AS: Hi I'm Adam Saad and I'm joined today by..

DT: Danny Tomes...

AS: and we're interviewing John Berger. First of all I would like to thank you for taking time for--to interview and first off uhh how about a brief introduction as to who you are and what you do here on your farm?

JB: All right. As you said, my name's Jonathan Berger. Um, we call this Green Vista Farm. We are a relatively smaller operation in the overall scheme of agriculture but probably one of the bigger grass-fed producers at least in this part of the state. We, we raise and market 100% grass fed beef. Um, some pastured poultry and a little bit of pastured pork.

Um, we have 140 acres on the home farm with currently three additional leases for a total of, actually four, a total of 340-50 acres--I'm not quite sure and about between 80 and 90 percent of that has a fence around it cuz our goal is to put the animals on to pasture as much as possible and then Uh, we harvest some feed of course for the non-green season as we call it.

Our history, I if you want a little bit of that, I guess would be: I graduated from Ohio State University in 1982 with a degree in Dairy Science. My wife the same year with a degree in Egg Economics. Came home to an existing dairy farm and through the course of, ya know, several years, we dairied, went into a partnership, dairied and about fifteen years ago we got out of the dairy business, but we've retained our roots in agricultural activities and some off-farm income subsidizing looking for ways to maximize what we could do on our home farm and through the course of reading other jobs kind of led me to what we're doing now in the grass-fed beef business with an emphasize on as natural a product and what we consider a clean a product as we can with the no use, no use of hormones, chemicals, limited antibiotics, no routine antibiotics at all and that type of thing. We're, we're looking for a high quality, healthy and very tasty product. So, that's what we do right now.
DT: So why did you make the switch from dairy farm to a beef farm?

JB: Um, that was gradual. It wasn't really a jump from one to the other, but when I became somewhat, I don't know if you'd say disenchanted with dairy--a lot of work and I didn't mind it at the time as long as there are some rewards for being a dairyman. A lot of hours you spend a lot of time nodding off during the day because your hours run so long. And that's okay as long as you like the lifestyle, your family enjoys it. But what I found with time, I was not thinking that as we went on that it was something my family would continue to enjoy.

There's an increasingly tight budget at times in the dairy business. Uh, it fluctuates year to year, but we would go through some pretty tight times even though we had what we considered or what seemed to be one of the more efficient and productive farms. Um, there's always that diminishing return per unit in dairy cows. You can say it’s either per cow or per how many pounds of milk produced. So there's a constant stress to increase your numbers to maintain the same standard of living. Uh, we liked working with the cows, being a part of the cropping process and the more you grow that, you have to start looking at becoming a manager rather than a farmer and I guess it was that impetus that got me to thinking, about maybe this isn't, ya know, where we wanted to be so when we got out of that it was, ya know, I did other things on the farm. Raised some heifers, contract-raised heifers, and always, like I said, looking at ways to increase the value of the crop.

So, we, we certified organic, um, looked at how that would work, and then the more we, the more we got into that, the more we realized that animals had to be a focal point of a sustainable agricultural, organic operation. So, we took that to the full extent essentially and now we're to a point where we run all the feed through the animals that we produce and we weren't looking to do anything in particular but it led me to the grass-fed beef...seeing that there was at the time what seemed to be an obvious growth in that area and after studying it, looking at the health benefits, ya know, uh, and all the aspects of it, it was just, it was kind of an easy fit because I liked cattle, but I wasn't ready to milk cows again, so that's the road we went down.

AS: Okay, so you mentioned organic and your farm is not certified organic, correct?

JB: Correct.

AS: And could you tell us why you chose not to be certified?

JB: Well, um, in actuality we, we did go through the certification process, the three years of um essentially not doing the prohibited activities as far as use of certain products and what not. Um, then when we got to the point where we decided it wasn't critical--we'd developed a market for our grass-fed beef--um, we had fees for certification, we had record keeping for certification, we had an inspection for certification and those inspections are actually conducted by, um, I don’t know if you'd call them, they're not federal employees, they're groups that are certified by the federal government to implement the rules and regulations of the national organic program.
So there was some leeway in what they could have you do and not do and what I found was, uh, some and this isn't completely what caused me to quit, but there was discrepancies in what different inspectors expected of you. Um, ya know what kind of testing you had to do, uh, like the first inspector we had, he had me testing water, which I can understand, but he even wanted me testing the cricks and I'm thinking, well, the cows drink out of mud puddles, ya know, do you want me testing it all? So, the second year, I questioned what exactly are we looking for because we have levels of substances in the water for human consumption, but do we really have that for the animals? And they essentially said "No. So, we're not going to require you to test the water."

Well, I had already spent, ya know, close to 300 more dollars the first year testing my water and I thought well, that's nice, it didn't really mean anything. And um, just little things like that. They were looking at coming out now with some rules with good intentions, but without a complete knowledge of how the animal system works. It was going to create some, some lack of efficiency, um, things like that that would put additional, ya know, economic strain on what I was doing along with the fees, along with the increased cost for organic certified processing which most of the time the customer didn't require, um, did kind of a poll of our customers and once they were comfortable with us and knew what we were doing, it wasn't nearly as important because most all of our sales are what I would call a face-to-face. I would either talk to the customer, emailed with them, ya know, told them about our farm, some of them visit the farm, and so they're very aware with how our operation works, so to them the certification stamp, basically your, your ability to use the organic stamp at that point was not a critical factor.

So, with no intent of changing a lot of the way we did things, we decided to let the organic certification essentially lapse, and that's, so that's what we did. I think it's, I think it's a great program for, I mean, when I buy fruits and vegetables and I go to the store, don't know, ya know, everybody who produced all these, I do look for the organic stamp because I think we're going down a dangerous road of genetically modified organisms being introduced into plants that come out with the desired effect but without full knowledge of what else happens, um, ya know, essentially the BT crops for instance are, ya know, creating an insecticide within the plant. Does the job, ya know, kills the or--ya know inhibits what they want it to, but what does it do at a cellular level in the body, ya know, once we consume it, ya know. We don't know. The same with insecticides used in the field. If you look at the spring of say insecticides, what percentage of that hits the intended host if you call it a host, I guess, or the intended target, ya know, whatever percentage that is, the vast majority of it just goes on to crops and ground with sure it's only, its half-life is such-and-such, ya know, we get this feel that it's non, that it's inert after a time but we're not getting the whole story I'm convinced.

Ya know money is the driver and uh when big corporations and government become as blended as they have, ya know, I just don't trust those things, so the organic program, I think's a good program. It's not perfect, nothing is, but nevertheless it was not something we felt was required for what we did and it's proven to be true that there's no, there's no slow-down in what we're doing, so that's kinda my A-Z on it. [everyone laughs]

DT: So how do you balance farming and a sustainable manag...errr, a sustainable manner with business management?
JB: Hmmm. Well, [laughs], I guess that’s, that was one of the trepidations I had when I got into it. I do not, I'm not technologically adept, um, I'm not a salesman personality, I'm not a bookkeeper. Um, I have what I consider a better than average knowledge of plant and animal physiology, agronomy, and those kinds of things, so I think my fears on a production level, umm, ya know, I was able to work with because I knew how to address them. As far as the rest of it goes, I did what I think anybody needs to to, and go to or lean on people that can set you up so that you can work in an environment that you're not comfortable in.

Um, ya know my son and wife set up an Excel spreadsheet for customer things. My, my nephew did a website for us. Um, ya know, things like that that they knew how to do, were good at, I relied on them to do and then I just made myself disciplined enough to work within that system as far as keeping track of customers as best I can. Ya know, the face-to-face marketing was not a big issue. We enjoy going to market, umm, I can talk to people very easily about what I do because I'm, I'm comfortable with it.

Um, I think every aspect of what we do is, is what we want it to be, so they can ask me anything they want, and I have nothing to hide there. Um, and I think we have a good rapport with our customers. Our product seems to be very well received, so, ya know, we get a return of customers. Um, and then ya know our, our marketing system um, through the advent of high-speed internet, um, and other media, I mean, ya know, documentaries that have come out. We've kind of hit a sweet spot in that, so the customers, ya know, a little bit by luck you might say that we got in this when we did have, have come I think relatively easily. Um, based on our growth because I didn't do anything, anything special that way, but we've been able to touch base with a lot of them in, in many avenues.

Ya know, I didn't put all of the eggs in one basket I guess and it just seems to have worked, and so I guess through, through the use of like say other people's talents it's kinda made it happen. And, and I can't, I'd be remiss if I didn't say that, ya know, not only on the production end, but when we look for who we're going to have as a final processor, they've created a product that is very appealing, ya know, retail ready, uh, always good reports back on how that's part of it, so ya know, that is, that's the final step and it's a critical part of it, along with the beginning of ya know, sourcing the right kind of animals and all that, so it's, it's just kind of fallen together--if that answers the question.

AS & DT: Yeah

DT: So are you the only grass-fed beef farmer located in Wayne County, Ohio?

JB: No, no.

DT: How many other farms are there?

JB: Uhhhhm, well once again I guess, ya know, the beef business of course it's a big business, but when you look at it when you talk about averages or this or that I think the average size beef farm in Ohio is somewhere between 12-15 cows so,

DT: Small.
JB: It's, it's, yeah, relatively, ya know, a very small thing. So, to say, well ya know, how many beef farmers do ya know, I know a few period, but there are way more out there. I mean if I were to say in Wayne County who I could count on my hands that produce grass-fed beef, I might come up with two or three that I know of, but once again, I think, ya know, the next only other one that I can think of with any size maybe did between 15 and 20 this year, so there, it's, it's a kind of a thing that you can increase on scale without a lot of increase in your ability, but the resource base, ya know, it's like, it's like a guy that has 400 acres of cropped land in Wayne County would like to go to 800. Well it's hard to do. I mean crop lands tied up and where we're at we're basically in a situation in a lot of terms where we would have to compete with what would have been recently very high crop prices, ya know, so people aren't interested. So what I have to do is seek out umm I guess more obscure type landscapes that are rolling and harder to work with for crop farmers, maybe have old fences in them that we can...we can work with. Umm, so it's...it's not something that comes easily um, ya know, you can't just step into it and step back out of it. So I don't...I don't know a lot of producers to be quite honest in Wayne County.

AS: Ok, and to give the listeners kind of as reference point, how many cattle did you do this year?

JB: Um, by the end of 2011 we'll have slaughtered close to 100.

AS: So that's about double what the second most ya know of, at least?

JB: Uhh…

AS: For the year?

JB: well, four times, maybe [laughs]

AS: Ok...

JB: But maybe, ya know, there is somebody out there I just don't know about but, ya know, we get calls from anywhere from Columbus clear up through northern Ohio. So obviously they've checked closer sources and there isn't a lot there, umm and or if they are it are…it's uhh marketed already. Um, ya know, I think a lot of people know small producers of beef but not 100% grass-fed and I think a lot of people like say looking at, ya know, publicity coming out... that's what they are after and uhhm, ya know, a lot of people say it's grass fed but I finish it on corn and that's not what people are looking for so there's a lot of those around ya know, but it's…it's not market it's really hot I guess you might say. So…

DT: In terms of just uhh as, as a business model in terms of your output um it's relatively small in comparison to like say feed lots and out west um, but this is far more sustainable so in your opinion how--what are the benefits of doing sustainable in terms of its output?

JB: Well, I guess you can look at, look at every aspect of it, and I think I've discussed this in the past, umm, some of the things that led me to what I'm doing were working in the slow-water conservation business and seeing how hard it is for a row-cropping farm, or row-cropping situation to maintain soil
quality. Umm, it's always a matter of loss of topsoil and it's just a matter of minimizing it. So, when you look at that, um, well-managed pasture and grassland and even hay land for that matter, um, is the best thing we can do. So, ya know, looking at that and then looking at how the ruminant animal functions and what is the best situation for it.

Uh, ya know, we've, we've produced, er, we produced a crop on the grassland that, that is by far the best thing that can happen to a ruminant. Um, now monogastricks--pigs, chickens, whatever--that's, that's a little different but when we're looking at ya know, a four stomach ruminant, uh, grass is, ya know,--and I can argue this point with anybody--grass or forage is the best thing for it, so we take what we consider the best way to manage the land, we take what we consider that product and is the best thing for the animal that is our primary function, and then, ya know, the research coming out, out of what grass-fed beef qualities are that are, ya know, as, as science checks farther and farther into things and these are things that people can argue back and forth, but suffice it to say it's at least as good a product, and, and I will, ya know, we're convinced it's much more than that, um, than a, than a corn-based diet animal.

Um, now, people will s-, ya know, I get calls from people say, ya know I want this but I'm not willing to give up taste, texture, tenderness and all that. Um, by and large they're all surprised because of how, ya know, that it's comparably tender, it invariably the response is that they like the taste better, and so as long as it's finished properly on quality grasses, umm, it's, it's a very management intensive because every day you have to reassess what you're doing. Um, you can't just formulate a ration, run it in a bunk, make sure the bunks been cleaned out, if the weather's hot, refill with fresh feed, it's, it's a little more in-depth than that. So, it takes, it takes a different management scheme, but we, when things come together, um, ya know, it's, it's really a very good product and the sustainability of it, um, an animal will return whatever 90 percent of the nutrients back to the soil on it's own.

Um, ya know, when we're grazing animals, which we have them on pasture almost all year, um, and we, we take, say we've, in the grazing season it's nothing but moving fence and they return it all right back to- -we have water lines laid out. In, in the off-season it's forage that we've harvested and we're feeding it back out on to where the animals are eating. Now, you take that in, in comparison to a feedlot situation where we've taken a field of corn, lets even say it's right next to the feedlot and a lot of it goes a long ways. You've done something to that field to prep it for planting, whether it's plowing, discing, harrowing, leveling, uh, spraying it with an herbicide and no-tilling it. You, you take an expensive bag of seed corn, put it in an expensive planter pulled by an expensive tractor using expensive oil to do all of that, um, that gets it in the ground. Then, you hope for the good season. You're running an expensive combine across it. You're, you're taking off corn that has to be run through a grain system and dried invariably in this part of the country anyway. Then it's either ground, it's hauled, it's mixed in a mixer with another tractor with other stuff and put with other feedstuffs into a bunk where the animals spend their life, where you collect the manure. You have to spread the manure if, in some certain instances you have to bed them in this climate you would, out west they make big dust feed lots. You have to haul that manure, hope for good weather. And when you add that sum, total things and somebody says what I'm doing is not sustainable, I mean, if you have any grey matter inside your brain you can see the conclusion hear, ya know. Well a grass-fed beef can't feed the world, well, ya know, I'm not sure what you're doing is gonna continue.
We feed a lot of people with a lot of cheaply, what they call cheaply produced beef, but as we can see right now, the price of corn's goin up. The price of oil hasn't gone up that much but we're, we're all seeing increased demand because of the price drive on, on commercial beef you call it in the store. We're, we're very competitively priced at this point. Ya know for years and years we've had very cheap beef. I think that era has maybe gone by the wayside. Um, ya know, when corn went from 3.50 to 4.50 to 5 to 6, ya know, other things went lock step with it, ya know, the price of seed corn goes up, ya know, equipment takin' tremendous jumps and it's like the one fellow said: "One thing I do know, if corn's at $7.00, within a couple years the cost of production's gonna be at 6.80 or 6.90." Cuz that's just the way it works. Ya know, that, that's simple, ya know, economics in a situation like ours. So, uh, ya know see it as you may, the, our system is different, but I'm not going to say it's not sustainable in, in any sense of the word, ya know, whether it’s economically or nutritionally for the animal. So…

AS: Okay, so here on your farm you implement what’s called a rotational grazing, where you move your heard from one section to the next and you just keep rotating them to basically optimize the use of the grass.

JB: Right.

AS: So, what do you do uhh come spring and fall when it’s such a day like today when it’s just a heavy downpour and you have, ya know, heavy hundred pound cattle, ya know, trampling your grass…

JB: Thousand pound cattle.

AS: Thousands pound cattle, right…

JB: Yeah

AS: I mean how does your, can your grass handle that amount of weight?

JB: Well…

AS: And do you have to rotate them faster, what’s your mechanism for handling this?

JB: Yeah, there’s…there’s some truth to what you say. What we, ya know, the best we can do sometimes is limit the damage. Ummm…I have different properties and it’s made me, ya know, come to realize how different the capability of the ground is for handling traffic and handling excessive moisture, ya know, this year I think we’re probably pushing 60 inches when the normal’s 36. So it’s been the most challenging fall we’ve had. The longer I can keep them grazing grass, the better. Umm like just before you got here I went and moved the one group for a second time today uhh just be…just to get them off of that ground. Now typically I wouldn’t of, I would have let them roam a little bit more, searching a little bit more, but the harder you push them the more activity they’re going to do searching for food, so if I move them again and keep them fuller it’s going to keep them calmer and more still so they’re not, they’re not tromping the ground up as bad as, as they would otherwise.
Um, a couple of the other groups, ya know, I already have 'em on round bale feeders cuz we, we are done with grass for the fall and, ya know, they're going to create rings, I guess you might say, in the field, where the grass will work harder to come back. But, in a, in a heavy sod on a well-drained soil, it's much more resilient than you would think. Um, even though ya know the pounds per square inch on one hoof of an animal is fairly intense when you compare that to a field that's been row-cropped there's no root mass to support it and then you run a, I don't know how many ton combine or, ya know, wagon pulling grain across it, it's still no comparison as to what the damage is that's done on a multi-year level. I mean, you can, you can, they've got equipment that can rut, ya know, 20 inches deep and keep going. Ya know, these cattle may step in 3-4 inches, but nothing that, that, uh, your winter frost and heaving doesn't essentially, ya know, take care of, um, but what you suffer from is some damage in the growing layer in that top 3-4 inches where we may have to go in in some areas in the spring and broadcast some seed or something. Not, not a great extent but it's pretty amazing how resilient it is and how bad it can look as far as the mud in the fall and still come back the next summer and be, and be relatively productive.

So, ya know, it's challenging, we work with it as best we can, but that's probably the biggest challenge that I have in a year like this and this is by far the worst year we've had, ya know. To approach, ya know, double normal precipitation that's, that's just something ya know, you can only do so much, but we'll, we'll make it through and we'll alter some things a little bit next year. Get them on some more ground probably have more grazing farther into the fall. Ya know, we're growing and I'm finding my, my maximum number of animals but we have such a heavy growth in the spring that we take off for excess feed that we still need to find a way utilize that, ya know. Um, so we, we can produce the feed, but our problem is that, that winter, err, non-frozen wet season. Whether it be March or in the spring, I do pull them off the ground at that point, but typically, I've tried to avoid that, but uh, ya know, we'll, we make adjustments as we go, so we'll see.

DT: Sooo um, you implement different types of grass for your rotational grazing is that correct?

JB: Um, yeah to an extent you might say that. We, we're not heavy into reseeding or incorporating new grasses to an, to any great extent. Um, we're looking at more looking at leaning on what are called naturalized grasses. They may not be native to right here, but they're grasses that have been introduced that thrive here. Okay? So they're the, they're the lowest maintenance type of forages that we can produce. Um, and we may look at doing some annuals. I don't know. Ya know, you hear a lot of promises about what a product can do for you, but it's often, more often than not, coming from the salesman of that product. So, I'm, I'm I guess skeptical in a lot of ways and looking at a way of doing things as least cost because that's, that's essentially our game. Ya know, if you look at, say a dairy operation run on the same number of acres we are, you're going to have course a lot more inputs, but your gross value of product is going to be several times what we are. So, we have to resist the urge to spend money to make money [laughs] because it's all around you. Ya know, everyone wants to sell you something and we're not a target that's hit hard because we don't have that income like a dairy farm does, but never-the-less we always have to analyze everything we spend money on very closely to see if it's really gonna return, ya know, something like what they say. And I think I mentioned to you guys before, if you don't spend that dollar, that's 100% profit, ya know. So...

[Laughter]
DT: All right, so uhh it’s December 5th today and here in the Midwest we expect snow sometime in the next month usually by Christmas day we are covered, um so what are your implementations with your cattle, I know you said right now obviously they are out grazing so when the snow falls and stays I mean do you bring them inside, what do you feed them, do you, I mean…would you go through that whole process for us?

JB: Yeah. We, we don't bring them in very much. A ruminant animal, when we look at it the rumen is a big fermentation vat. It consumes the largest portion of that animal’s midsection, and it's basically like a furnace. They, they produce a lot of heat from that process going on in the rumen and they handle the cold, what we consider cold, much better than what we consider hot. The animal's body’s big enough that, I think I mentioned before, their body temperature will peak in the middle of the night, so they have to look at ways to cool more than heat. So, when we go into winter, um, not usually too concerned within Ohio once you have a new baby calf that's dried off, they can handle just about anything the weather throws at them. If there's a little bit of a windbreak or whatever. Umm, so when, what we like, what I would like to have happen now is for the ground to freeze up. Snows not a real issue. Um, they will, even if they're still grazing which two of our groups do have some grazing, uh, you know, if they know the forage is there, they'll, they'll go up to their eyeballs in snow after it. Now, that's, that's brood cows which you can kind of put on a different plane of ability and nutrition than our finishing animals who are I guess what you'd say is the most pampered. Once it gets to a point where they have to work for their feed too much, we look at supplementing them with what we call balage, would be the moist wrapped bales. It's the highest quality forage we can make on a perennial basis and so we, we don't ever want them getting hungry. There's, there's, uh, there's always maintenance costs in a metabolic system that are met first and only the excess above that can be used for gain so we work, we work to keep a maximum energy intake on the finishing animals first and primary. Um, and then young stock and then the old cows can do, can do a loss and compensatory gain when things are better, things like that. We don't worry about them as much so essentially, yeah, we start to tie up where they have access to land, grass, whatever and um, feed them that excess that we harvested in the spring, early summer.

DT: So you leave them outside through March and February and…

JB: Well, there will be a time in the spring and that can be somewhere between late February and late March, I guess you might say um, where, we use the terminology where the frost comes out of the ground, when the ground freezes, it, it heaves, you know, water molecules expand so when that final thaw is happening, we do bring them in because the ground is so susceptible to damage at that point that we, we can't leave 'em on. Now that can be as short as two weeks or it could be as long as a month until the grass gets going and we can put them back out. So, other than that, there are very few climatic conditions that are harsh enough that we bring 'em in. Um, you know, if it's gonna be a cold rain, temperatures drop, wind's blowing, you know that cold rain in the low 30s, 30 degree range that soaks their hide and they lose their insulating ability, it is worse than a dry 10 degrees, so ya know, you just kinda gotta know, use a little common sense and uh, once again if you're gonna, in a situation that uses too much energy from the animal, you don't want that happening either, so we do what we can to—

DT: Do you continue, continue to rotate them through the winter months? January and February?
JB: Well, even when we're feeding them on the round bales, we move those around to, for dispersion of the manure nutrients and urine and stuff like that, so, yeah, we never, we never really put 'em onto any permanent situation I guess you might say.

DT: Uh, do you rent out any portions of your land or is it mostly tied up for cattle?

JB: Umm, mine is completely tied up, and then, like I said, I'm leasing several properties and always looking for more. [Laughs] So that's uhh, our situation.

AS: Ok, so in the beginning you mentioned during your shift from dairy to grass-fed, you said it was easier in your family and your lifestyle, and I know that you have a son so is he looking to move forward in, ya know, grass-fed beef farming as well, is this kind of a family tradition for the Bergers or…?

JB: The beginning of a dynasty? [Laughs]

AS: Yeah.

[Laughter]

JB: Well, actually, I have two sons. The younger one is helping me on the farm. Um, and he works, he also works off the farm. But you know, at the age of twenty, let's just say, uh, the thought is right now that he wants to help and, you know, proceed with it. Um, you know, I didn't actually start doing this until I was 46. Um, got a degree in dairy science, grew up on a dairy farm. Worked with cattle the whole time. Um, then, you know, worked in the water office for over four years, so I have a, a pretty varied background in the concepts of what we're doing.

So, him at the age of 20 and I quit dairying 15 years ago, he didn't grow up with that, ya know, didn't take any formal education so there's, there's a lot of learning curve yet and uhh, he seems to have the interest, and we'll just see where it goes, ya know. I'm fresh enough into it that I'm not the expert by any means um but I'm, I'm a firm believer that if you can make something enjoyable and there's some, there's some return to it, ya know, it makes it a situation where, ya know, somebody wants to come in, ya know, he's got a little bit of his own enterprise. We're starting to pasture poultry, I had, I'm not going to say zero interest in it, but it's not my gig. So that's something that has a long, I mean it can go big if we want it to, I think. Um, it's just like the beef, ya know, it doesn't come, ya know, right off but this year he did uhh 100 broilers and no problem selling them and we could, we could probably triple that next year. Whether we will or not I don't know, without having any problems selling them. Ya know there's things you can add, like say we did a little bit of, we did a little pork I'm not looking to really expand that um the hogs are, they're a very different management scheme and I'm not sure I want to address too much of that. The poultries not really an issue, but ya know, I know what I'm doing with the cattle and that's the main focus, and that's what I'm trying to teach him the most but, the chickens work well. So, we'll see.

DT: Um other farmers, uhh when they're growing their crops do it in a more seasonal thing where they're living season by season, ya know, planting and then harvesting later on, but for you it's very different
because your beef grows continually, like over a course of a year. So, for how long does it take to get um beef ready to be sold um and essentially harvested?

JB: Yeah, well if you, if you take it from start to finish um, ya know, course a living animal, you have a cow and you breed her she’s going to have an average of a 280 2-3 day gestation. So you have the cost of maintaining that cow in there and she, during part of that time she’s nursing her last calf too, um but once they’re born um that calf will stay on its mother from 6-8 months whatever you decide, but from when it’s born until it is ready for harvest we are at a minimum of about 20 months to a maximum of 25 or 6, um ya know, animals vary in size and that causes differences, um gender causes differences--the females mature more quickly than the males. So like right now we’re in what would be animals that would be two years old in April, right now we’re getting into the smaller framed females of that group, so they’re right at 20 months old and those spring calves will continue on into the summer until we are done with them, then we’ll jump to the fall calves and we’ll do the same thing. They’ll kind of blend together that way.

So, ya know, you have 2 years of live animal, um, along with the gestation period or ya know half of our animals come from a couple of qualified suppliers, and I’ll buy them anywhere from 8 months to a year length and, ya know, they, they grow those animals according to our protocols, um, and so I don’t have them that full time but I, I will, I don’t sell beef that I haven’t finished because it’s such a critical point in the, the process and it has such a dramatic effect on quality that uhh, that’s something I don’t want to let go of I guess you might say. So umm …so depending on how you look at it, it’s anywhere from a year to three, the harvest of a live animal occurs from about 20 months per minimum up to about 26.

AS: Okay, I have a two-part question. So the first is: when you purchase these calves from a supplier how old are they typically?

JB: Well they, I’ll make a long answer of a short question. [laughs] We, one of the things that our goals are, is to reduce the stress levels on the animals. Um, there are beef producers that will wean a calf, dehorn it--by weaning, we mean pulling it from its mother --uhh dehorn it, castrate it, vaccinate it, and ship it to another farm. That’s a whole lot of stress on what’s kind of a very young baby. Umm what we do, if we don’t uhh band them or castrate them at birth we do it sometime later in their life and then put them right back with their mother. Ya know, we only do one thing at a time.

Um, if we, if we want to wean them we do it separate from other things, ya know, we use all polled animals, p-o-l-l-e-d, so we don’t deal with dehorning, they’re just naturally no horns grow on them so that’s a stress we’ve eliminated, um so our, our goal is to have the least stressed animals. So like the calves, actually I’m going to be getting a small load this weak, they’re going to have been early spring calves um weaned three weeks to a month ago. Okay, taken from their mothers. So that’s one stress that’s reduced, and um, we’ll bring them home, ya know, put ‘em in our pasture, that’s the only thing that happens to them ya know that day is the shipping. Um and by doing these stretching out the stresses not bunching them all up we end up with almost zero sick calves. Um so the youngest calves we will get will be in the 7-8 month range the older ones would be um the, the fellow I get my fall calves from, he fall calves, weans in about May, then puts them right onto his own grass. Then runs them on his grass through the summer, and I get them early fall, you might say September when they’re still very good grass. So these are yearlings that go from his grass to my grass and that’s the only thing that happens to them, and
they don’t miss a beat. That’s a nice size to get them to is yearlings, so then we’ll finish those, um like I say, in step with the other ones, and it's just a real nice, real nice system that works cause we only spring calve and having a partnership with a fall calving operation is a nice addition to not only our marketing but to our growth of our grasses.

AS: So you receive calves typically spring for your own and then fall you purchase from another, so you’re getting them twice a year?

JB: Um, and, and I buy some spring calves from another fellow too.

AS: Okay, so the second part of the question is, uhh when you’re like a um agriculture farmer, ya know, you have a growing season that’s anywhere between 3-6 months, but with cattle it’s seems like you have anywhere between a year and a half to a year as far as how long you have to keep them on your farm. So what type of planning difficulties do you have trying to, ya know, one grow your farm and two, you know, you said you have this strong demand for people in the area, so how do you plan that out so far in advanced? Is there any difficulties do, you find?

JB: Um, pray about it. [laughs] I mean all the kidding aside, we’ve truly been blessed. Uhh God’s shined on us, but yeah there’s, there’s ya know, we will go to a farmers market and the thing that people don’t understand is we, we take what product we can, but they’ll come up and... I shouldn’t say, they are still some people that don’t understand why we don’t have a product. Ya know, they kind of expect us to be like a little Wal-Mart. They want it, it’s there um, but the logistics of having cattle resources and meeting demand is, is the most intimidating thing that we have. Um, ya know especially as we’re growing and I look at uhh, ya know, like right now my waiting list of customers I’m telling them it’s sometime next summer. I can’t put a finger on it. I don’t like to make a commitment that I’m not able to keep but I don’t know how tough of a winter we’re going to have, I don’t exactly what my growth rate will be, um, based on my forages, ya know we had, I guess, what you would say a wet summer, our forage has never lacked for moisture, that’s great for volume but your highest quality forages actually occur in a drier season it concentrates the nutrients so will they grow as well this winter as they typically do? I don’t think I will see a, ya know, a vast difference by any means, but along with the fact that our processor is, is a very demanded commodity, I guess you might say, White Feather meats who does all of ours, ya know, I have to schedule that a year in advanced so when you ask that question it’s very legitimate to try and time this all together it’s the most daunting thing that I do and I spend a lot of time, ya know. A friend will drive by and say, “I saw you out walking around in your field,” and I kid with them. I say, “well I’m managing, you know,” but there’s more truth to that, because I have to really spend a lot of time pondering, looking at my animals seeing what I think is going to happen, when they’re going to be ready and uhh ya know, it’s, it’s not always a comfort zone that you’re in, ya know. Um if I was farming crops, ya know, I’d put out there I’d do everything that they say you should do. I harvest what’s there, and ya know, I’m kind of happy with it. I don’t have to do as much planning I was never really into marketing crops too much, and there’s a lot of planning that goes into that, but what we’re doing along with the growth of it makes a very uh, ya know, you have to put a lot of concentration into how you’re going to market that.
DT: All right, uhh, so Wayne County is pretty well known for its farming, and it’s a pretty heavy concentrated farming area so do you find that difficult when you’re looking to grow, to find the land to rent from?
Is it…

JB: Yes, you do not drive around Wayne County and see open fields, ya know, if very much. Ya know there are places um you go south and east [cell phone goes off] a little bit of where we are there are fields that you can find that haven’t had a lot of activity on ‘em, um but in Wayne County you just don’t, you just don’t find that. So growing is, is, ya know, it’s a struggle, um and that’s why we’re, that’s why I have to source calves from people um they’re good operators the raise better calves then I do to be quite honest, but it also gets me to other areas where I can use their resources of, that they have and not in direct competition with the, ya know, the crop farming that occurs in Wayne County so yeah it’s, you work at that too.

AS: All right well, thank you for your time Mr. Berger we really appreciate it.

DT: Thank you so much.

JB: No problem.

DT: All right.

JB: Maybe somebody can learn a little something.
[laughs]

AS: Hit the record…