

## Organic Beef Scorecard Scoring Criteria

*The Organic Beef Scorecard is based on volunteer surveys completed by brands. This information is supplemented by our own independent investigation and information gleaned through third-party labels and trusted sources. See below for the details, then read the rest of our report: Value Meal: [The Benefits of Organic Beef Production](#).*

### Transparency and Disclosure

Most producers and brands that voluntarily participated in this survey received a high score for transparency and disclosure. Cornucopia deducted some points for leaving questions blank, for omitting information, or for declining an on-farm site visit. Brands that do not participate in our survey can receive some points in this section if they are fully transparent with a trusted third-party reviewer or if reliable information is found by our investigators.

Transparency and Disclosure	
100	Full and open disclosure
20-90	Answered some percentage of questions and/or verified information in background investigations from outside sources such as third-party labels
20-50	Some information confirmed via trusted outside sources
0	No response on survey and/or no reliable information found via background investigations

### Ownership History

Cornucopia considered each brand's ownership structure and history, which is one measure of the validity of marketing claims. Farmers or ranchers who live and direct market on their farmsteads will have more control over supply than corporate buyers coordinating purchasing from dozens or hundreds of individual farms. Some brands, including private label brands marketed by grocery stores, blindly accept the claims of their beef suppliers or finished products.

Ownership History	
100	Farmstead (owned and operated by farm family)
80-90	Farmer-owned cooperative (or similar) — close ties/partnership with producers who are also involved in management decisions
80-90	Family-owned business or closely held business — close ties/partnership with producers who are closely involved in management decisions

70	Corporate/investor owned and/or independent subsidiaries that have deep roots/ties with their suppliers, but less input or understanding of day-to-day practices
40-60	Investor-owned corporations and similar with no contact or relationship with suppliers
0-40	Any ownership structure with history as a “bad actor” or investor-owned businesses with a questionable track record
0	No response on survey and/or no reliable information found with background investigations

**Beef Supply**

In general, a brand that sources beef from only one farm (or is a single-source farmstead ranch or farm) will be able to detail how they steward the land and animals. Brands that source beef from multiple operations tend to have less control and knowledge of production.

Cornucopia finds that brands with strong oversight of their beef quality are more likely to produce authentic organic products. Hands-on owners who either participate in the beef production or have a strong review process and internal standards garner a higher rating.

<b>Beef Supply</b>	
100	Confirmed single ranch/farmstead
70-90	Brand sources meat from multiple sources in one geographic location with close oversight (score depends on level of oversight)
50	Brand appears to source beef domestically from multiple suppliers based on independent investigation, but unable to confirm details
0-40	Brand supplied by beef of unclear origin; may not have responded to investigation and little info was found as to sourcing

**Commitment to Organics**

Brands that focus exclusively on certified organic production are generally more dedicated to organic integrity. Cornucopia asks for this information to determine a brand’s commitment to organics. *Split operations* must juggle priorities in order to keep organic and conventional products separate (as is required by the organic standards).

For beef production, the question of commitment is somewhat more complicated than other

categories. Consumer demand for 100% grass-fed beef is high, creating a range of marketplace alternatives to conventional feedlot raised beef.

Commitment to Organics	
100	100% organic production (brand does not market conventional)
80-90	Brand markets both organic and conventional beef products but conventional beef is pasture based (score depends on level of segregation)
40-50	Markets both conventional and organic with good segregation at processing level as required by minimum organic standards but mixed organic-conventional production on single properties
0	No response on survey and/or no reliable information found with background investigations

### Organic Certifier

Cornucopia lists the brand’s organic certifier, but this does not impact the score. For more information on how domestic organic certifiers stack up, check out our [certifier guide](#).

### Other Labels and Standards

The USDA organic label is the only federal label that verifies how a product was made. While the USDA organic label is an important signifier, some third-party labels provide further useful information about a product. This portion of our rating system is based on the standards and oversight of a select group of third-party labels. Cornucopia has researched the standards and enforcement of these labels and believes they add something meaningful above and beyond organic certification.

The Regenerative Organic Certified label stipulates extremely high-bar standards for beef producers; stay tuned for producers certified by this newcomer to the third-party labeling category.

Other Labels and Standards	
100	Animal Welfare Approved, Biodynamic Certified (Demeter Association), Real Organic Project, Regenerative Organic Certified
90	Certified Naturally Grown

80	Salmon Safe, Wildlife Friendly, Predator Friendly, 100% Grassfed Certification
60	Certified Humane (HFAC), Food Alliance Certified, American Grassfed Certified
40	American Humane Certified (AHA), Global Animal Partnership, Non-GMO Project verified
Variable	Other label (see details in text)
0	None

## Beef Finishing

The highest scoring in this category goes to brands that do not confine cattle to feedlots to *finish them* (prepare them for slaughter) and produce all or the majority of their feed on-site or locally. High scoring beef brands emphasize the natural diet of cattle in their finishing and are primarily or entirely grass-based.

Organic regulations require a minimum grazing period of 120 days, as well as *access* to pasture for each day the finishing period falls within the normal grazing period for the region. There is no minimum amount of forage or pasture organic cattle must eat during the finishing period; the animal may see green for just a few minutes. And for industrial producers who finish cattle in the high heat of summer, “access to pasture” doesn’t apply because grazing is over. In both those scenarios, the entire finishing period can be spent in feedlots similar to conventional beef, where cattle receive most of their calories from concentrated feed, albeit certified organic feed.

Beef Finishing	
100	100% grass fed and finished with independent verification of practices. Finished with genuine pasture access, meaning the pasture provides some nutrition
90-100	Finished on pasture or otherwise not on a feedlot, with other feed grown on site
50-80	Finished with access to pasture with confirmed locally sourced inputs of grain, legumes, or other concentrates (score depends on inputs and care of pasture).
50	Finished in feedlot with inputs produced locally or on-site. May not have access to pasture if finished outside the grazing season.
40	The brand probably meets minimum organic standards for finishing, with organic feed, but likely/may be finished on a feedlot.
0	No answer, cannot verify compliance

## Pasture and Grazing Management

This rating is based on the following criteria: a) policies for using and protecting pasture above and beyond USDA regulations, especially during finishing, (b) enforcement/oversight, (c) amount of acreage available per head on the brand’s largest farms (stocking density), (d) average days cattle are on pasture per year, (e) permissible exemptions, and (f) impacts on the pasture in question (i.e., evidence of overgrazing or poor management).

Quality of grazing depends heavily on the location and quality of pasture available to an individual brand. For those brands that get beef from multiple suppliers, only their *largest* suppliers will be accounted for in this scoring mechanism.

<b>Pasture and Grazing Management</b>	
100	Cattle are grazed with special attention to improving and maintaining the natural resources of the operation, typically via practices like rotational grazing and the monitoring of vegetation cover and without evidence of misuse
50-90	Makes some efforts to manage environmental sustainability through management practices
40	Likely meeting minimum organic requirements
0	No answer, cannot verify compliance
0-100	Extra credit for outstanding and unusual management practices (see notes on individual brand).

### **Environmental Stewardship**

The highest rated brands produce beef with little to no negative impact on the surrounding environment and take extra steps to be good land stewards. Raising beef is potentially harmful to the environment, and this extra care to provide environmental benefits is a standout even in the organic industry.

Best practices include monitoring native species, water quality, runoff, and soil quality, as well as keeping cattle out of sensitive riparian habitats. Grazing cattle on public lands unsuited to cattle is a red flag.

<b>Environmental Stewardship</b>	
100	Brand closely monitors and manages for the health of the soil, native species, water quality, biodiversity, and other environmental benchmarks.

50-90	Brand makes some efforts to manage environmental sustainably (score dependent on specific actions)
40	Investigation shows likely meeting minimum organic requirements
0	No answer, cannot verify quality of compliance
0-100	Extra credit for practices that go above and beyond (see notes on individual brand)

### Feed Sourcing

Widespread grain fraud has impacted the organic farming community for more than a decade. Concerns relating to the international grain trade reached a fever pitch in 2017 after exposés from investigative reporters and [investigations by Cornucopia](#) pointed to an influx of cheap, imported “organic” grain of questionable legitimacy. This has pervasive effects on organic livestock operations, including beef that is finished on grain rations.

Sourcing feed locally or growing feed on-farm supports local economies and increases the likelihood that the feed is of high organic quality.

<b>Feed Sourcing</b>	
100	Brand produces all feed “on site” (minus supplements) including pasture, hay, and concentrated feed (like grain)
50-90	Brand makes some efforts to procure domestic-only feed. More points given for those that source from neighboring farms or mills that source locally or % of feed produced on site
40	Investigation shows likely meeting minimum organic requirements (all feed is certified organic)
0	No answer, cannot verify quality of compliance

### Cull and Death Rates

Rating is based on the health and longevity of a farm’s cattle, taking into account the farm’s death and cull rate. A high death rate can be an indicator of poor herd health, high levels of predation, or other concerns for animal welfare.

<b>Cull and Death Rates</b>	
100	Under 5% annually

80	Under 10% annually
15-60	10% or more annually
0	Do not know or didn't answer

## Oversight

The rating for “oversight” is entirely informed by how often brand representatives see and experience the land and livestock in question. This includes where the brand sources their young cattle (stockers).

Highest scores go to farms and ranches with closed herds (where cattle spend their whole life cycle on-site). Mid-level scores go to brands that buy confirmed organic stock elsewhere.

Oversight	
100	Farmstead or ranch owner (and/or management) works on site and sees cattle daily and has a closed herd
70-80	Cooperative or business that sets standards and has a staff that visits suppliers regularly (or similar situation). Points added for closed herds or herds derived locally from organic cattle
15-60	Brand representatives visit a minimum of once annually
50	Depends solely on trusted third party for supervision (this includes USDA organic inspections)
0	Do not know or didn't answer