

# How 'Pasture for Life (championing 100% pasture-fed ruminant products) has taken off in the UK – from the bottom up!

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Pasture for Life

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## **Abstract**

Ten years ago Pasture for Life (PfL) was a collection of around 50 UK farmers who were producing high quality ruminant food products wholly from pasture. They were regenerative farming pioneers and PfL was run by volunteers and funded through various grants. In the past two to three years, membership has increased significantly, nearing 1,000 with almost 150 certified Pasture for Life (100% grass-fed). The organisation is now run by a paid executive and is bursting with energy, conversation, and learning. Members are mainly farmers, but also include butchers, chefs, vets, academics and consumers – all keen to champion the role of ruminants in pastoral ecosystems and diets. This is an example of bottom-up learning - farmers working with other farmers on topics such as mob grazing, soil health, multi-species swards, breeds and breeding, biodiversity, animal welfare, carcass breakdown and presentation of products for selling. Technology transfer is happening at farmer level - study group trips away, a very active Internet forum, farmer-to-farmer mentoring. Participation is growing still further with the setting up of 15 local groups across the country, led by facilitators, carrying out local farm walks and workshops and developing local food supply. The rise in PfL membership has been helped by the rising cost of farm inputs, pushing more farmers towards increasing production from grass and pasture. Environmental pressures, have for example, seen an upsurge in the sowing of multi-species leys to improve soil health and this has also inspired interest in the PfL. Increasingly researchers are validating what farmers have been doing and seeing happening in their fields and in their herds. Building local supply chains remains a challenge but as more people talk about the benefits of PfL – better for the animals, better for the environment (wildlife and carbon storage), better for the farmer, better for the people that eat and drink the meat and milk, the easier this will become.

## **Introduction**

Pasture for Life was the vision of Dr John Meadley, an agricultural graduate who had spent his career in overseas development. His work in the developing world made him acutely aware both of the fragility of the planet and the absurdity of using half the world's grain to feed livestock. In 2009, he met with two farmers who were already feeding only grass and pasture plants to their animals. Feeding grain to calves, pregnant ewes and finishing and dairy cattle has become the norm for most ruminant livestock farmers, driven by the supply trade selling them more and more products and large-scale customers (supermarkets) wanting them to produce bigger, consistently sized animals as fast as possible. But grain is not a ruminant's natural diet and intensification of the meat and milk production process has led to short and sometimes unhealthy lives for the animals and a lowering of the nutritional quality of the products that people then eat. Dr Meadley and the two farmers decided they would encourage other UK farmers to produce high quality meat and dairy products from grass alone. Pasture for Life was born.

## **Methods**

Dr Meadley led the first meetings of a handful of farmers and butchers in the south west of the UK. They defined what they meant by wholly pasture fed production, with some help from the American Grassfed Association. These went on to become the PfL Certification Standards. This tells farmers what they can and cannot feed their ruminants ie, no grains whatsoever. To ensure the integrity of these standards the Pasture for Life Certification mark was developed. Certified and independently audited producers can use this stamp on any of their promotional material, giving consumers the confidence that what they buy has never eaten grain and so retains a high nutrient density. The third founding principle was that the members would be open to discussion and share every aspect of their journey towards grain-free ruminant farming. The final principle was never to be judgemental to those who continue to feed grain or who challenge the reasons for not doing so.

For the first two years, Pfl was an informal collection of people with a common goal of championing 100% pasture-fed production but there was no formal management structure. However, as the organisation grew it was clear the Standards required ownership and so the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association was formed as a Community Interest Company. An executive manager was appointed to oversee activities and to drive membership. The original board members thought, naively, that funding the organisation would be easy – with many members paying £50 (now £100) a year and certified members paying a small levy on every certified animal they sold. But gaining new members was hard in the early years and the system for collecting levies too onerous with too few animals declared as Pasture for Life, as premiums failed to materialise. It soon became clear that this would not generate enough funds to do anything. All tasks, including membership recruitment and promotion of Pfl were carried out by volunteers. The first few years were funded with small awards from charities such as the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. With limited resources it was hard to know where to put most effort. On the communications side, it was decided to target messages to farmers to encourage them to join, as it was thought to be too early to promote the concept to consumers, as supply was patchy.

The main channels for member communication were an active internet forum, where many hundreds of questions have been answered over the years, to farm walks, longer two-day study tours of two- or three-members' farms, and e-newsletters. Tasting events were popular and helped promote the debate. Two or three Pfl farmers would provide some of their meat for cooking by a chef and then tasting by an audience of butchers, retailers, food writers, and other chefs. Adam Horovitz, was engaged as poet-in-residence and stayed on four Pfl farms throughout the year and then wrote an anthology of poems called 'The Soil Never Sleeps.'

For the first seven years, the community of Pfl farmers steadily grew to a few hundred, but in the past three years the rate of membership recruitment has risen more quickly and significantly – up to almost 1,000. This has come in part due to an increased awareness for regenerative farming in general, as poor soil health has been highlighted as a limiting factor to increasing agricultural production. Where there were never any articles in the farming press about grassland farming ten and even five years ago – now every publication will be running grass and pasture content of some kind.

A different set of people on the Pasture for Life board and a new executive director has brought fresh enthusiasm and ideas and the organisation is now involved in very many different projects and initiatives including:

- Fifteen regional groups delivering local farm walks, tastings and study tours. In the early days, travelling to farm walks and events would be impossible because the distances were too far. Local groups are also working to build local supply chains with local abattoirs, butchers, restaurants and retailers
- Technical webinars throughout the winter season. Born through covid necessity, webinars remain a good way of engaging with the wider membership on national topics and issues – using top experts to lead the discussion. Upcoming topics include grass finishing, agroforestry, integrating ruminants into arable systems and direct selling to customers. There is also a growing back-catalogue of webinars stored on the Pfl YouTube channel
- A research group is actively involved in academic and data collection initiatives – to prove the scientific and financial benefits of farming according to Pasture for Life principles. There is participation in the PATHWAYS project, which is identifying and increasing sustainable practices along the supply and production chains of the European livestock sector, working closely with the University of Reading and other researchers from 30 other institutes. Twenty Pfl farmers have met online to form the UK practice hub, specifically looking at Pfl as one pathway for sustainable livestock in Europe. The team is also involved in new work called Re-Livestock, funded by Horizon Europe, which is setting out to evaluate and mobilise the adoption of innovative practices to reduce GHG emissions from livestock farming systems. Sustainable Economic and Ecological Grazing Systems – learning from Innovative practitioners (SEEGSLIP) (Norton et al. 2022) shows that swards, and to a lesser extent, soils managed by PFLA farmers are in a better ecological condition than a large representative random sample of production-oriented Improved Grassland across the UK. For example, vegetation in PFLA plots was taller than in either Improved or Neutral grassland plots and the presence of flowering species and taller vegetation have been shown to lead to an increased abundance of invertebrates including butterflies and bees. A shift towards these approaches is being led by practitioners themselves which is likely to make their adoption at scale far more likely than if implemented through top-down mechanisms. As part of the SUScatt project, funded by SusAn, an

ERA-Net co-funded project under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, which set out to increase the economic competitiveness of forage and grazing based cattle production systems, researchers at the University of Newcastle have confirmed the superior nutritional quality of products from extensive farming, highlighting the potential benefits from forage-only feeding (Davis et al. 2020). In addition they show scope for certified pasture for life beef to lessen consumer deficiencies in long chain omega-3 fatty acids. The Pfl research team is also facilitating the testing of Pfl meat samples by the Bio-nutrient Institute in the USA. The samples will be assessed in comparison with conventionally raised beef. This autumn sees Pfl supporting its first PhD student enrolled on a Doctoral Training Programme with the University of Bristol, who will be investigating the environmental and animal welfare impacts of different dairy production systems by taking a holistic approach.

- Soilmentor is a farmer-developed App which helps regeneratively-minded farmers measure their soil biology, chemistry and physics. It is helping Pfl members monitor soil health and record their observations including earthworm counts, rooting depths and nodulation of legume roots. This will help Pfl generate a baseline dataset which will allow long-term monitoring and analysis of the trends in soil health. Training courses have been held across the UK and a two-week soil testing challenge was run.
- Funding has been won to extend peer-to-peer knowledge exchange on farms with farmer-to-farmer mentoring in three areas in the south east of the country. Sixteen farmer mentors, drawn predominantly from Pfl certified farms, have been trained and are working to bring in as many as 160 other farmers to receive mentoring, other high-level training and a programme of relevant technical events. Discussions are ongoing to repeat this exercise across the UK. As well as this, a farmer internship programme is being rolled out with eight farms in Scotland. If successful this too will be rolled out across the country.
- Pfl continues to be well presented in policy arenas and is taking the lead with issues such as product labelling through the Consortium for labelling for the Environment, Animal Welfare and Regenerative Farming (CLEAR) campaign. With eco-labelling an increasingly likely scenario, much of the work has been going towards ensuring that agroecological farming has a seat at the table when government decides on the shape of future labelling reform.
- With the demise of many small abattoirs, which is a particular difficulty for small producers wanting to provide beef and lamb to local customers, Pfl members have been actively campaigning as members of the Abattoir Sector Group (ASG) since 2020. While tangible progress remains elusive, it appears that government is now taking the issues much more seriously.
- New, modern Pfl branding has been designed and introduced across many Pfl assets including clothing, banners and a gazebo. Two salaried positions, a head of communications and a content manager – have professionalised the marketing communications output and earned well-earned rises in traditional and digital and social media metrics.
- Supply chain development was difficult in the early days but there are signs of movement now. In early 2022, online grocery retailer Abel and Cole (turnover £100m) partnered with Pfl and a certified butcher to launch a new range of 100% pasture-fed products. The Green Butcher is also selling into Planet Organic, a chain of upmarket supermarkets in the south of England. Two active and enthusiastic supply chain managers are co-ordinating inquires for Pfl meat and availability across the country. Many certified Pfl farmers do not have the quantity of animals a potential customer might want on their own – but by pooling resources, the supply managers can often make it happen.
- The Grady + Robinson leather project has been launched during London Design Week – producing high-end goods from the hides of Pfl animals. This, together with a forthcoming collaboration on the production of Pfl wool, shows Pfl delivering on its promise to encourage use of all the animal – from nose-to-tail and using the fifth quarter too.

## Discussion

Pasture for Life started out as the vision of three men, one academic and two farmers, in the UK 13 years ago. It made its way slowly through the 'introduction' stage, in business terms often characterised by low sales and high costs. In the early days Pfl was managed by a small team of enthusiastic people, mainly farmers, doing many different tasks for no payment – so costs were kept low. In the past three years things have changed dramatically – more funding has enabled a slightly bigger team of people paid for doing jobs they have specialisms in. The environment in which Pfl is now working has also changed significantly. Regenerative farming has become a 'buzz' word in agricultural circles. Improving soil health through the re-introduction of

grazing ruminants is more of a priority, and the move away from junk food to nutritionally dense, naturally produced foods, is also rising up the consumer agenda.

Executive director Jimmy Woodrow believes the public hold the key to future success: “We can hope that the government gets behind what we are doing from a policy perspective,” he says. “I think we can feel confident that the academics and researchers are going to provide the evidence to show that what we are doing is really positive for the environment, animal health and welfare and for human health, but it ultimately requires the public to seek out Pasture for Life products.”

In a film made to celebrate ten years of the Pfl (Pasture for Life – A short history 2022), beef farmer and Pfl co-founder John Turner said: “The success comes from the people who are mainly farmers. Just to see an organisation that is so well regarded across the industry and the political spectrum as well, and for that to have been achieved in ten years is actually something quite special. I can’t think of any other farming organisation that has achieved so much in such a small amount of time, without compromising any of its standards or core values.”

The future looks good for Pfl and there are high hopes of reaching 1000 members soon and onto the second thousand as soon as possible after that – as the more members there are, the more core funding there is. There are plans for a new website, with a members’ only area to house the question-and-answer forum and Pfl livestock marketplace, and for a project that will delve deeper into the economics of Pfl production – to provide further positive evidence for this way of farming.

## Conclusions

Pasture for Life has come a long way from its first meetings of a handful of farmers in the upstairs room of a country pub. Pasture for Life now often trips off the tongues of people across the farming industry and increasingly in food businesses.

Interestingly, it is not only farmers who are 100% grass or pasture-fed who are joining the movement, but also farmers who are recognising the benefits of reducing inputs or extending their grazing season or just making much more of the cheapest and most versatile asset on their farm – their grass and their pasture. Long may this continue.

## Acknowledgements

Pasture for Life [www.pastureforlife.org](http://www.pastureforlife.org)

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