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Maine beef gets boost - naturally *by: TUX TURKEL, Staff Writer*

A new program aimed at preserving Maine farms will put naturally raised USDA Choice beef from Freeport into 75 Hannaford supermarkets around New England.

Through marketing and promotion, supporters plan to steer a third of Maine's cattle herd to the program by next year, an expansion that will involve up to 5,000 head of cattle, 52 beef farms and 24,000 acres of farmland.

Farming has been on an overall decline in Maine for decades, undermined by factors ranging from competition to development pressures. The program involving Wolfe's Neck Farm attempts to reverse that slide by paying beef farmers more money for a specialty product that commands premium prices with consumers. Farmers will have an economic incentive, organizers say, if they can count on a good wholesale price and don't have to worry about the marketing.

"The whole goal of the program," said Erick Jensen, manager of Wolfe's Neck Farm, "is to help the producer."

Jensen got the idea after learning about a beef-farm cooperative in Oregon. He refined the concept in Maine with help from a \$15,000 grant from the Maine Department of Agriculture and \$35,000 from Common Good, part of the Maine Community Foundation.

Wolfe's Neck Farm is a 600-acre saltwater farm on Casco Bay that is owned by the non-profit Wolfe's Neck Farm Foundation. The farm has roughly 100 cows and raises beef without the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or hormones. The meat has been locally available for years in restaurants and natural food stores. Recently, the foundation set out to expand its vision.

The foundation began working with farms and feedlots across the state, many of them in Aroostook County. The farmers agree to raise cattle to Wolfe's Neck Farm's all-natural

specifications. In turn they are paid a wholesale price per pound that is 5 percent to 20 percent higher than the price for conventional beef. Since last August, they have produced 1,500 head of cattle for sale under the Wolfe's Neck Farm label.

Sales have expanded out of Maine and into Bread & Circus natural food stores and WholeFoods Stores around the Northeast. But the big break came this spring, when Wolfe's Neck Farm negotiated a deal with Hannaford, which had been carrying a line of natural beef from a Colorado producer. Now Hannaford will sell the Maine-produced beef in 75 stores in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. The beef will also be available in 15 stores that Hannaford supplies, but doesn't own.



"We had the opportunity," said Caren Epstein, a Hannaford spokeswoman, "to do business with a Maine company that could supply us with the quality and quantity we were looking for."

Natural beef is not labeled organic. Beef certified as being organic must meet tough new certification standards from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that cover issues ranging from what cows are fed to soil fertility. Foods listed as natural may be produced using some organic methods, but aren't as strictly defined.

Natural and organic food accounts for a small but growing percentage of supermarket



sales. Its appeal is limited because, in the case of beef, retail prices are 20 to 50 percent higher than conventional meat.

"But ongoing news stories about mad cow disease and recalls of contaminated meat may prompt more shoppers to try Wolfe's Neck Farm's natural beef," Epstein said. "Another selling point is that the beef is locally produced. Customers have been drawn to Atlantic salmon raised in Maine, and Hannaford expects a similar allegiance to develop for Maine-grown beef."

Hannaford will cook free samples for shoppers in its stores as part of the promotion, and display brochures from Wolfe's Neck Farm. While drumming up business, Hannaford is also counting on Wolfe's Neck Farm to meet demand. "Running out of a product just as customers become interested is a concern when supermarkets team up with small suppliers," Epstein said. "It's a killer for us - if you promote something, and people come in and it's out of stock, you risk losing the customer."

At Wolfe's Neck Farm, Jensen is well aware of this challenge. It will take a year or two for Maine farms to increase cattle production, the time it takes to raise a calf until it's ready for the slaughterhouse. In the meantime, Wolfe's Neck Farms is buying some cattle raised to its standards in Vermont and New Hampshire. Cattle in the program are being processed at a slaughterhouse in Pennsylvania.

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If the program is successful, it has the potential to keep more farms in business and preserve farmland, organizers say.

"This is quite significant," said Robert Spear, Maine's agriculture commissioner. Spear, who is a dairy farmer, said Maine has the land, water and feed to support a vibrant beef industry. The missing link is a better connection to customers "It's the market that has been the problem," he said.

That point was echoed by Judy Powell, executive director of the Maine Beef Industry Council. The Hannaford connection, she said, could also raise the visibility of the state's beef industry, which has a low profile

with residents. Unlike dairy farms, no one has promoted local beef the way Maine dairies market milk. Most of Maine's cattle have been shipped out of state for slaughter and consumption elsewhere. "There was never an end product for consumers to recognize," she said.

Maine has roughly 1,400 people involved in raising or selling beef. While a dozen or so farms have 100 head of cattle, Powell said, most production takes place on small farms with an average herd of about 20. Many farms are in Aroostook County, with its abundance of pasture land and access to feed from culled potatoes, broccoli and other row crops. The program holds the promise

of bringing more farmers into beef production, Powell said. "Hannaford's involvement will increase visibility, and that will help assure supply."

Wolfe's Neck and Hannaford will kick off the program today at 10:30 a.m., at the Hannaford store on Forest Avenue by Back Cove. State officials are expected to attend, including Gov. Angus King, who is scheduled to grill a steak.

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