

## Grasslands Alliance Releases First Certification Standard for Sustainable, Climate-friendly Beef Production in North America

### *Enabling a Renaissance in Responsible Ranching*

How do you know if the steak on your plate or the beef in your burger was sustainably raised? Did it come from a ranch that protects wildlife and ecosystems, treats animals humanely, and pays farmworkers decent wages? The US is the largest beef producer in the world, and Americans eat a lot of it – about 54 pounds per person a year. And yet there has been no consensus on what sustainable livestock production looks like at the grassroots level, no comprehensive sustainability certification system for ranches, and no widely accepted ecolabel on better beef. That’s about to change.

After four years of research, discussions and field trials, the [Grasslands Alliance](#), a multi-stakeholder coalition led by conservation groups, has released the first comprehensive guidelines for responsibly raising cattle on North America’s vast range and pastures. The standards cover all the interlocking spheres of sustainability – environmental protection, economic viability and social justice – as well as climate change, animal welfare and human health.

Ranchers and farmers who comply with the Grasslands Alliance criteria will be certified green and able to use an ecolabel, now under development. This will allow progressive producers to send a clear farm-to-market signal that they are meeting the most robust sustainability standards. Ranchers, consumers and commercial buyers have been asking for a way to distinguish beef from eco-friendly and climate-smart ranches.

The Grasslands Alliance was organized by the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) and two groups with extensive experience in setting standards, auditing and certifying farms -- the [Rainforest Alliance](#) and [Food Alliance](#). In developing the cattle standard, the coalition engaged other NGOs, ranchers, scientists, corporate beef buyers, and beef marketing experts.

Consumers increasingly seek out products that are third-party endorsed by independent, nonprofit programs such as [Rainforest Alliance Certified™](#), Organic and Fairtrade. Popular brands are working with certifiers to rid their supply chains of major sins such as deforestation and child labor, and ensure that suppliers are efficient and resilient enough to withstand climate change, drought and social unrest. Around the world, cattle ranching is a leading cause of deforestation and other environmental degradation, and a major contributor of climate-disrupting emissions. In the US, for example, cattle emit nearly as much of the powerful heat-trapping pollutant, methane, as fracking and other forms of natural gas and petroleum extraction. The other highest impact crops – palm oil, soy, paper pulp, sugar – developed sustainability standards and certification programs long ago.

The Grasslands Alliance standard fused traditional knowledge gained over generations of ranching with the latest science. It provides detailed guidance on raising cattle in the most sustainable way – such as how to keep the grass green, avoid erosion and pollution, protect endangered wildlife, control invasive weeds, conserve water, safeguard streams, manage livestock humanely, reduce climate-related risks and impacts, and protect consumer health.

Ranchers and farmers were involved in developing the standard. One of them, Michael Hale, who manages a herd of Spanish breed cattle on native range in Northeastern Oregon, said that a good standard, “is more than a checklist of best management practices; it’s a way for us ranchers to share experience and a guide to sustainable land stewardship.”

The Rainforest Alliance Certified seal of approval is on coffee, tea, chocolate, bananas and a host of products from farms meeting the rigorous standards of the [Sustainable Agriculture Network](#) (SAN). The SAN standard is designed for countries where farms are mostly small, regulations and government assistance are weak and many farmers are struggling to make ends meet. The Grasslands Alliance standard is expressly tuned to conditions in the US.

Jeffrey Hayward, VP of Programs for the Rainforest Alliance, said, “As our beef certification program gains traction in Central and South America, we’re excited to have an aligned partner standard in the US. That will allow producers and buyers to work with one, streamlined system no matter if their farm is in Brazil or Montana.”

Jonathan Kaplan, head of the Food and Agriculture Program at NRDC said, “The Grasslands Alliance will help ranchers address essential sustainability issues, including promotion of healthy soils, more productive grasslands, predator co-existence, and antibiotic stewardship.”

Marcia DeLonge, an agroecologist at the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#), said, “A clear, science-based roadmap toward sustainable beef production systems that support farmers and ranchers, conserves valuable grasslands, and reduces negative environmental impacts is much needed. It is exciting to see efforts like the Grasslands Alliance standard working to encourage beef production that is as healthy, sustainable, and climate friendly as possible.”

The Grasslands Alliance standard has been reviewed by many ranchers, scientists, environmentalists, activists and other experts. As part of an inclusive process to gather as much input as possible, the alliance invites anyone interested to [comment on the standard](#), which is available on the coalition’s [website](#). Along with ranchers, NGOs, government agencies, retailers and restaurants, the Grasslands Alliance is planning for the first certified ranches, supply chains and sustainably produced beef available to consumers. Updates will be available on the website.

## ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

The [Rainforest Alliance](#) is an international nonprofit organization that has worked for nearly 30 years around the world to conserve forests and natural resources while advancing sustainable livelihoods. The Rainforest Alliance collaborates with foresters, farmers, businesses and workers to build healthy communities, protect habitat, and rebalance the Earth, working towards the vision of a world where planet and people prosper together. To learn more, visit [www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org)

The [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) (NRDC) is an international nonprofit environmental organization with more than 2 million members and online activists. Since 1970, our lawyers, scientists, and other environmental specialists have worked to protect the world's natural resources, public health, and the

environment. NRDC has offices in New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Bozeman, MT, and Beijing. Visit us at [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org) and follow us on Twitter @NRDC.

The Food Alliance works at the juncture of science, business and values to define and promote sustainability in agriculture and the food industry, and to ensure safe and fair working conditions, humane treatment of animals, and careful stewardship of ecosystems. To learn more visit [foodalliance.org](http://foodalliance.org)

The Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) is a coalition of non-profit conservation organizations in America, Africa, Europe and Asia promoting the environmental and social sustainability of agricultural activities through the development of standards for best practices, certification and training for rural farmers around the world. See the revised 2017 standard on the [SAN website](#).

The Union of Concerned Scientists uses science for a healthy planet and safer world. Its report, "Cattle, Cleared Forests, and Climate Change: Scoring America's Top Brands on Their Deforestation-Free Beef Commitments and Practices," is [here](#).