May, we'll host a panel called "Decolonizing Regenerative Agriculture and Boosting Agroecology to Build a Just Food System" with food producers and agroecologists. The details of that panel are coming soon.

I'm excited to talk to these researchers, ecologists, farmers, and economists to add different voices to conversations usually led by beef producers. It's an important step in protecting wildlife as we advocate for smarter environmental policy and clarify the direction of the environmental movement and its stance on grass-fed beef. [Get the details for all our "Grazing the Wild" online events.](#) I hope to see you there.