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THE COST OF RAISING GRASS-FED BEEF IN THE NORTHEAST UNITED STATES

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The Cost of Raising Grass-Fed Beef in the Northeast

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Introduction

Consumer interest in grass-finished and locally produced meat has grown significantly over the past decade. From July 2020 to July 2021, the US grass-fed fresh beef sales reached $776 million, an increase of 5% from the previous year (Loria, 2022). Most of the grass-finished beef in the United States is currently imported from countries in the Southern Hemisphere (Resource Trade Earth, 2025). However, the $776 million in sales reported by Loria does not include grass-fed beef sold through consumer-direct markets, such as farmers markets and freezer trade[1]. Given the level of interest in local food in the Northeast U.S., and the region's natural research capacity, previous research has examined the potential to expand grass-fed and grass-finished beef cattle production in New York and New England (Houtian, et al. 2025 and Waro, et al. 2019). According to the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, New York and New England were home to 142,600 beef cattle in 2022, both conventionally raised cattle and grass-fed beef. Although the specific number of grass-fed beef is not known, over 5,500 grass-fed and finished cattle were identified on farms participating in this study in 2022.

The economic viability of expanding grass-fed and finished beef production in the Northeast is not well understood though. Therefore, this study assessed important aspects of the economic feasibility of producing grass-fed beef in New York and New England. It examined various costs of production and market prices to help local producers compete with conventional domestic beef, grass-fed beef from other regions, and imported grass-finished beef. For the purposes of this study, grass-fed and grass-finished beef will be referred to simply as grass-fed beef.

Data collection commenced in late March 2023 and concluded at the end of June 2023. Thirty-one grass-fed beef farms across the Northeast were surveyed about their costs of raising grass-fed beef during the 2022 calendar year. Data was gathered through in-person interviews and phone

[1] Freezer trade is the practice of buying meat in bulk (whole, half, or quarter of an animal) and freezing it for later consumption or sales

conversations. These farms were located within the states of New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine.

When selecting farms and producers for this study, several criteria and requests were made:

- Grass-Fed Criteria: Cattle must have been raised on pasture and fed grass-forages during non-grazing months. They must never have been fed grain, subtherapeutic antibiotics or added hormones, and must have been grass-fed their entire lives.
- Breed Specifications: Cattle included in the project should primarily be of British descent, including breeds such as Angus, Herefords, and British White Parks.
- Land Ownership: The land used for raising the cattle should be owned or leased by the person responding to the survey.
- Sales and Processing: The farm must have sold meat in 2022, and the farm must have utilized a USDA harvest[2] facility during that year.
- Sales Channels: Cattle sold for harvest should have been sold directly to consumers, through third parties, or via retail establishments.
- Financial Information: Farms should provide financial information, with most data sourced from their 2022 tax records. Some figures were best estimates.

Methods

Grass-fed beef farms were identified through word of mouth and Google searches for each state. Producers were asked a series of financial questions, with each conversation lasting around 60 minutes, and many extending over two hours. Farms were categorized by size: small farms had 1-75 head of cattle, medium farms had 76-250 head, and large farms had 251 or more head during the calendar year 2022. Results are reported by farm size. All data are for the year 2022.

Key Farm Definitions

Acreage

Total farm acres encompass all land on which taxes are paid, while total leased acres refer to the land leased specifically for the beef enterprise. The acreage owned and leased by producers includes building envelopes, wetlands, forested lands, croplands, pastured lands, and any other usable or unusable lands. The cost per acre is calculated by dividing expenses by the total number of acres on which the producer pays taxes or leases.

For this study, pasture lands and hay lands may be considered the same, as many producers use the same lands for both purposes within a given year. They may harvest hay before grazing the field or vice versa. The cost per productive acre is determined by dividing the farm's expenses by the acreage used in production for the calendar year 2022. This productive acreage includes pasture lands, croplands, hay lands, and lands used for silvopasture, excluding all non-productive acreage.

Harvest/Slaughter

The term "harvest/slaughter" is used throughout this study. In the expense category, "harvest/slaughter" refers to the costs incurred when an animal is sent for processing. These costs

[2] A harvest facility is also known as a slaughterhouse, meat processing plant, or abattoir

include the transportation of the live animal and pickup of the meat, harvest fee, cutting fee, and meat wrapping fee. In the context of revenue, "harvest/slaughter" refers to the revenue generated from selling carcasses, whether as whole carcasses or packaged cuts. Additionally, revenue from harvest/slaughter can include the sale of live cattle through a third party, where the cattle are sold live but shipped directly for processing.

Cattle

The total number of grass-fed cattle on the farm, referred to as the "annual inventory," includes all cattle present at any time during the calendar year 2022, whether they were born on the farm or purchased. Producers may have had different groups of cattle rotated in and sold at various times throughout the year. For this study, the cattle were categorized as follows: brood cows (including any pregnant heifers at the end of the year), bulls (intact males used for breeding), cull cattle (mature male or female cattle, typically over 30 months of age, that were previously intended or used for breeding purposes (such as cows, bulls, or breeding heifers) but are no longer productive or suitable for reproduction due to age, health, fertility issues, or management decisions, and are therefore removed (culled) from the herd and sold for slaughter or other purposes.), 2022 calves (male or female), 2021 yearlings (steers or heifers), and 2020/2019 finished cattle (heifers or steers destined for harvest). Steers are male cattle that have been castrated.

The cost per head is calculated by dividing the farm's expenses by the annual inventory of cattle on farm in 2022. In contrast, the cost per head of cattle that remain is determined by dividing the total expenses by the number of cattle that were on the property at the end of the calendar year 2022. The cattle that stayed could include brood cows, bulls, yearlings, weanlings, calves, and any other cattle not sold for harvest or to other farms. Cattle did not need to be on the property all year to be accounted for.

Calves (heifers, steers, or bulls) are those born in 2022, while yearlings are heifers or steers born in 2021. Fat cattle are any heifer or steer destined for harvest within the next 12 months. Cows are any females that are bred or have had a calf, and a bull is any uncastrated male over one year old with breeding potential. The term "live cattle" refers to cattle sold live and not directly for harvest. These cattle can be sold as feeder calves, stockers[3], finished cattle, replacement heifers, brood cows, or bulls.

Operating Expenses

Operating expenses included the cost of leased acreage, labor costs (paid and unpaid), the cost of purchasing grass-fed cattle, harvest expenses, pasture management expenses, feed and feeding expenses, veterinary and medical expenses, and herd management software expenses.

Results

Thirty-one farms participated in this study by reporting their farm information for the 2022 tax year. Each farm provided data on expenses and revenues. Additional details such as cost per head per acre and the number of laborers per head were calculated. Fourteen farms were classified as small (1-75 head of cattle), 11 farms were medium (76-250 head of cattle), and 6 farms were large

[3] Stocker cattle are young, lightweight steers or heifers raised primarily on forage-based diets to gain weight before they are either sent to a feedlot or used as replacement cattle in herds.

(251 or more head of cattle). Small farms comprised 45% of the study, while large farms accounted for 19% of the total reporting farms.

Producers provided financial data for paid full-time and part-time employees, including both wages paid and hours worked. This allowed researchers to distinguish between compensated labor and additional labor inputs that were not formally paid. Farms often rely heavily on unpaid labor, typically provided by family members, and this reliance varies depending on the size and structure of the operation. Because of this, researchers also collected information on unpaid labor to estimate total labor contributions more accurately.

Unpaid labor was assessed using standardized assumptions to ensure consistency across farms. Specifically, unpaid full-time labor was calculated as 40 hours per week for 50 weeks per year (accounting for a two-week vacation), and part-time unpaid labor was estimated at 20 hours per week for 50 weeks per year. These unpaid labor hours were then assigned a monetary value using the minimum wage defined by each state:

- New York = $14.20
- Rhode Island = $13.00
- Vermont = $13.18
- Massachusetts = $15.00
- Connecticut = $15.00
- New Hampshire = $7.25
- Maine = $13.80

For this project, we calculated the 'full time equivalent' (FTE) employees for each farm to standardize the amount of labor used across the participating farms. To calculate FTE we added the (part-time paid and unpaid, and full-time paid and unpaid) by the number of hours considered a full-time workweek, in this case 40 hours. FTE = (Total hours worked by all employees) / (Full-time hours per week).

Pasture management expenses include the costs of chemicals, pesticides, or fertilizers used, any new fencing or repairs, new seeding, and any tillage performed. Additionally, it covers the costs of soil sampling, spraying, and water-related expenses such as new hoses, tanks, wells, and water lines.

Feeds and feeding costs encompass the expenses of baling hay and baleage, as well as any feed, supplements, minerals, and vitamins purchased in 2022. This category also includes crop insurance, consulting fees, feed samples, and any additional feeds purchased.

Veterinary and medical expenses are detailed as vet services, vaccines, medications, vet supplies, worming and parasite control, as well as the purchase of ear tags and any breeding charges (such as straws, gloves, and semen) incurred in 2022.

Within the "other" operating expenses category, costs were grouped to capture a wide range of essential but variably reported farm expenditures that did not neatly fit under primary categories like feed, labor, or veterinary care. Specifically, this grouping included gas, oil, and fuel, repairs

and maintenance to machinery, farm improvements, and property taxes, all of which contribute directly to the day-to-day functioning and upkeep of the operation.

Additionally, employee-related costs such as healthcare, payroll taxes, and associated benefits were included in this category when not captured under standard labor reporting. Mortgages on farm property were also grouped here when producers listed them as part of their annual operating cash flow.

This study chose not to include the costs of farm vehicles, machinery, equipment, or construction-related expenses (such as building or repairing farm structures or making farm improvements) in the final analysis due to the complexity of deriving accurate depreciation schedules across farms. While this information was collected, calculating annualized depreciation would require additional data, including original purchase price, year of purchase, expected useful life, salvage value, and farm-specific depreciation methods, data that were inconsistently reported across producers.

Without standardized reporting of these variables, any attempt to apply a uniform depreciation schedule would risk introducing inconsistencies or inaccuracies in cost comparisons. Therefore, to maintain methodological rigor and comparability, these capital expenditures were excluded. In addition, costs for utilities (e.g., electricity and propane) were collected, but also excluded from the final report. Most producers were unable to disaggregate these utility expenses specifically for the beef portion of their operation, especially when shared infrastructure (e.g., barns, water heaters) served multiple livestock types or the entire farmstead.

Harvest expenses include slaughter costs, trucking costs for transporting cattle to the harvest facility and picking up the processed meat, marketing expenses, and checkoff dollars paid to the state and national Beef Checkoff programs. Additionally, these expenses cover the financial costs of death loss, loss of packed product, and auction barn commissions.

Farm Operating Expenses

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of farm expenses in 2022, showing the average costs for each farm size, as well as the minimum and maximum for each expense. Farm expenses as a percent of total expenses for 2022 are illustrated in Figure 1, which compares operating expenses across small, medium, and large farms. Operating expenses assessed in this study include the costs of full-time and part-time labor (both paid and unpaid), the purchase of grass-fed cattle, harvest expenses, pasture management, feeds and feeding, veterinary and medical expenses, leased acreage, and herd management software.

Operating expenses for small farms averaged $116,484 and for medium farms averaged $214,944. Large farms averaged $655,979 in operating expenses. The range of expenses reported varied widely among farms. Among small farms, the range of $206,004 in total operating expenses by farm was larger than the average. Large farms showed a $492,615 difference in the range of expenses.

As shown in Table 1, labor is a significant expense for grass-fed beef farms of all sizes. Across all participating farms, a total of $1,491,600 was spent on paid labor in 2022. Additionally, 1,271 grass-fed cattle were purchased, amounting to $1,364,010. The total expenditures paid to Northeast packing plants for harvesting, cutting, and wrapping were $1,145,727.

Figure 1 compares the expenses as a percent of total to compare across small, medium, and large farms. For small farms, paid plus unpaid labor constitutes the largest expense at 45.0%. In medium farms, paid and unpaid labor represents 27.6% of expenses, which ranks fourth for expenses on these medium farms. On large farms, paid and unpaid labor comprises almost 28.2% of operating expenses, with paid labor accounting for 25% of the farm's expenses. The owner/operator is categorized as either unpaid or paid labor, depending on whether the farm provides a regular salary or paycheck. If the owner/operator reported being paid regularly, their compensation is included in the paid labor category. Conversely, if the owner/operator did not pay themselves regularly, their salary is accounted for under unpaid labor.

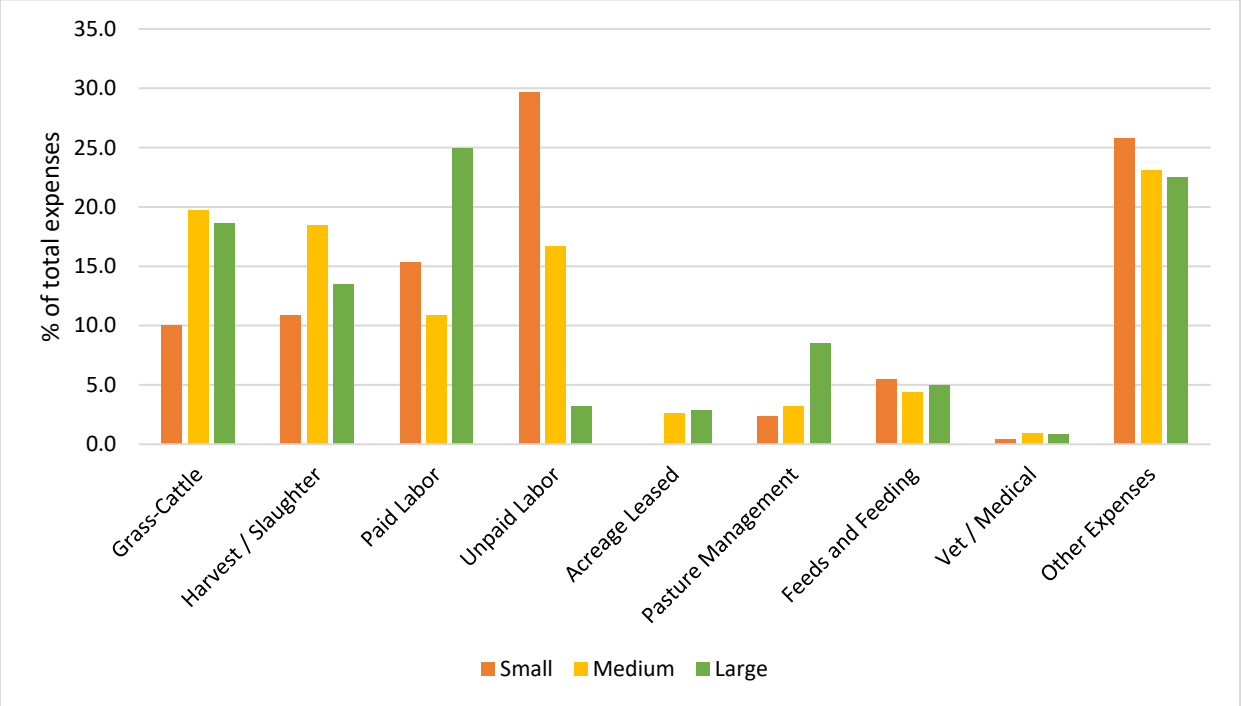
Expenses for purchasing grass-fed cattle and harvesting and slaughtering the cattle are some of the other significant expenses across all farm sizes. For medium and large farms, the cost of purchasing grass-fed cattle accounts for nearly 20% of total expenses, compared to 10% for small farms. Harvest and slaughter expenses make up 18.5% of total expenses for medium farms, 13.5% for large farms, and 10.9% for small farms. The most consistent expense category across all farm sizes is feeds and feeding, which constitutes under 5% of total expenses for both medium and large farms, and 5.5% for small farms.

Table 1. Operating Expenses

Expenses	Small Farms	Medium Farms	Large Farms
	$	$	$
Grass-Cattle	11,663	42,409	122,371
range	0 - 70,125	0 - 183,750	0 - 270,000
Harvest / Slaughter	12,682	39,665	88,646
range	0 - 47,950	4,865 - 133,000	30,910 - 210,450
Paid Labor	17,857	23,455	163,933
range	0 - 63,000	0 - 195,000	5,200 - 266,000
Unpaid Labor	34,543	35,920	21,100
range	0 - 60,000	0 - 82,800	0 - 56,800
Acreage Leased	75	5,638	18,579
range	0 - 1,046	0 - 22,975	0 - 44,000
Pasture Management	2,710	6,857	55,971
range	0 - 10,000	500 – 17,000	9,825 – 204,200
Feeds and Feeding	6,430	9,333	32,382
range	150 - 24,000	3,452 – 17,000	16,900 – 43,800
Vet / Medical	476	2,049	5,291
range	0 – 2,000	0 – 6,000	2,850 – 11,835
Other	30,049	49,619	147,707
range	4,608 - 67,745	15,650 - 76,000	66,000 - 263,526
Total Operating Expenses	116,484	214,944	655,979
range	39,266 - 245,270	106,348 - 490,150	389,940 - 882,555

Note: Small farms were defined as having 1-75 head of cattle, medium as having 76-250 head of cattle, and large as having 251 or more head of cattle.

Figure 1. Farm Operating Expenses, percent of total expenses



Farm Receipts

Revenues reported by the farms include live grass-fed cattle sales, harvest/slaughter sales, pasture receipts, receipts from leased acreage, and feed and feeding sales.

Harvest sales included retail and wholesale meat sales in 2022 as well as cattle sold to third parties for the purpose of slaughter for meat. Meat could be sold as individually packaged cuts or as whole or partial carcasses. Sales could be made through various channels such as online, farm stores, or farmers' markets. All meat sold was harvested at USDA-certified facilities.

According to Table 2, large farms averaged $675,887 in sales per farm, medium farms averaged $177,462 per farm, and small farms averaged $60,839 per farm.

Harvest and slaughter sales include cattle sold directly for processing, including whole, half, and quarter carcasses sold directly to consumers, and the freezer trade, which includes packaged meat sold directly to consumers. Large farms reported harvest receipts ranging from $126,000 to $1,839,000, with an average of $485,333 per farm. Small farms averaged $52,740 in harvest receipts per farm, while medium farms reported an average of $156,199 per farm.

Figure 2 shows that large farms had average sales of $128,067 per farm from live cattle sales, with one large farm selling $450,000 worth of live cattle in 2022. Medium farms averaged $15,609 in live cattle sales, while small farms averaged $3,468 per farm.

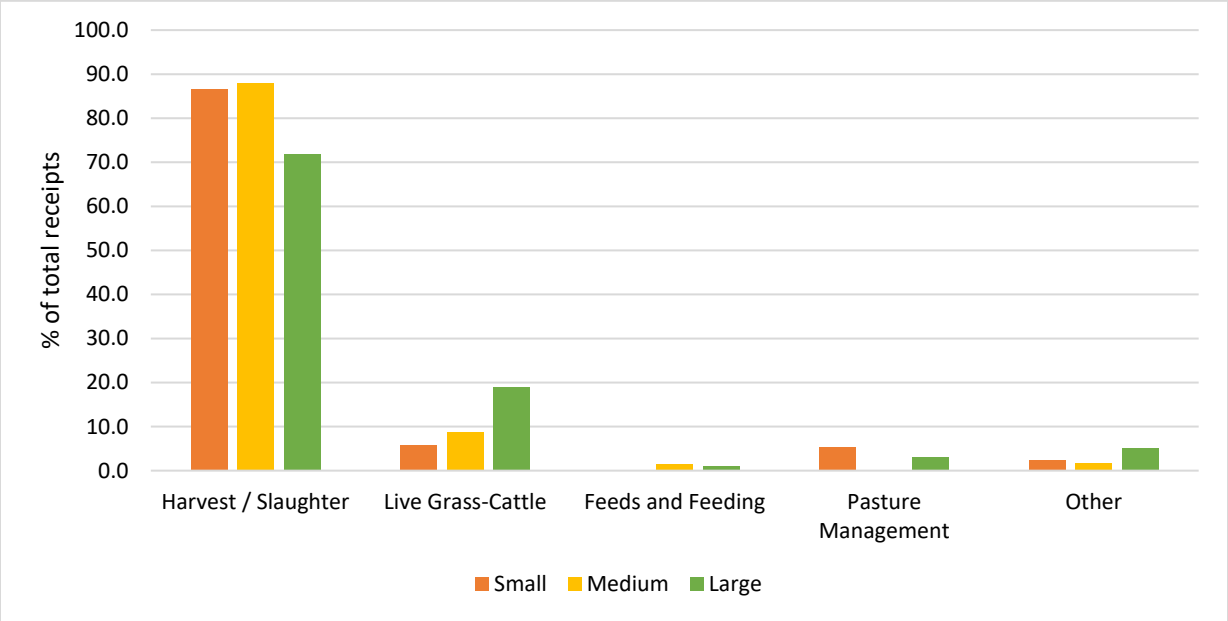
Table 2. Operating Receipts

Revenue	Small Farms	Medium Farms	Large Farms
	$	$	$
Harvest / Slaughter	52,740	156,199	485,333
range	0 - 240,000	0 - 450,000	126,000 - 1,839,000
Grass-Cattle Sold Live	3,468	15,609	128,067
range	0 - 20,612	0 - 56,550	0 - 450,000
Feeds and Feeding	0	2,797	7,000
range	0 - 0	0 - 12,600	0 - 42,000
Pasture Management	3,234	0	20,333
range	0 - 44,000	0 - 0	0 - 67,000
Other Receipts	1,397	2,856	35,153
range	0 - 8,500	0 - 11,000	0 - 140,000
Total Receipts	60,839	177,462	675,887
range	8,000 - 248,500	47,528 - 450,000	256,120 - 1,916,904

Note: For the study, the "number of cattle harvested" represents all cattle sent to harvest throughout the 2022 calendar year. This included fat cattle (Fat cattle or finished cattle refer to cattle that have reached the desired weight and body condition for slaughter) and any cull cattle sent directly to harvest, with plans for the meat to return to the producer or go directly to consumers through third parties.

In 2022, the participating farms reported a total of $5,368,550 in harvest sales, making it the highest revenue source across all farm sizes. For both small and medium farms, almost 90% of their receipts came from harvests, whereas for large farms 71.8% of receipts were from harvested beef. Large farms reported that 19% of their receipts were derived from the sale of live cattle, while small farms reported less than 6% from live cattle sales. Additionally, small farms indicated that 5% of their receipts came from pasture management and sales, whereas the medium farms in this study did not report any receipts from pasture management sales.

Figure 2. Farm Receipts, percent of total receipts



Farm Business Factors

The farm's operating income was calculated by subtracting expenses from receipts. Please note that these costs and revenues do not include depreciation schedules or certain expenses that may be included or associated with other farm enterprises (such as oil usage). In addition, unpaid labor has been expensed although it is labor that was not paid. Producers should consult with a financial and tax expert to accurately understand and evaluate their grass-fed enterprise.

As shown in Table 3, on average, small farms lost $55,646 and medium farms lost $37,482. The average large farm had positive income of $19,908. In total, 22 grass-fed beef enterprises out of 31 had negative income, with small farms experiencing larger losses than medium farms. In 2022, 14% of small farms reported a positive income, compared to 45% of medium farms and 33% of large farms. Live cattle sales may have helped larger farms spread expenses over more revenues or find additional sales.

For the study, the "number of cattle harvested" represents all cattle sent to harvest throughout the 2022 calendar year. This included fat cattle (fat cattle or finished cattle refer to cattle that have reached the desired weight and body condition for slaughter) and any cull cattle sent directly to harvest, with plans for the meat to return to the producer or go directly to consumers through third parties. The farms in this study sold a total of 1,737 cattle for harvesting. An average of 14 were harvested by small farms and an average of 162 were harvested by large farms.

The "number of cattle sold, but not to harvest" includes any calves, weanlings, yearlings, fats, cows, or bulls sold to another farm and not directly to harvest. In this context, "fats" refers to finished cattle that have reached market weight and are ready for slaughter but were instead sold to another operation, such as a packer or feedlot, rather than being harvested directly by the farm. This distinction is important, as some farms specialize in raising feeders or stockers and may sell most of their animals before they reach finishing weight or before harvesting them themselves.

Table 3. Farm Business Factors

Business Factor	Small Farms	Medium Farms	Large Farms
Operating Income ($)	-55,646	-37,482	19,908
range	-185,720 - 7,746	-217,339 - 88,850	-606,461 - 1,034,349
Grass-Cattle on Farm (#)	37	151	558
range	15 - 59	82 - 227	340 - 791
Number of Cattle Harvested (#)	14	52	162
range	0 - 50	10 - 150	10 - 300
Total Acreage Owned and Leased (#)	134	396	1,274
range	39 - 280	136 - 720	460 - 2,596
Cost per Acre Owned and Leased ($)	870	543	515
range	413 - 2,725	193 - 2,446	292 - 1,765
Cost per Productive Acre ($)	1,158	578	626
range	522 - 3,375	197 - 1,532	348 - 3,804
Cost per Head on Farm ($)	3,160	1,423	1,175
range	1,282 - 6,491	798 - 2,427	796 - 2,596
Acres per Head on Farm (#)	2.73	2.62	2.28
range	1.73 - 7.37	0.60 - 5.22	0.90 - 3.46
Full-Time Equivalent Labor Paid and Unpaid (#)	1.86	2.18	5.08
range	1.00 - 3.50	1.00 - 5.50	1.50 - 9.00

Table 3 also shows economies of scale might be occurring on grass-fed beef farms in the Northeast. The average cost per head by farm size: small farms average $3,160 per head, medium farms average $1,423 per head, and large farms average $1,175 per head.

This study identified a total of 13,873 acres of land, either owned or leased. Large farms accounted for 55% of the total acreage, with an average of 1,274 acres per farm. In contrast, small farms owned or leased 14% of the total acreage, averaging 134 acres per farm.

Table 3 illustrates the cost per acre for different farm sizes. For small farms, the average cost per acre owned and leased is $870. Medium farms have an average cost per acre of $543. Large farms have an overall average of $515 per acre.

The cost per productive acre is calculated by dividing the expenses by the acres that are in production. Medium farms have a lower average cost per productive acre at $578. Large farms average $626 per productive acre, while small farms have the highest cost per productive acre at $1,158.

Table 3 illustrates the average acre per head of cattle. Small farms have an average of 2.73 acres to sustain one animal, while large farms have only 2.28 acres per head, and medium farms an average of 2.62 acres per head. Acres per head was calculated by dividing owned and rented acreage by the number of cattle on farm during the calendar year.

Cattle

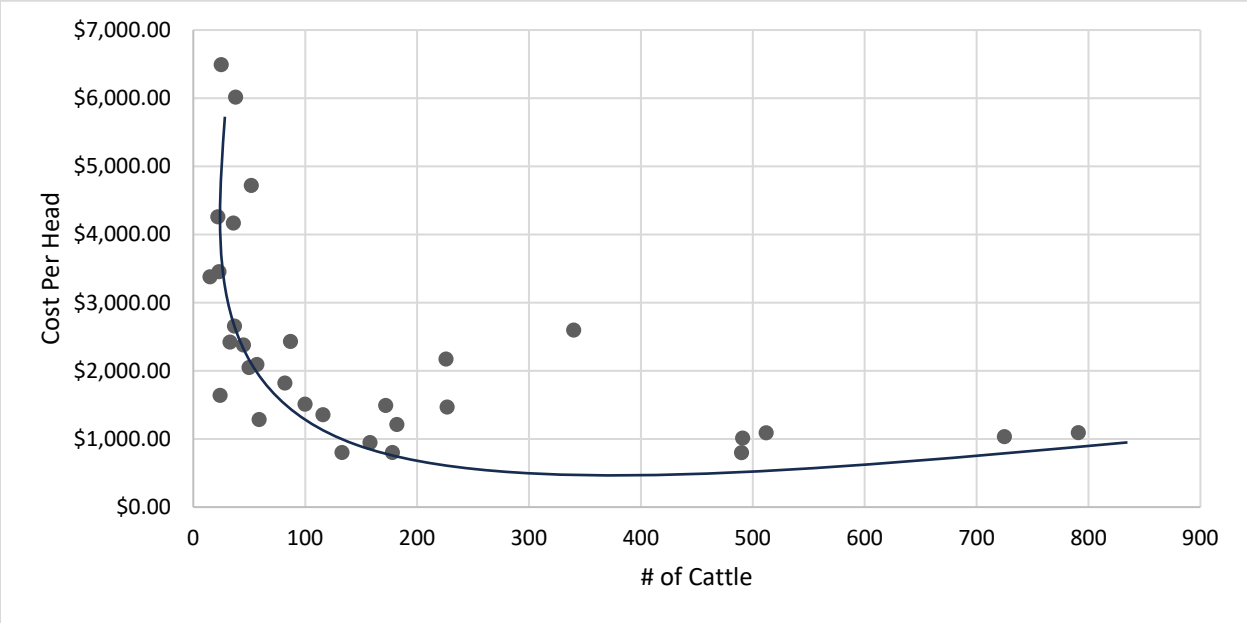
In 2022, the total beef cattle on participating farms was 5,526. Large farms, which represent 19% of the participating farms, account for 61% of these cattle. Small farms average 37 head per farm. In 2022, a total of 1,737 head of beef cattle were harvested across the participating farms, representing just over 31% of the inventory. Medium farms averaged 52 head harvested per farm, small farms averaged 14 head per farm, and large farms averaged 162 head per farm (Table 4).

Table 4. Cattle Numbers

		Small Farms	Medium Farms	Large Farms
2022 Grass-Cattle on Farm:	All	516	1,661	3,349
	Average	37	151	558
	Spread	(15-59)	(82-227)	(340-791)
2022 Cattle Harvested:	All	195	572	970
	Average	14	52	162
	Spread	(0-50)	(10-150)	(10-300)
2022 Cattle Sold not to slaughter:	All	16	80	252
	Average	1	7	42
	Spread	(0-15)	(0-30)	0-180

Figure 3 illustrates the cost per head relative to the number of cattle on the farms. The graph indicates that as the number of cattle increases, the cost per head decreases.

Figure 3. Cost per Head by Annual Cattle Inventory



Labor Efficiency

This report uses labor FTE to standardize the use of labor of all types across all farm sizes. Table 5 presents labor efficiency measures for the number of acres per FTE and the number of head per FTE. Large farms report the highest numbers for both head and acres per FTE, while small farms report the lowest.

Large farms reported the highest number of cattle per FTE, with 110 head of grass-fed cattle per FTE, as shown in Table 5. Large farms were the only group to report having paid full-time and

part-time labor across all farms. In contrast, small farms were the most likely to report using unpaid labor.

Full-time labor, whether paid or unpaid, is crucial for all sizes of grass-fed beef farms. This study reported a total of 58 full-time employees and an additional 47 part-time employees. Large farms averaged 3 full-time paid employees per farm. Medium farms averaged 0.6 full-time paid employees per farm, while small farms averaged 0.3 full-time paid employees per farm.

Table 5. Labor Efficiency

	Small Farms	Medium Farms	Large Farms
Average FTE per farm:	1.9	2.2	5.1
# Acres per FTE:	72	181	251
# Head per FTE:	20	69	110
Paid Labor (full-time and part-time):	0.6	0.9	4.3
Unpaid Paid Labor (full-time and part- time):	1.3	1.3	0.8

Beef Cut Prices

During the data collection process, beef cut prices and wholesale carcass prices were gathered from participating farms for the calendar year 2023. Although this study was focused on collecting financial data from 2022, the producers already had their 2023 meat prices available. Therefore, we used the 2023 numbers and those are the numbers reported. Table 6 lists the top 15 cuts alphabetically, while Table 7 breaks down the wholesale carcass prices to whole, half, and quarter carcasses. In this study, "wholesale" refers to when a producer sells the animal whole, half, or quarter to a consumer. The consumer pays a flat fee per pound of meat, which may include a mix of burger and steak in the same package. For the farms that reported beef cut prices, the weighted average prices are noted in Table 6, along with the lowest and highest prices.

Table 6. 2023 Beef Cut Prices

	Weighted Average	Low Price	High Price
Brisket	$13.35	$7.25	$29.00
Chuck Roast	$11.55	$6.29	$30.00
Flank Steak	$16.61	$8.99	$27.60
Ground Beef	$8.91	$6.00	$12.50
Hanger Steak	$18.44	$9.45	$25.00
Heart / Liver/ Tongue	$6.71	$2.99	$23.00
NY Strip	$20.45	$14.00	$28.00
Porterhouse	$21.70	$9.75	$29.00
Rib Eye Steak (Delmonico)	$22.28	$16.99	$32.20
Rib Roast (prime rib)	$24.64	$13.00	$109.00
Short Ribs	$9.67	$5.00	$24.00
Stew Beef	$9.96	$5.75	$16.00
T-bone	$20.74	$9.00	$30.00
Tenderloin Steak	$26.54	$19.00	$38.00
Top Round Roast	$11.28	$5.99	$20.70

For the farms that reported selling whole, half, or quarter carcasses, Table 7 lists the producers' wholesale prices, which are noted per pound of hanging weight. Among the participating farms, 50% include the costs of harvest, cut, and wrap in their per pound prices. Additionally, 13% of the farms only sell by the carcass and do not sell individual cuts of meat, while 20% only sell by the cut (wrapped) and do not sell by the carcass.

Table 7. 2023 Beef Carcass Prices Per Pound

	Weighted Average	Low Price	High Price
Whole Carcass	$5.72	$2.80	$15.87
Half Carcass	$6.47	$3.25	$15.87
Quarter Carcass	$6.57	$3.25	$15.87

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the current farm economics of the grass-fed beef industry in the Northeast. This project has compiled the most comprehensive economic dataset on grass-fed beef production in the region to date. The findings provide valuable insights into how Northeast producers might compete in broader markets, highlighting several regional advantages, including reliable access to water, high-quality grazing lands, proximity to consumers, and opportunities to market calves or feeders rather than finished cattle.

Data were collected from 31 farms, each operating a unique enterprise. Economic performance varied widely across operations, and while economies of scale were evident, with larger farms demonstrating greater efficiency in labor use, land utilization, and total expenses per head,

significant variation also existed within each size category. This diversity suggests that factors beyond scale, such as enterprise mix, market strategy, and labor structure, play important roles in determining viability. Importantly, more data are needed to determine whether farms are operating at a profit or loss and how financial performance changes over time.

Owner/operators play a central role in the functioning of beef farms in New York and New England. However, most are currently unpaid, which raises critical questions about the long-term financial viability of these operations and the sustainability of the regional industry. Reliance on unpaid family labor masks the true cost of production, makes profitability appear higher than it is, and can limit business growth, succession planning, and the ability of new entrants to compete. Yet producers remain deeply committed to grass-fed beef, motivated by values related to land stewardship, animal welfare, and local food systems. To support these values-driven enterprises, the industry may need new models of financial support, risk-sharing, and market development.

When asked why they choose to raise grass-fed beef, producers consistently cited ecological fit, animal health, lifestyle alignment, and personal fulfillment. Many operate grass-fed beef as one component of a diversified agricultural system, and several rely on off-farm income or retirement benefits to stabilize their finances. A number have also enrolled their land in permanent conservation easements, providing tax benefits, supporting long-term land access, and facilitating succession.

These motivations and business structures highlight two broader considerations for the future economic viability of the Northeast grass-fed beef sector. First, the industry must grapple with whether it can continue to rely on unpaid labor without compromising competitiveness. Under-accounting for labor can lead producers to underprice their product, unintentionally depressing market prices and disadvantaging more financially structured operations. Second, the prevalence of diversification suggests that grass-fed beef may be most viable when embedded within multi-enterprise or multi-income systems where labor, equipment, and capital costs are shared. Whether a standalone grass-fed enterprise can succeed at scale remains an open question requiring further study.

Together, these findings underscore the need for continued, structured data collection to support a more resilient and economically viable grass-fed beef industry in the Northeast. Longitudinal research, tracking annual changes in cattle numbers, labor, land use, market channels, and financial performance, would strengthen the evidence base available to producers and policymakers.

Future studies should prioritize more detailed data on production costs (fixed and variable), depreciation, labor allocation (paid and unpaid), marketing channels and prices, subsidies and loans, and profitability benchmarks. Capturing how farms allocate shared costs across enterprises, make marketing decisions, and evaluate financial risk would deepen understanding of the economics of small and mid-size beef operations in the region.

Collecting this level of detail will improve financial transparency, enable more accurate benchmarking, and enhance the ability to evaluate interventions aimed at reducing food loss or improving surplus utilization. These insights can inform more effective policy, investment, and technical assistance strategies, ultimately supporting a regional grass-fed beef sector that is both economically competitive and aligned with producer values.

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