

case 9-453-550
April 29, 2021

Andrew Hoffman

White Oak Pastures: A Radically Traditional Farm Redefines Growth

When Will Harris III took over White Oak Pastures in the 1990s after four generations of family leadership before him, he faced a decision. Should he keep the industrialized farming practices that his father had implemented throughout the 20th century, which resulted in land degradation from monocrop agriculture? Or, should he transition back to the more natural, regenerative practices of his great-great-grandfather?

Harris chose the latter and White Oak Pastures became a regenerative agriculture farm. People travelled from all over to visit Bluffton, Georgia, to see White Oak's on-premises red meat and poultry abattoir (slaughterhouse) and learn about their farming practices and impact.

On a mild day in late 2007, as Harris was taking his ritual morning stroll around the White Oak property, he paused for a moment to appreciate just how far the farm had come over the past few decades. He had been thinking recently about his own legacy and the future of White Oak Pastures. He was proud of the work they had done on the farm, but could they have had an even bigger impact? Did their model influence other, larger farms to adopt similar practices?

One word that crossed his mind was "growth." Traditionally, growth in the business world meant more revenue, more product, more land, etc. Harris felt that White Oak, as a "radically traditional farm," should have a radically new take on defining growth. What did and should growth look like for White Oak Pastures?

As sales grew, so did the burden of production. For the past several years, the White Oak team had been processing a few head of cattle a week in Tifton, Georgia. Now, as 2007 was nearing a close, that processor had reached capacity and was unwilling to expand to accommodate White Oak Pastures. The owners were older and had no children interested in taking over the business. Harris was faced with a decision: Should White Oak plateau its beef sales, find a new processing partner, or borrow the \$2.5 million required to break ground on a second, on-farm processing plant?

Published by WDI Publishing, a division of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

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