

A BASELINE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

John Cox has always enjoyed tinkering with stuff. Before he began farming in Iowa in 2014, he worked as an automotive engineer. After reading books on farming and natural systems he became more interested in tinkering with the many variables that go into raising ecological food than those needed in manufacturing a car. In 2016, when the deal he had in Iowa to graze ruminants on another farmer's land fell through, John moved his herd to Dexter, Michigan and started Baseline Farm.

The farm gets its name because it is across the street from Base Line Lake. But John has found a new meaning in his strive to be a “baseline for sustainability.” The phrase that has recently become popular to describe the practices John uses on his grass-fed beef farm is “regenerative agriculture.” Before this buzzword John called it ecological farming, “to capture that other natural systems are a part of this farming.” John’s holistic approach all starts with growing good grass, stating, “That ties into a lot of the other ecological aspects. If you have really healthy grass growing, then you’re sequestering more carbon...And the way I’ve found to do that is by having a really robust rotation.”

Baseline farm is 100% grass-fed, meaning the cows eat standing forage for the entire outdoor growing season, and are fed hay during the winter. By frequently rotating his cows from pasture to pasture and allowing for sufficient rest for grass to regrow, John ensures a balanced diet for his cows and cycles nutrients through the system to build the health of the soils. As John points out, “anybody that’s farming now—we’re not plowing up the virgin prairie, everything has been farmed for the last 100 years or more, and that definitely takes a toll on all the aspects of the soil--mineral-wise, and biology-wise.” He strives to get to a point with his operation where even fewer external inputs are needed, but even the hay that he buys introduces nutrients and organic matter into the system.

Baseline Farm is about as close to being organic as a beef farm can be without going through the hoops to become certified. John says the biggest hurdle to becoming certified organic for a beef farmer is finding certified organic hay, which is more expensive and often more difficult to find than other sources of hay. By law, all the food that a certified organic cow eats also has to be certified organic and having hay and pasture production certified organic is an expense and burden many farmers are not able to take on. Another barrier to organic meat production is finding an organic processor. There are few certified organic meat processors in the state, and the ones that offer organic processing do non-organic processing as well.

In addition to the ecological benefits of rotational grazing, there is also a benefit to the quality of the product in terms of flavor and health. As he points out the cows on his farm don’t just eat grass, they graze legumes, alfalfa, clover, and a variety of weeds. The various compounds and nutrients from this balanced diet, results in more flavorful and likely healthier beef, compared to beef raised on a plain-calorie, feed-lot diet of corn and soy bi-products. Baseline Farm is actually involved in a study that the Bionutrient Food Association is conducting to define nutrient-density in beef. John submitted ribeye steaks (an expensive cut!) for analysis.

When John moved his herd from Iowa to Michigan, he had 20 cattle and roughly 30 sheep. He no longer raises sheep, but he now has well over 100 cattle. John's herd is a composite of various breeds, including heritage breeds such as Ancient White Park, Galloway, Scottish Highland, and even Corriente, a Spanish, land-race breed that is mostly raised today for sport at rodeos. By selectively breeding, John is hoping to create a regionally adapted herd.

Baseline Farm started selling at Ann Arbor Farmers Market in 2017, but the first few years were challenging for John. After a short break from Ann Arbor Market, once he was confident with the supply and quality of his product, John has been a regular vendor since 2019. You can find John selling his delicious and nutritious, grass-fed beef at every Saturday market. You can also find Baseline products at Argus Farm Stop, White Lotus Farm, or you can buy a whole, half, or quarter animal directly from John at baselinefarm.com.