In five years, the market for grass-finished beef has grown from less than 50 producers to 1,200 companies, said Allan Nation, editor, The Stockman Grass Farmer.

Though grass-finished beef amounts to only one percent of the market, that one percent amounts to a billion dollars, he told producers at the recent Nebraska Grazing Conference.

“What we are learning about how to finish an animal with no grain can be used by others to greatly lower the amount of grain fed and allow a producer to finish an animal much more cheaply than in the present high-grain system,” he said.

Success with grass finishing requires early-maturing, mid-sized cattle, Nation said. A steer would finish at about 1100 pounds and a heifer slightly less. Today, most cattle in Nebraska are bigger than that. The heifers finish at about the optimum size for steers, he said.

Nation recommends that producers start with heifers because they finish and mature faster than the males. In fact, a good animal for a producer who just wants to “dip your toe into grass finishing” is a heifer that didn’t breed.

To develop select-to-prime grade fat marbling, an animal must gain 1.67 pounds per day for at least 60 days, Nation said.

For stocker cattle, high-protein, cool-season pastures are great, he said, but it’s really hard to gain fat on that kind of ration. To gain fat, the animal has to have energy. The energy in the grass comes from the sun, Nation said, and so the highest energy is in the top two or three inches of the grass blade.

“So for a finishing system, we have to have a luxury grazing system where we allow the animals to cream the top two or three inches of the grass to get that high energy component,” he said.

Some people worry that they will waste grass, but producers can clean up the remaining grass with stockers or pairs.

To critics who say grass-finished beef is not as palatable as grain-finished, Nation says that tallgrass beef in Kansas yields a higher percentage of prime grade animals than grain finished.

Grass energy is highest late in the day and when the days are longer, so the easiest time of year to finish animals is on the longest day of the year. The best grass-finished beef is usually around the Fourth of July.

Going into the fall, when the grass comes out of its summer slump from the heat and starts to grow again, we have a second spring, Nation said. The grass is low in dry matter then and gains drop. In Nebraska, on cool-season pastures, the animal is about as good as it will get by the end of August – unless the producer holds it into the frost season.

Once the frost hits the grass, it puts dry matter back into it and cattle do excellent. We get a second season after the first light frost where we can really finish animals in Nebraska on cool season grass. We need to feed them some hay to keep the dry matter high, though.

For those who want to try entering a new market, the grass-finished beef market offers a lot of opportunities, Nation said. And the techniques producers are learning in order to produce select-to-prime grade grass-finished beef can help other producers to reduce grain costs.

For more information about grass-finished beef, click here . For grassfed meats of various kinds, go to

: The Nebraska Food Cooperative