

Back to the Land

A new certification program is part of a revolution to improve
the lives of animals raised for food. by KAREN E. LANGE



We wanted cheap food, and the market delivered—with ruthless efficiency. Past the point where it was healthy for us, or safe for the food supply, or good for the environment. Past the point where it benefited rural communities, or was in any way sustainable. And far past the point where the animals involved were treated like living, feeling beings.

Change came fast and seemingly irreversibly. Hens were jammed into small cages; chickens bred to quickly grow big breasts, their bones often unable to support the weight; sows imprisoned in spaces barely larger than their bodies; cattle crowded onto huge feedlots where they stood exposed to the cruelest weather. Farms transformed into CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations). To keep animals alive and profitable in the midst of the crowding, stress, filth, and uncollected corpses, farmers cut off beaks and tails, and administered a never-ending regimen of antibiotics. Staring at the shrink-wrapped packages in the grocery store, most people had no idea of their true cost.

Then came the obesity epidemic, and food scares, and runoff from manure pits, and undercover footage showing

what was actually happening on the mega-farms that had taken over U.S. agriculture. Though we still want cheap food, increasingly, we also want meat that is safe, environmentally friendly, and produced in a more compassionate way. More and more, we're even willing to pay more for it.

But how well an animal has been treated is a lot harder for consumers to determine than price per pound. And the nation's food conglomerates know this, hiding the proliferation of factory farms behind idyllic red-barn imagery and appealing descriptions on product labels.

Enter Global Animal Partnership's 5-Step Animal Welfare Rating system. Launched in 2009 as a pilot program with Whole Foods Market, the initiative—which certifies farms and ranches raising cattle, chickens, pigs, and turkeys—provides clear choices for grocery shoppers and markets for producers who reject the profit-at-any-cost model of intensive confinement.

"We think we can change agriculture," says Edmund LaMacchia, a global vice president at Whole Foods.

Savvy consumers may already be familiar with other labels—Food Alliance Certified, Certified Humane, and



A mother pig forages with her week-old piglets at Becker Lane Organic Farm, where nursing babies live alongside their moms in farrowing huts (shown in the background). At a typical factory farm, the breeding sows would suffer virtually lifelong confinement in crates so small they couldn't even turn around, and their piglets would be taken away soon after birth.



“There was a long period of time during which we lost our way,” says Will Harris (above) of the ranch started by his great-grandfather nearly 150 years ago. “We incorporated ‘modern’ production ways without understanding the unintended consequences that come with them.” Now focused on more traditional practices, Harris has built a successful business that embraces stewardship of both animals and the land and that is certified under Global Animal Partnership’s 5-Step Animal Welfare Rating system (summarized below).

Animal Welfare Approved are just a few examples. What distinguishes GAP is its tiered program that certifies farms at six levels of welfare and its diverse leadership of producers, academics, retailers, and animal protection advocates from The HSUS and other organizations. The levels mandate progressively higher welfare practices, starting with Step 1’s requirement prohibiting confinement in cages and crates and leading to Step 5+, which requires on-site or local slaughter (saving animals from the stress of transport).

GAP works with third-party auditors and certifiers to assess compliance with its standards. The auditors visit farms every 15 months and inspect not only animals and buildings but feed tags, medical records, and veterinary and other receipts. “You can’t fake it,” says Joe Maxwell, The HSUS’s director of rural outreach and development and a Missouri pig farmer who’s certified at Step 3, a label that means his animals have daytime access to the outdoors.

By allowing entry into the system at more attainable levels, GAP motivates a broad spectrum of farmers and ranchers to earn the higher ratings that will

further improve welfare and presumably bring premiums for their products. “Even in our early years, we already work with producers who have moved up the step ladder,” says GAP executive director Miyun Park, a former HSUS vice president of farm animal welfare.

About 1 percent of the 9 billion animals raised each year in this country for meat come from farms certified under GAP standards, says Steven Gross, chairman of Farm Forward and a member of GAP’s board of directors. That represents 144 million animals raised each year on 1,815 farms, and there’s plenty of room for growth: Step 1, which gets animals out of cages and crates, and Step 2, which adds environmental enrichment, can be achieved by both big and small farms that still keep their animals indoors. On the demand side, an estimated 20 percent of food sold is purchased by people with what marketers call “lifestyles of health and sustainability”—just the sort who have an interest in animal welfare.

“We’re seeing customers buying up the ratings scale at a quicker rate than I thought we would,” Whole Foods’ LaMacchia says.



Though GAP's just getting started—with standards for eggs still in development and those for dairy and lamb yet to be introduced—farmers are already helping meet the demand. Sale of certified 5-step products is expanding outside of Whole Foods to an increasing number of purveyors. And in less than a year, Whole Foods helped create an alternative to huge, quickly grown broiler chickens, recruiting one or more producers from each region able to offer pasture-raised (Step 4) chickens.

One of those producers is David Pitman. He and the other three farmers profiled in these pages rejected most everything taught in ag school. They searched out alternative models. They took great financial risks, with no guarantee of success. Most of all, they followed their hearts in an environment often driven by the bottom line. People—their neighbors, sometimes their own family members—thought they were crazy. Some still do.

Others say they're the start of a revolution that will dramatically improve animal welfare. Making the adjustments on larger farms will take time and money—realistically, producers will wait until they have to replace buildings, says Bernard Rollin, a Colorado State University professor who chairs the GAP board and served on the groundbreaking Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production. Certain expenses, though, may actually be lower: Rollin and another researcher found building barns without sow gestation crates costs up to 20 percent less.

Rejecting the factory farm model doesn't mean rejecting science or technology, says Maxwell. "We can be successful and not go [back] to the Dark Ages," he says. Though crowding animals inside has been made

possible by prolific use of antibiotics, for example, progressive farmers have applied a better understanding of key factors—including respiratory health, adequate ventilation, and disease-specific immunizations—to put animals back on the land and keep them healthy.

Meanwhile, the conditions that made intensive confinement possible—cheap oil, abundant water, a stable climate, a surplus of feed grain—are disappearing, say scholars like Fred Kirschenmann of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. The scale of today's mega-farms has actually grown beyond what's necessary to be efficient, according to a study by Iowa State economist Michael Duffy. The future, says Kirschenmann, lies with what academics call "the agriculture of the middle"—mid-sized farms bigger than the type that sell to farmers markets and CSAs (community-supported agriculture groups), but not so big they have to rely on extreme confinement practices that ignore welfare.

"What we need to be looking at now [are] the beginning farmers, the farmers who are in their 30s and [40s and] 50s," he says. "They don't want to raise hogs in CAFOs. They want to produce food for people."

DAVID PITMAN

Bringing the Old Country Home

In order for David Pitman to raise chickens in the most humane way possible in California's flat, dry San Joaquin Valley, he had to go to northern France. That's because conventional broiler chickens in the United States have been bred primarily for massive breasts and fast growth. The birds' bones often can't support their unnatural weight. Their immune systems aren't



David Pitman

FARM:
Pitman Family Farms

LOCATION:
California

CERTIFIED STEP 3 FOR 16 CHICKEN AND TURKEY FARMS:
Animals live in an enriched indoor environment and have access to the outdoors during the day.

CERTIFIED STEP 4 FOR ONE CHICKEN FARM:
Animals are bred for the outdoors and spend their days on pasture or foraging areas.

CERTIFIED STEP 5 FOR TWO CHICKEN AND TURKEY FARMS:
As with Step 4, animals are on pasture or in foraging areas; all physical alterations are prohibited.

WEBSITE:
maryschickens.com

Global Animal Partnership's 5-step program has really been a blessing for us. It's the first of its kind to finally teach consumers the truth behind the food they eat.



David Pitman's chickens forage and dustbathe outdoors. They also perch—unlike factory-farmed birds bred to grow large breasts so quickly their legs often can't support their weight.



Will Harris

FARM:

White Oak Pastures

LOCATION:

Bluffton, Georgia

CERTIFIED STEP 4 FOR CATTLE:

Cattle are not dehorned and are raised on pasture with constant access to shelter.

CERTIFIED STEP 5 FOR CHICKENS:

Chickens are bred for the outdoors and spend their lives on pasture.

WEBSITE:

whiteoakpastures.com

One of the primary core values of my family has always been [that] you take care of the land and the herd, and they will take care of you and the family. Animal welfare is not new to us.

always tough enough for life off antibiotics. Put them out on pasture in the Valley, with its hot afternoons and cold nights, and they won't survive long, even with a mobile chicken house for shelter and plenty of corn and soybean meal to supplement whatever food they find in the grass.

So Pitman traveled across the Atlantic to learn how birds were raised in America before industrial farming introduced chicken CAFOs. Now, every four weeks, a French breeder sends him eggs. From these hatch the slow-growing, Step 5 Rhode Island Reds Pitman markets as "Mary's California Bronze." (They're named after his mother, who for decades has coped with food allergies by eating the healthiest food she can find.)

These birds lead the sort of life that could be featured in a commercial—except it's real. "If I was a chicken, I'd want to be raised in a pasture," says Pitman. "... They can run and jump and perch and climb."

In the 1980s and 1990s, because of consolidation in the poultry industry and the departure of companies from California, the slaughter plants that once bought the Pitmans' turkeys shut down until the family had just a single customer left. They raised organic turkeys, but it was hard to market birds for 20 cents more per pound when buyers make decisions based on a half-cent difference.

"I was studying to come back to the ... farm," Pitman remembers. "My dad said, '... Better change majors. ... By the time you get out of college, we won't be here anymore.'"

The family tried selling unprocessed organic chickens to ethnic markets in Los Angeles. In 2002, they risked all the money they had to buy and renovate an old processing plant. In 2003, about three months before it seemed they would lose everything, they got a contract to supply Whole Foods stores with organic birds who have access to the outdoors. Two years later, Pitman began producing pasture-raised chickens, partly at the urging of his soon-to-be wife.

"She hones in on this chicken that is having trouble walking, she gets a tear in her eye, and she said, 'David,

what's wrong with this chicken? Obviously, this chicken is in pain.' [And] I said, 'Well, you like boneless breast meat.'"

Achieved in 2010, Step 5 certification has allowed Pitman to continue raising chickens on pasture and ask a higher price for birds with smaller breasts (and bigger thighs). Sales have doubled; the manager of the Whole Foods stores in Las Vegas went from begging Pitman not to send him any more birds because he had unsold cases stacked in the freezer, to pleading with Pitman to increase the weekly deliveries from three cases to eight.

Pitman's mother, Mary, is relieved—and proud. "It's just so exciting for me that he and my husband are raising food that I can eat, and that we're changing the whole industry. ... They're ... changing the way meat is produced."

WILL HARRIS

Letting Nature Lead the Way

In an out of the way corner of Georgia, close to the Florida border, Will Harris enjoys his own little stretch of the Serengeti. He rises at 5 a.m. to drink a cup of coffee and watch cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, ducks, turkeys, guinea hens, and geese graze and swim. And he ends each day drinking wine from the bottle, watching the sun set over the flat green fields bordered by pine trees and scrubby oaks. In between, Harris, who sports a goatee and covers his head against the sun with a cowboy hat, herds his cattle from a jeep. "Goup, goup, goup—come on!" he calls. The cattle run and moo over what looks like an endless expanse of grass.

"I love my herd and flock as much as you love your dog or cat," he explains. "I don't love the individual within it—I love the cycle, the system."

What Harris has created on his family's 2,500-acre ranch is based on the famous East African ecosystem, even if the animals involved aren't wild: Large ruminants graze, then small ruminants, then birds, all fertil-

THIS SPREAD: JULIE BUSCH-BRANAMAN

THE RISE (AND FALL) OF EXTREME CONFINEMENT

SEVENTY YEARS AGO, American meat and egg production started to industrialize. First, chicken and turkey farms, then cattle feedlots and egg operations, then hog farms. By 1980, most farm animals were kept in CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations). Multi-national corporations like Tyson Foods and Smithfield bought up all the parts

of the meat supply chain—from feed companies and breeding operations to slaughter plants—and signed contracts with producers. Farmers either went along or went under.

But as The HSUS and others exposed the cruelty inherent to factory farms, Americans began demanding change, setting in motion a wave of legislative and

corporate initiatives to reduce the use of veal crates for calves, battery cages for hens, and gestation crates for sows; Smithfield is among the first of the industry giants that's pledged a phaseout.

"Who'd have guessed it 10 years ago?" says William Heffernan, a pig farmer certified under the GAP 5-step system, pointing out that veal crates are

already on their way out. A professor emeritus at the University of Missouri who has chronicled the development of industrial agriculture, Heffernan predicts gestation crates for pregnant sows will be next. "[They] will go pretty fast. ... The pressure's going to be on."

Here are snapshots of seven decades of change.



izing the soil with their manure. Since most parasites and diseases are adapted specifically to one type of animal and cannot survive in the gut of another, this keeps them from spreading. Harris transplanted the Serengeti to Georgia in his early 40s, when he grew tired of fattening up cattle in a feedlot and sending them across the country without food or water in double-decker trucks, where they urinated and defecated on each other. Now he's ranching like his grandfather and great-grandfather did, raising animals without antibiotics, hormones, chemical fertilizers, or pesticides and butchering them on the farm.

Harris' friend, Virginia Willis, a food writer and cookbook author, says White Oak Pastures' grass-fed beef is a revelation to most people. "There's a fullness and a richness. It's gamier."

As a conventional cattleman, Harris made money

every year. When he switched to the new model, he lost money. Harris spent \$5 million to build the cattle and chicken slaughter plants on his property (animal welfare expert Temple Grandin was a consultant). It costs him a quarter to a third more to produce beef and about double to produce chicken. Fortunately, Whole Foods bought his meat, and "Certified Humane" and "Animal Welfare Approved" certifications helped sell it. Though still searching for more buyers for his chicken, Harris finally made money. He's hoping his GAP step ratings will pay off as well.

"In my 20s, the idea of really producing a lot of meat as efficiently as possible—giving it whatever I needed to give it to make it grow—was kind of exciting," he says. "... [But] you really are fighting against nature. ... Now we try very hard to emulate nature ... let the animals express their instinctive behaviors."



Far removed from the battery-caged life of most of the nation's egg-laying hens, laying chickens at Will Harris' farm (top) enjoy sunshine and fresh grass outside their mobile chicken house. While GAP step ratings for eggs are still in development, the portion of Harris' operation raising chickens for meat (above) is certified at Step 5.



1940s

Researchers discover streptomycin, the first in a series of antibiotics that will allow farmers to raise animals in confinement without risking widespread disease.

1950s

Farms develop fast-growing types of chickens and turkeys and place them in crowded barns; by 1955, only 10 percent of broiler chickens come from independent producers.

1960s

System of fattening cattle in large feedlots becomes firmly established.

Nearly half the nation's eggs come from caged hens.

1970s

Number of farms falls to 2.3 million (from 6 million in the 1940s) while the number of animals raised for food climbs.

CAFOs are identified as potential sources of pollution under the Clean Water Act.

1990s

Most sows are kept in gestation crates.

2000s

A handful of companies control the meat and egg industries. By 2006, most poultry and pigs are raised under contract with large corporations.

Florida passes nation's first anti-confinement law, an HSUS-led ballot measure to outlaw gestation crates.

2000s (cont.)

By decade's end, six more states pass HSUS-led measures against extreme confinement of certain species.

The HSUS's No Battery Eggs Campaign launches; hundreds of restaurants, manufacturers, and other companies end or reduce their use of eggs from caged hens.

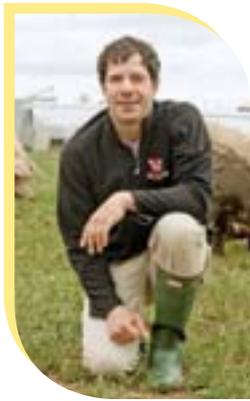
Burger King makes the first major anti-cage pledge by a U.S. corporation, announcing that it will start switching to cage-free eggs and gestation-crate-free pork.

2010s

FDA urges farmers to phase out the use of antibiotics to promote animal growth.

An HSUS-backed bill to end barren battery cages for egg-laying hens is introduced in Congress.

Companies from Safeway to McDonald's pledge to phase out gestation crates for sows.



JUDE BECKER

A Not-So-Crazy Pioneer

Jude Becker started out in 1999 with six sows and a strange idea. All around Iowa, family pig farms had been giving way to industrial agribusiness. The price of pork kept dropping and markets available to small farmers continued to disappear. It seemed the type of farming Becker's family had done since they arrived in the eastern part of the state in 1850 was gone forever. After arthritis forced Becker's father to retire, the family's land was rented out to large-scale producers. Undeterred, Becker returned from college with a vision: to raise pigs organically.

Professor Mark Honeyman, Becker's agriculture teacher at Iowa State University, says he knew of no one else attempting this at the time. "It was not ... something you could pull out of a textbook."

Becker's family wanted to encourage him, but they couldn't help wondering, says his sister Abby Becker, especially since back then organic was far from mainstream. Jude Becker remembers blunt words. "They said, 'This is crazy—we're living in the middle of Iowa!'" The neighbors were suspicious.

But slowly, carefully, thoughtfully, Becker, who his sister once imagined might become an architect or perhaps a history professor, proceeded to create a rare kind of farm. He began with organic crops and those half-dozen pigs, selling mainly to co-ops. His big break came in 2004, two years after the federal government created an organic certification program. Whole Foods

approached him to buy his pork.

In 2008, he got a call to appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. After that, Becker Lane Organic Farm was selling to customers as far away as Japan and to chefs on both coasts. The farm had grown to several hundred sows and around 6,000 pigs produced a year—a large chunk of the organic pork raised in this country.

Becker's farm is nothing like the intensive-confinement operations built during his childhood. "I remember ... seeing these big, ugly steel-and-concrete aberrations popping up on the landscape, and I thought, 'I wouldn't want to live there if I were a pig, [and] I wouldn't want to work there.'"

Instead, his farm is the kind of place you'd take kids on a field trip. Pregnant sows are kept in stables, rather than confined in gestation crates. When they're ready to give birth, they are moved outdoors to insulated metal shelters Becker imported from Europe. The youngest piglets wander a 30-acre pasture, free to come and go from their mothers before they are moved to a straw-strewn nursery barn. For most of the rest of their lives they root and forage for food, nest, and, during the hot summer, wallow in the mud.

They're allowed to be pigs, and Becker says because of this they enjoy good health, even without antibiotics. Since they're not raised over manure pits, he says the meat tastes clean—chefs have commented on the flavor.

Honeyman isn't sure you can taste the difference between a pig raised on a factory farm and one raised

Jude Becker

FARM:

Becker Lane Organic Farm

LOCATION:

Dyersville, Iowa

CERTIFIED STEP 3

FOR PIGS:

Pigs have access to the outdoors all day long.

WEBSITE:

beckerlaneorganic.com

This is the way you have healthy animals, this is the way you have healthy meat. ... Industrial agriculture is always living in fear of itself, of the next food scare.

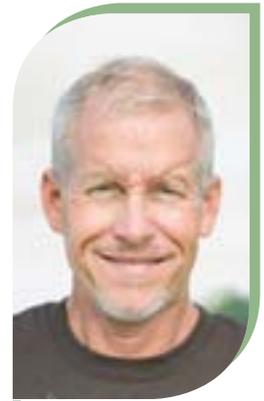


Becker's great-grandfather (above) worked the same land in the 1920s. In 1999, Becker (right) renewed family traditions. He remains inspired by pigs' unique personalities.





Livestock handler Scott Storey feeds Thompson Farms' pigs, who graze year-round on pasture.



Andrew Thompson

FARM:
Thompson Farms
Smokehouse

LOCATION:
Dixie, Georgia

CERTIFIED STEP 5+⁺ FOR PIGS:
No physical alterations and no slaughterhouse or other transport; animals spend their lives on pasture.

WEBSITE:
thompsonfarms.com

on an organic farm. But the professor acknowledges the importance of the emerging niche markets his former student has connected with.

Now Becker is striving for the highest GAP step ratings he can achieve. "You have to superimpose morality over economics," he says. "Otherwise, farming just becomes maximizing. There's no more humanity left in it."

ANDREW THOMPSON

Out with the New

In the early 1990s, after the price of pork bottomed out, the Thompson family in south Georgia agreed to move pigs off the land in exchange for payment—an EPA initiative intended to protect the watershed from runoff. Just about every other pig farm in the state had quit the business, and this seemed the only way to continue raising pigs, which the Thompsons had done in Dixie since the Depression. So the family shut up their animals in a big barn with a cement slab floor that drained into a manure "lagoon"—a fixture of many factory farms that has since been implicated in land, air, and water pollution.

Andrew Thompson, who runs Thompson Farms Smokehouse with his 84-year-old father, said the problems started immediately. "We had a little bit more sickness in the hogs. ... You got a little bit more fighting because they were bored. They were a lot leaner-type hogs—they just didn't have the taste." Some animals went lame from standing on the hard cement. And the farm stank.

So it wasn't long before the Thompsons decided to put their animals "back on the ground." Nowadays,

says Thompson, "we have a lot healthier hog."

The pigs graze year-round on pasture—rye grass in the winter and millet in the summer. When they're turned into new fields, they rush forward playfully, like kids on their way to open Christmas presents. During the heat, they wallow in "country swimming pools"—water piped into holes. When sows are about to give birth, they build nests in little huts.

"It's really nice to watch a sow," says Donna Anderson, Thompson's sister and a secretary at the family business. "... She'll go in and out of that house, taking whatever she can—dried grass—[to] build her bed. You'll know she's fixing to have her pigs."

Raising pigs this way means they reach market weight more slowly—around two months later—and the cost rises higher than the typical supermarket is willing to pay. The local school system laughed at the price Thompson wanted. So the family struggled until 2009, when they found a buyer in Whole Foods. The family entered the GAP rating program at Step 4 and quickly achieved Step 5+ when they moved away from all physical alterations, including castration, and eliminated transport for slaughter after building an on-farm plant.

Farm animal welfare certification may be new, even trendy. Thompson Farms is not. The Ten Commandments are written on a chalkboard in the main building. The manager, an ordained Baptist minister, starts each day with devotions. Everyone gathers for lunch at noon.

"That's what this country used to be—small farms," says Thompson. "... Nowadays everything's done quick and not near as good. We're going back to the old way." ■

The sows are a lot more healthy. They stay out rooting, grazing all day long.



Mud holes, fresh water, and wide open spaces make Thompson's farm a playground for piglets, whose mothers nest naturally in huts outside. It's a welcome change from the family's brief foray into factory farming. "For me," says Thompson, "one of the best aspects of being a farmer is seeing how content and happy our pigs are."