



(Photo courtesy of Panorama Meats)

# Grass-based growth

Integrity and experience are the pillars of success for Panorama Meats

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**P**anorama Meats, based in Vina, Calif., is the nation's biggest producer of organic, 100 percent grass-fed and grass-finished beef, and also sells a lot of natural beef. The

company has been in business for 11 years. Back in 2001, a group of multigenerational ranchers joined forces with rangeland conservationists in Northern California to start producing beef that is grass-fed, humanely raised, easy on the environment and healthy. The ranchers pooled their resources, conceived a business plan and created a company called Western Grasslands Inc.

CEO Mack Graves has been involved in the food industry for more than 35 years. Graves travels across the United States and around the world, speaking about meat and poultry marketing issues, emphasizing how consumer-trusted brands are set up and operated. He's recognized in the

industry as an expert in organic and natural meat and poultry.

Which brings him back to Western Grasslands Inc. He became CEO of Panorama/Western Grasslands in 2005. "As the company grew, I felt the name 'Western Grasslands' was not going to resonate with our customers," Graves says. "So, we started looking around for another name because the ranchers who started this grass-fed beef business didn't feel they were getting as much return in their business as they deserved. Eventually, the ranchers decided the name 'Panorama' related to wide open spaces. They liked that idea. We all thought that was more exciting and attractive to consumers, so we renamed the company Panorama Meats."

## Years of experience

Graves grew up on a fruit farm in Washington state, and earned bachelors and masters degrees in Business Administration at the Univ. of Oregon. His first job in the meat industry was at Armour in 1972. Before coming to Panorama Meats, he worked

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Organic Grass-Fed Meats

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at Purdue Univ. in West Lafayette, Ind. He became president and CEO of Coleman Natural Meats, during its transition from a family business to the biggest natural beef company in the United States. He also was interim CEO of Meyer Foods, producer of Meyer Natural Angus Beef. He also worked as a consultant and has written articles for *Meat&Poultry* “a long time ago,” he says laughing. Currently, he writes a monthly column, “Marketing Trends,” for the National Meat Association’s *Lean Trimmings* newsletter.

Today, Panorama’s nine participating family ranchers and are spread across eight states and hundreds of thousands of acres of USDA Organic Certified grasslands in Northern California, Southern Washington State, Southern Oregon, Wyoming, Montana, New Mexico, Nebraska and California. The cattle are raised on lush green pastures that feature a cow’s favorite foods – natural grass, legumes and range forage. Graves says Panorama Beef is sold at this point to grocery stores in California, Washington,



(Photo courtesy of Whole Foods Market)

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Oregon, Texas, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Kansas. “In addition to a steady diet of the foods they were designed by nature to eat, Panorama’s cattle live the way they were meant to live,” Graves says. “They are never implanted with hormones, fed animal byproducts or treated with antibiotics,” he says. “They enjoy room to roam and graze on grass and forages at their leisure, not according to a schedule. Panorama cattle are always treated with respect and handled humanely.”

Panorama Meats’ founding ranch is the Leavitt Lake Ranches, owned and operated by Darrell Wood and his family, in Vina, Calif. Graves says the mission of Panorama Meats

is grounded in its belief that rangelands must be protected and preserved for future generations. All Panorama ranchers are engaged in active conservation efforts, and many of them have been recognized locally and nationally for rangeland stewardship.

As producer of organic grass-fed beef, Graves must position his products in the face of some giant competitors, and his marketing strategy must address grain vs. grass-fed beef. For organic, he must also follow federal regulations, while with ‘natural’ beef, the rules are voluntary. “Our principal customer is Whole Foods; we have a handshake deal with them, and the people who buy their food at Whole



Mack Graves, CEO of Panorama Meats (left), and his son, John, pose while handing out samples at a Whole Foods Market in Denver. (Photo courtesy of Panorama Meats)

Foods are looking for grass-fed beef,” he says. “The ones we sell to are all in the West. We don’t really compete with the ‘big boys’. In Texas, we do compete with other companies, and we market our product. We sell to HEB Groceries in Texas, Central Markets there and Abundant Harvest Organics in California. HEB carries only one item of ours: pre-packaged ground beef.”

### Repeat customers

Graves also talks about his pragmatic business approach: “You can probably get anyone to eat something one time,” he says with a chuckle. “The real thing is to get them to come back. With food, the final criterion is taste. The consumer makes the final decision, and you have to tell the consumer everything you’ve done. When you tell them the animals are humanely treated, you don’t add a lot of things you shouldn’t add to their feed and the product measures up, you have a winner.”

Graves says the company’s sales have grown consistently by about 22 percent per year. In 2011, about 7,000

head of cattle were processed. “We don’t like to get into the financials publicly too much, since we’re privately held, but we’re in the \$12 million to \$15 million sales category.”

Because the company is relatively small, it contracts with slaughterers and processors to handle the

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beef. They include Yosemite Valley Beef Packing in Merced, Calif.; G & C Packing in Colorado Springs, Rocky Mountain Natural Meats in Henderson, Colo.; and Golden California Meat Packers in Fresno, Calif. “We outsource everything,” Graves says. “We don’t even have an office of our own. Our company has a total of four employees.” Most of the cattle

are slaughtered at between 16 and 18 months, at a weight of between 1,050 and 1,100 lbs., less than grain-fed beef.

One part of Graves’s marketing strategy is to not run down the opposition. “We don’t say other products are bad. We think our products are great. When we look at studies to prove the health benefits of grass-fed beef, we talk about others, not any studies about any other kind of beef.” Graves also says his principle marketing mechanism is demonstrations “in stores, where the consumers are, handing beef to customers and saying ‘try it.’”

One thing Graves has to do is convince the ranchers to keep the cattle for another year. “We have to pay a premium to the ranchers. Grass-fed cattle gain about 1-1/2 to 2 lbs. of weight a day, where grain-fed beef from the feedlot gain 4 lbs. of weight a day. “One advantage for ranchers is they can take advantage of our strong retail presence to get a premium price and a guaranteed market for their beef. “Panorama handles all the processing, merchandising and marketing for their beef to consumers, allowing family ranchers to focus on ranching.” He says his mission is to help make organic grass-fed and finished cattle ranching a viable economic strategy. We also want to help our rancher partners employ systems to protect delicate ranchlands for future generations.”

Graves says the environment, sustainability and conservation are very important to him and his company. “One of our ranchers won the NCBA Environmental Stewardship Award two years ago. We not only talk the talk, we walk the walk.” ■

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