



BOTTENS FAMILY FARM & GRATEFUL GRAZE

Illinois Grass-fed Value Chain Case Study: Production

Developed by Delta Institute and Pasture Project

Overview

Bottens Family Farm is a multigenerational, 2,000-acre farm owned and operated by Monte Bottens and his family in Cambridge, Illinois. Bottens Family Farm produces corn and soybeans with cover crop rotations and added livestock to their operation in 2016. They began grazing livestock on their farm to improve soil health. In early 2018, Bottens started a marketing platform, Grateful Graze, to increase direct-to-consumer sales.

Operation

In 2016, Monte Bottens began integrating livestock on his 2,000-acre farm to improve soil health. The farm now raises cattle, sheep, and poultry on 150 acres of diverse pasture. The cattle are grass-fed and finished on the farm and are never fed grain. Bottens has 130 head of cattle of various breeds. Some of his herd came from Gabe Brown in North Dakota, and his steers and heifers are from Mark Thomas in Oklahoma. Bottens does see better performance and increased average daily gains from cattle that are born on his farm. Bottens says they are planning on growing their herd as they improve their marketing plan and customer base. He explains that he has plenty of crop acres that could support additional cattle; he estimates up to 450 head. Of the land Bottens farms, he owns 50% and rents 50%.

Two years ago, Bottens started Grateful Graze, a marketing platform for their livestock. Grateful Graze is a website where customers buy meat online and can have it shipped directly to their home (within a 300-mile

radius of the farm) or can collect it at a pick-up location if they are local in Illinois. Bottens started Grateful Graze to capture all the value from direct-to-consumer sales. He couldn't afford to sell his meat wholesale due to the significant cost of raising grass-fed livestock, which is largely due to the high price of land. Most sales are to individual customers and while sales have increased, they are not yet where Bottens would like them to be. During his first year, Bottens sold \$150,000 in grass-fed beef and hopes to sell \$2,000,000 of product by the fifth year of Grateful Graze.

Motivation

Bottens did consider market trends when deciding to produce grass-fed beef. He observed that nation-wide grass-fed beef consumption trends were encouraging, but more regional trends, and Illinois specifically, were less so. Many consumers are skeptical about the health benefits but are concerned to some extent about animal welfare. Bottens says the trick is encouraging a consumer to transition to grass-fed. Once his customers try his products, they know the quality and taste are superior to what can be found in a grocery store.

While consumer demand was an important factor for Bottens, he incorporated livestock first and foremost for the soil health benefits. Bottens explains that his family has been practicing no-till on their farm for 22 years and started integrating cover crops five years ago. Bottens went to visit the successful farmer and grazer Gabe Brown in North Dakota and after touring Brown's operations, saw a successful path for himself in a diversified farming operation that included livestock.



Challenges and Barriers

Access to markets and a customer base were significant barriers to Bottens when he first started his livestock operation. He did not have any customers in the beginning, and they are still trying to grow their customer base online through social media platforms, farmers' markets, and farm tours. Bottens also mentions that lack of infrastructure on the production side is a challenge.

When he started, Bottens did not have fences, watering systems, barns, or hay equipment. Now he uses temporary fencing and has developed a mobile watering technique where he pumps water to the trough in the livestock paddocks. Bottens also noted that finding and hiring the right people to help with the operation requires time and careful consideration. He has good hires on the operations and production side of the business but continues to search for the right people to run marketing. Marketing is key to growing the business, says Bottens. He has tried a lot of strategies that did not work and has learned a lot about what it takes to run a successful marketing campaign, but it all takes time and effort.

Growth

When asked what the major bottleneck is to grow the grass-fed beef sector in Illinois, Bottens says, again, it's marketing. It's difficult to convince the consumer to pay twice what they're used to at the big box store for meat. He also says there needs to be an adjustment to the overall cost structure in grass-fed beef. It costs more for consumers to buy grass-fed beef because it

costs producers like Bottens more to produce it relative to conventional beef. Bottens explains that when volume increases, his labor costs and marketing costs per pound decrease. Prices self-regulate through volume, which is why it's hard to compete against big meat producers. When a large meat producer processes a cow, it costs around \$160 to process the whole animal, whereas it costs Bottens from \$800-\$1,050 per animal.

Bottens thinks more row crop farmers would add grass-fed beef production to their business if they felt there were yield gains with livestock integration. And, Bottens adds, stakeholders must find a way to make the transition easy for them. Integrating livestock into cropland has significantly more obstacles than integrating livestock into pasture ground. Bottens says crop insurance compatibility, marketing of wheat crops and animals, technical assistance, and more automated technology would all ease the transition for row crop farmers.

When looking at potential markets for increased growth and sales of grass-fed beef, Bottens says every farmer has a different strategy. Restaurants are a great market because they offer your farm free promotion, and Bottens knows some farms focus exclusively on the wholesale restaurant market for this reason. For Bottens, he plans on staying with direct-to-consumer sales through Grateful Graze.



Bottens knows Grateful Graze can grow his business and the sector in Illinois. He sees it as a way to bring livestock back to cropland and improve yield and soil quality. He wants Grateful Graze to help those farmers who raise livestock market their product. In the future, Bottens intends on working with existing corn and soybean farmers who are losing money producing row crops and offer them marketing support if they transition to grass-fed/finished livestock production. Bottens would buy the product from the farmer at live weight, and, based on product sold, the farmer would receive a percentage back at the end of the year. Bottens wants to focus on farmers who cultivate at least 2,000 acres or more to have an impact at scale. He explains that one of the issues he sees with regenerative agriculture is that it's primarily practiced on a small scale, and sees increased potential with larger, aggregated systems.



Monte and Robyn Botten with herd dog Grazer!