

# RESPONSIBLE SOURCING



## Production process

BEEF CATTLE

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### Animal welfare considerations

- Extended time in feedlots
  - Husbandry procedures such as hot iron branding, castration, disbudding, dehorning and spaying without pain management
  - Long distance transport
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### Definitions

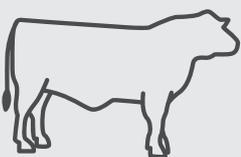
**Calf** – Young cattle with no permanent incisor teeth, either male or female.

**Steer** – Castrated male cattle.

**Heifer** – Female cattle who have not yet produced a calf and under 42 months of age.

**Bull** – Mature male cattle with intact sexual organs and capable of reproduction.

**Cow** – Mature female cattle with eight permanent incisor teeth used for breeding.



Cows are curious, playful and intelligent animals. Descended from Aurochs and the most common type of ungulate (primarily large mammals with hooves), they have been domesticated for over 10,000 years.

Most domesticated breeds have horns, although breeding strategies have allowed for more 'polled' (hornless) cows. A cow's natural lifespan can be up to 20 years, however in commercial beef production a cow will likely only live for 14-22 months if raised for meat.

Beef cattle are reared outdoors in all Australian states and territories. Southern areas with good pasture have herds with a high density of stock and northern areas, with less feed, have herds with a low density of stock. Queensland and New South Wales account for 69% of beef and veal production. While Australia is the world's seventh largest beef-producing country, it is the world's second largest exporter of beef.

Beef cattle come in many breeds and crossbreeds, some suited to mild climates and some to tropical climates. Some are from the dairy industry where cows may be mated with beef bulls to improve their calves' meat quality.

Beef calves are usually weaned at 8–10 months of age and can be sold for slaughter or veal production. They can be weaned at younger ages if cows are losing body condition and, in a severe drought, calves can be weaned as young as six weeks provided they are given a high protein diet.

Although abrupt separation of the cow and calf is a common way to wean calves, it is stressful for both. The least stressful weaning method is 'yard weaning' where calves are given good-quality feed in a yard, while their mothers graze in an adjoining paddock and, a few days later, are moved further away. It is labour intensive but calves benefit by getting used to yards, people, handling and group socialisation. In addition, being in yards makes it easy to do health checks, vaccinations and parasite control. This weaning method is important if calves are going to a feedlot or are destined for live export.

As with all livestock production systems, animals may be subjected to painful procedures often without the use of pain relief. Cattle producers aim to mark (identify), disbud/dehorn if necessary, and castrate calves before weaning. Calves may be castrated using a knife or rubber rings. Cattle who have horns are usually disbudded (removal of the horn bud before it attaches to the skull) or dehorned (removal of the horn). The horn bud may be removed up to eight weeks of age by heat cauterisation or

dehorning knife. Where the herd is spread over a large area (e.g. rangeland cattle), some animals may miss musters and unfortunately will be older when these procedures occur, creating a larger wound and extending healing time.

Identification of cattle is used for on-farm management and tracking from birth to slaughter, but some methods are painful. Microchips or other electronic methods cause little discomfort. Tattooing and tagging need to be done humanely and, if branding is necessary, freeze branding should be used but not on the cheek or other sensitive areas. Hot iron (fire) branding and ear mutilation are common yet unnecessary and painful marking methods.

After weaning, management and feeding practices are fitted to beef production targets, for example to reach a particular age or weight for the domestic or export market. Some cattle may go to a feedlot where the diet is aimed to have the animal reach a high degree of marbling (intramuscular fat) before going to slaughter. At feedlots, cattle movement is restricted, the environment is barren, they have no access to pasture and animals may be exposed to extremes of heat or cold, excessive dust or mud, and respiratory disorders.

Beef cattle producers are obliged to provide their stock with feed and water. They are responsible for cattle safety by providing good fencing, yards, handling facilities and shelter against weather extremes; as well as protection from predators and toxic plants. Cattle should be handled by skilled workers and, if necessary, using well-trained dogs who are under effective control. Producers should have contingency plans to cover disasters such as fire, flood, drought and major cattle disease outbreaks.

Once they've reached slaughter weight, cattle are transported to an abattoir, either directly or via a saleyard. Transport is inherently stressful for farm animals as they are exposed to unfamiliar conditions, handling, people, and other animals, so it is better to transport animals directly to their destination rather than via a saleyard where they are confronted with similar stressors. Animals are without water during the transport process and legally may be off water for up to 48 hours.

Because of Australia's vast size, many cattle undergo long-distance transport before being slaughtered or shipped for live export. Ideally, all cattle should be humanely slaughtered as close as possible to where they were reared. The RSPCA is opposed to the live export of animals for slaughter. At the abattoir, good handling and effective stunning to ensure the animal is unconscious prior to bleeding out are paramount to humane slaughter.

**For more information visit the RSPCA's Knowledgebase [kb.rspca.org.au](http://kb.rspca.org.au)**