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.

Most cow-calf operators sell their weaned “feeder” calves back on to backgrounders, which 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.

Stockers 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.

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.

Ranch and Farm Grazing Operations

Backgrounder Operations

Stocker Operations

Grass-Finishing Operations

Feedlots

Processing

Supermarkets & Retailers

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