

FACT SHEET: Beef from Farm to Fork

<p>Background</p>	<p>The beef industry is complex, with many types of producers active in all 50 states. Although each segment is very different from the next, they must work together to bring a high quality, safe, wholesome, nutritious and delicious product to dinner tables around the world.</p> <p>There are about 800,000 beef producers in this country, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Nearly all of these are individual or family businesses. These operations vary in size from a few cows to thousands, depending on the region and other sources of income the family may have. According to USDA's 2002 Census of Agriculture, the average herd size in this country is 40 head of cattle.</p>
<p>Cows and Calves</p>	<p>The process starts with a cow-calf producer who breeds animals based on the desire for a calf that will produce great tasting beef. The producer considers other factors too, including desired calving characteristics and whether the calves are suitable for the environment in which they will be raised. For instance, in hot regions, Brahman and Brahman-cross cattle may be selected for their ability to withstand warmer weather. Cow-calf producers raise their cattle on range or pasture land for up to a year after which, many are sold to other beef cattle operations. Some producers keep their cattle on the range to produce grass-finished beef.</p>
<p>Animal Marketing</p>	<p>When cattle are ready for market, many are sold through a livestock auction market, which transfers ownership to the next level in the production chain. These markets, located throughout rural America, seek to obtain as much value as possible for the animal, bringing in many different potential buyers. There are 815 fixed auction facilities in the United States, according to the USDA Packers and Stockyards Administration.</p> <p>Some of the buyers will be stockers, who purchase yearling animals (about 1 year old) and put them on pasture until they are ready to go into feedlots. These animals are usually kept for about five months, depending on the region and its growing season.</p>
<p>Cattle Feeding</p>	<p>Feedlot operators vary in size, from a few hundred head to as many as 100,000 head. Most are located in the Cornbelt, the Southwest and the Pacific Northwest, providing grain (usually corn) and roughage to animals to generate a consistently tender and flavorful beef product. Animals are normally placed in feedlots when they are 12 to 18 months of age and stay there approximately three to six months.</p> <p>Feedlot owners may purchase cattle or operate a contract feedlot, where the cattle are owned by stockers or cow-calf operators who maintain ownership of the animals throughout the feeding process. Some ranchers and stockers also operate their own feeding facilities. According to USDA, there were about 2,200 cattle feedlots in the United States in 2002 that had a capacity of 1,000 head or more.</p>
<p>Beef Packing Process</p>	<p>Feedlots have marketing arrangements with meat packing plants, which typically purchase animals when they are anywhere from 18 to 22 months old or weigh between 1,000 and 1,250 pounds. These facilities must follow strict government guidelines that provide oversight for their operation.</p> <p>USDA inspectors are stationed in all federally inspected (FI) packing plants, overseeing the operation's safety, quality and animal welfare standards from the time the animals come into the plant to the time the meat leaves it. As of 2004, there were 689 FI meat packing plants for cattle and calves across the United States. Plants that do not sell meat outside of their states are not required to have USDA inspectors; however, they are required to have state inspection systems that meet or exceed the USDA's inspection requirements.</p> <p>Most packing facilities fabricate major primal cuts (chuck, round, rib, loin) into subprimal cuts that are sold to retailers and foodservice operators. Some plants sell subprimals to meat processors, who cut them into individual steaks and roasts for restaurants, or create marinated or pre-cooked items.</p>
<p>Meat Marketing and the Consumer</p>	<p>Finally, retailers and foodservice operators sell these beef products to consumers in supermarkets or restaurants. Those outlets are responsible for assuring the final safety and quality of the products.</p> <p>Ultimately, consumers dictate the actions of the beef production chain, from farm to fork, by determining what kinds of beef they want and at what price. Market signals start with the consumer and are passed back through the chain. Beef producers are meeting the needs of consumers; reading the demand signals from the meat case and their customers throughout the production chain. For instance, beef cattle are now much leaner than just a decade ago as a result of the demand for products that have less fat. As a result, there are now 29 cuts of beef that fit government guidelines for lean.</p>

