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Beef Production in the Flint Hills

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COUNTIN' CATTLE
Bruce Brock

Beef Production in the Flint Hills

The Flint Hills provide an integral source of sustainable and productive forage for over 1 million head of cattle on an annual basis.



The dominant use of the Flint Hills, at least in the large intact pastures in the core Flint Hills area, is to graze over 500,000 yearlings during the growing season of April to September.

Some of these yearlings are owned by local ranchers, who purchased the animals as weaned calves the prior fall and winter. Most of these yearlings, however, are owned by cattle producers throughout Kansas and in many other states. Local care-takers, sometimes referred to as custom graziers, will look after these yearlings as if they were their own. While the cattle forage, the ranchers keep a count to determine quickly if any cattle have strayed or become ill. Salt and mineral are provided to balance the cattle's nutrition needs.

Why are the Flint Hills sought by cattle

owners from hundreds of miles away? The productivity of the tallgrass prairie, during the growing season, is unsurpassed by any other grazing region. At the start of the grazing season the yearlings typically range in weight from 500 to 700 pounds. It's not uncommon for yearlings stocked in Flint Hills to gain over 2 pounds per day.

While the Flint Hills provide exceptional weight gains, the nutritional value of Flint Hills grasses peaks in July, and cattle gains drop off considerably before summer ends. At this point, the yearlings are herded to corrals, loaded back on trucks, and transported to their next destination.

When the yearlings are trucked to the Flint Hills in the spring and moved off during the summer, the highways are filled

with commercial trucks hauling the cattle to their destinations. It's estimated that at least 55 trucks are needed daily in Chase

The Flint Hills are also home to over 275,000 beef cows that are usually owned and cared for by local ranchers.

County alone when the yearlings are moved off pastures at the conclusion of the grazing season.

After their stay in the Flint Hills, the cattle are ready for a 90 to 120 day grain-feeding regime in feed yards throughout Kansas and other neighboring cattle-feeding states, before being harvested as high-quality grain-fed beef.

The Flint Hills are also home to over 275,000 beef cows that are usually owned and cared for by local ranchers. The majority of these cows will give birth in the spring, which is purposely timed so the mothers are grazing the lush Flint Hills grasses when their nutritional needs

are the highest of the year. The late spring and summer is when the beef cows are providing milk to their calves and rebuilding their body condition for the coming winter and next year's calf crop.

In most cases, the calves are weaned in the fall weighing 500 to 700 pounds. These calves will be sold to other ranchers for growing or finishing. In some situations, the cow herd owners retain ownership of their calves until they are harvested for beef at processing plants.

Beef consumers all over the world enjoy beef produced in the United States, and there is a good chance these consumers have dined on beef that was made possible by the forage produced in the Kansas Flint Hills.

Mike Beam is an executive with the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA), which is an agricultural trade association organized by Flint Hills ranchers in 1894. Beam also serves as the Executive Director of the Ranchland Trust of Kansas. This affiliate of KLA was created by the association in 2003 to preserve Kansas ranching heritage and open spaces for future generations through the

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