

## Animal Management and Animal Welfare at the Snake River Farm PART 7

This letter is part of a series.

### **This letter is about cattle.**

We sell grass-fed beef.

Cattle are sociable, ruminating, prey animals.

Taxonomically, cattle are in the same "Family," (bovidae), as bison, sheep, goats and antelope.

Obviously, cattle are more like bison, than they are like sheep.

Cattle are in the same "Order," (artiodactyla), as pigs and horses, because they walk on their toes.

Ruminating means that they have complex stomachs which allow them to digest fibrous plant material.

That is a great advantage; cattle can live on fibrous plants that would not sustain us.

### **We keep only a few beef animals through the winter.**

All our land is grazed. We must purchase winter hay.

Hay for the bison, beef and horse herds is our single greatest expense.

Because of that, we minimize the number of animals we keep through the winter.

As I write this letter, it is March, and there are six beef animals on the farm.

By early summer, we will have one hundred animals grazing 300 acres of pasture.



Each spring I personally select the calves and yearlings that we will raise for you.

Those animals come from small farms in central Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

I select animals that will grow well through the summer and become grass finished beef by fall.

Finished means large enough, mature enough, and fat enough to be great grass-fed meat.

Most of the beef animals are sold to you by the ¼ for cuts. I buy only heifers for that purpose.

Heifers finish younger and smaller than steers.

The fact that heifers finish younger is important. The Minnesota grazing season is bountiful but short. Our beef animals must be ready for harvest by December at the latest.

Heifers finish smaller than steers and that is also important. Most of our customers want a smaller ¼ of beef.

### **Three hundred acres of pasture, over 60 paddocks.**

Snake River Farm is the main farm. It has over two hundred acres of pasture.

Sandhill Farm has 70 acres of pasture.

Five Straw Farm has more than 20 acres of grazing land.

Each farm is fenced and watered for rotational grazing.

There are more than 60 separate paddocks or pastures on the three farms.

There will be a herd on each farm, from the start of the grazing season until late fall.

### **Lead cows welcome the new heifers.**

The six beef animals that are here now are the welcoming animals for each farm.

Having mature animals to greet the new arrivals is incredibly helpful. When the animals arrive, they are stressed.

They have been corralled, loaded, and hauled from the farm of their birth.

Sometimes they arrive with a herd



mate or two, but often they are with complete strangers.

It is important to calm the new animals as soon as possible.

Young animals become ill quickly when under stress.

This is where the welcoming animals come in.

The senior animals that we overwinter are selected to be good leaders and matriarchs.

They are calm. They know the pastures. They know us.

One or more of the overwintered animals will be on each farm to welcome the new arrivals.

That works miraculously well.

Young animals look for leadership. The heifers find that most readily in a cow.

Animals quickly learn from their leaders.

The cow is calm and that relaxes the new arrivals.

The cow sets the schedule. She leads the way to food and water.

I select a leader who is a superior grazer. From her the heifers learn what to eat, when to eat it and how much to eat. Plants that are considered toxic are often medicinal in the correct dosage.

The lead cow is trained to come when I call. When she comes, the herd will follow her.

That means within a day of arrival I can move the herd to fresh pastures.

Perhaps most important, the heifers see that the cow is not afraid of me. I can walk to the cow and touch her.

That has a great effect on the new animals, some of whom were mishandled in the past.

### **Our cattle do not have horns.**

Both male and female cattle naturally have horns. That includes all varieties both dairy and beef.

Horns can be problem, however. They are dangerous to farmers and to other cattle.

Horns are managed in two basic ways.

Some breeds have been selectively bred to be hornless. For example, Angus cattle, male and female, black or red are hornless. Farmers called such cattle naturally polled.

Virtually all Holsteins, the black and white dairy cattle, have horns naturally. Nevertheless, very few adult Holsteins have horns. Their horns are removed when young. That is done by cutting, burning with a special hot iron or by caustic chemical. Frankly, there is no delicate way to dehorn.

Most of the calves we raise are naturally polled. I do not buy horned animals. An animal with horns will quickly learn she has an advantage and abuse her herd mates.

Besides, as Gail says, farming buffalo with horns is exciting enough.

### **Proper grazing improves prairies, woodlands, wet meadows and stream banks.**

Grass farmers know that grazing is a powerful tool for improving prairies and pasturelands. In many areas people are learning that grazing is the critical element in both grassland and savannah management.

Burning has a place, but burning should be used much less frequently than has been taught.

Cattle and bison can do an excellent job of improving woodlands.

For example, Buckthorn is an invasive bush in many forests. It grows here. It is an attractive plant that provides winter berries for birds.

On our farms, the grazing animals keep



Buckthorn in check. The cattle walk the plants down by wedging the thin trunk between their front legs. They eat the leaves and berries as they move ahead.

Buckthorn is not a problem in our woodlands, nor are other brushy plants.

Properly timed grazing is good for wet meadows and stream banks. It has been erroneously taught that cattle should be permanently fenced away from streams. In some situations that may be true but for most streams that is poor management. Prolonged “rest” is as great a problem as overgrazing. Ungrazed stream banks often go to brush and trees. Then total shading produces a soft unstable bank, subject to erosion.

Managed grazing that mimics natural herd movements can maintain healthy stream banks.

### **It would be an advantage to graze the bison and cattle herds together.**

I have tried that for four years and the results have been mixed.

It would be good to pasture them together to form a larger herd of grazers.

It may be counterintuitive, but the ideal grazing situation is large numbers of animals that eat or trample everything in a few hours. Then move on to let the land rest for months.

Some farmers, mob graze small paddocks with enormous numbers of animals. They get a wonderful plant and soil response.

The opposite extreme, continuous grazing is quite destructive to plants and soils. Continuous grazing is common. Many people with small numbers of horses or cattle continuously graze. You can watch the pasture degrade, year after year.

Unfortunately, one of the bison cows is not tolerant of the beef heifers. Last summer she injured three heifers in three days. I separated the herds. The heifers recovered although one limped for a month. Perhaps I can solve the problem by converting the ornery cow to hamburger.

**Space, social order and choices.**

Cattle, like most animals establish a hierarchy, or pecking order. To do that they need adequate space. Our herds have enough space to arrange themselves socially, at all times. A stable social order means low stress. Adequate space also means they never have to stand in mud or manure. They can always find comfortable places to rest.

They have trees for shade on hot summer days. At times, the animals enjoy using those same trees as “rubs.”

Our pastures have a great variety of grasses, forbs and shrubs. The animals are free to make grazing and browsing choices to maintain good health.



**Pasture harvesting eliminates stress.**

We pasture harvest both beef and bison. This eliminates the high stress activities of corralling, loading, unloading and then dying in a strange place.

Through pasture harvest, the animals do not anticipate, nor are they aware of their death.

No fear, no pain, no stress.

Some of you have asked for more about harvesting. I will write a separate letter on that topic.

**Our cattle get daily care.**

The animals are observed every day. They have frequent human contact. We walk among them several times a week to see that they are well but also to teach them to be calm when we are with them.

Spending time with the animals, observing them closely and seeing that their needs are met is fundamental to animal husbandry.

It is central to being a farmer.

Best regards.

Tom