

THE MULTI-STEP PATH TO A BETTER U.S. BEEF SUPPLY CHAIN

RECOGNIZING CREDIBLY BETTER BEEF REQUIRES VERIFYING RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT AND POSITIVE OUTCOMES AT EACH STEP OF AN ANIMAL’S JOURNEY FROM RANCHES AND FARMS TO FEEDLOTS AND PROCESSORS, INCLUDING HOW FEED SUCH AS CORN WAS PRODUCED.



COW-CALF OPERATIONS

During the first “phase” of beef production, all calves remain in herds with their mothers on cow-calf operations until they are 4–7 months old, weighing 400–700 lbs. Although all cattle come from farm and ranch grazing operations, affecting widespread change at the ranch level is difficult because the vast majority of ranches are small and dispersed. Only 9% of cow-calf operations have herds over 100 head.



BACKGROUNDER OPERATIONS

Most cow-calf operators sell their weaned “feeder” calves at a livestock auction market, where backgrounders may buy them. Backgrounders manage calves through the stressful adjustment period following weaning and shipment, when they are most vulnerable to disease. Backgrounders transition weaned calves to finishing either on grass or grain. Weight leaving the backgrounding operation is 600–800 lbs. at 6–8 months of age.



STOCKER OPERATIONS

Stocker operators put weaned “feeder” calves back on pasture, where they continue grazing to put on weight until they are 12–18 months and 800–1100 lbs. Stocker animals can come directly from a backgrounder (described at left), or where conditions exist, they can come directly from a cow-calf operator.



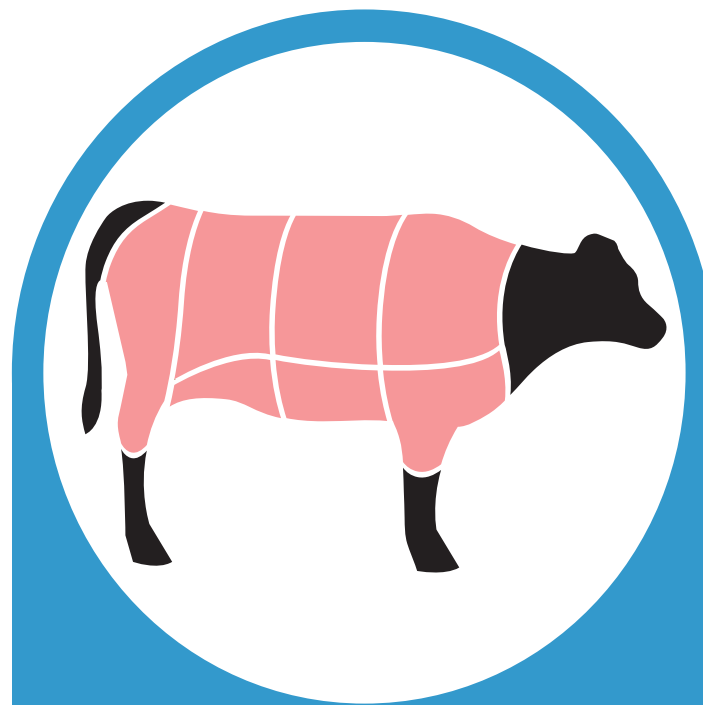
GRASS-FINISHING

The approximately 3% of U.S. beef that is marketed as “grass-fed” or “pasture-raised” may come from animals that are fattened for slaughter or “finished” on the ranches on which they were born, or on specialized “grass finishing” operations. Grass-finished animals typically reach harvest weight when they are 30–36 months, and thus take longer to produce, on average, than grain-finished animals.



FEEDLOTS

The vast majority of calves (about 97%) are fattened or “finished” at feedlots, where they live in pens and eat grain (mostly corn, corn byproducts such as distiller’s grains, and soy-derived feeds) until they are 16–24 months and 1100–1400 lbs. Feedlots are typically large operations with hundreds to thousands of cattle, which spend 4–6 months there. Only 5% of feedlots have a capacity of over 100 head, but these 5% of feedlots produce between 80% and 90% of all grain-finished cattle.



PROCESSING

Cattle are transported to a packing plant to be slaughtered at 16–24 months (grain-finished) or 30–36 months (grass-finished), when they weigh 1100–1400 lbs. USDA inspectors oversee the process and grade the carcass based on marbling (fat content, rather than based on health or environmental attributes). The meat is cut, boxed, and sent to retail outlets. This phase of the supply chain is highly concentrated—four giant meatpackers control more than 80% of the cattle slaughtered to produce beef in the United States.



SUPERMARKETS & RETAILERS

Retailers package the meat for consumer purchase and sell it either in supermarkets, restaurants, or institutions such as schools and hospitals. They have diverse stakeholders and must consider opportunities for growth, their public-facing image, and long-term price trends as well as consumer trends, regulations, competing products, and risks to their supply chains—from climate change to mad cow disease. Retail buyers, who are in a constant push-pull dialogue with their customers and suppliers, are well-positioned to drive positive change in the U.S. beef supply chain—if they choose to act...

Ranch and Farm Grazing Operations

Feedlot / Feedyard (Animal Feeding) Operations

Meatpacking, Processing, and Retail Operations

*These figures are general. Age to maturity and average slaughter weights can vary in different regions throughout the country.