

# What happens on a feedlot?

- There are approximately 450 accredited beef cattle feedlots in Australia with over 95% family owned and operated. They are generally located in areas which have a ready access to grain, cattle and water.
- In Australia, feedlot cattle spend around 85-90% of their lives on pasture. Cattle are generally taken to feedlots because pasture quality does not allow cattle to reach marketable weights during poor seasons or particular times of the year when rain doesn't fall. Notably, pastures are deficient in northern Australia during the drier winter months and in southern Australia during the drier summer months. In addition, customers in both domestic and export markets actively demand grain fed beef due to the industry's ability to consistently supply market requirements in terms of quality and quantity.
- Cattle are first transported to feedlots by truck. Animal welfare transport requirements are governed by legislation and codes of practice which are mandated under the feedlot industry's quality assurance program. Transport time requirements are also stipulated in driver fatigue legislation. It is in both the interests of cattle and the lot feeder for cattle to travel as little distance as possible.
- A short time after arrival, a process called 'induction' is then undertaken. This involves a number of steps. Key details such as breed, age and weight are recorded. This information is used to identify cattle which have similar attributes so they can be yarded together. Cattle are then given treatments to eradicate internal/ external parasites along with bacterial/ viral diseases picked up prior to feedlot entry. Cattle are also provided a radio frequency ear tag as required by the beef industry's National Livestock Identification Scheme. Some cattle may be treated with Hormone Growth Promotants (HGP's) depending on customer requirements. HGP's are naturally occurring hormones used by some grass fed and grain fed beef producers to help cattle meet market weight at an earlier age. They have been used in the Australian beef industry for over 30 years and have been approved by the World Health Organisation and the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority as safe for both consumers and cattle.
- Cattle are then placed in a yard according to their breed, age, weight and likely market destination (ie domestic or export). The domestic market is our largest single market whilst 65% of Australian beef production is exported each year. Each yard is up to 6,000m<sup>2</sup> in size - enough space for all cattle to exhibit natural behaviour in terms of movement and interaction. Plentiful quantities of clean fresh water and feed are supplied 24 hours a day, 365 days per year. Feedlot cattle diets are formulated by nutritionists and comprise energy, protein, fibre, minerals and vitamins. Final weights vary depending on the number of days cattle stay at the feedlot and the energy levels of the feed supplied. The average time cattle spend on a feedlot is between 50-120 days or around 10-15% of their lifespan.
- Feedlots employ stockmen and women who supervise cattle each day. These key staff members are specifically trained in animal welfare, husbandry and handling along with quickly identifying any animals that may appear sick so that they can be isolated from other animals and treated as soon as possible. Feedlots also employ qualified veterinarians to oversee their animal health programs. As feedlot cattle are also protected from floods, fire, droughts and wild animals; mortality levels are lower than in extensive grazing systems.
- The Australian feedlot industry recognises that it has a social and ethical obligation to customers, communities and Government to continually deliver demonstrable animal welfare, environment and food safety improvements if it wishes to maintain the trust and confidence of these key stakeholders. The National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme (NFAS) was the first agriculturally based quality assurance program implemented in Australia and was proactively developed to ensure that the every accredited feedlot met legislative requirements and exceeded community expectations. It is managed by a committee comprising predominantly state Government representatives and is recognised under various state legislation. Under the scheme, feedlots are independently audited each year to ensure compliance with animal welfare, environment, food safety and product integrity legislation. NFAS requirements are continually updated as developments in legislation, codes of practice, guidelines, technology, best management practice and science occur.
- NFAS requires manure to be regularly removed from yards. It is also in the commercial interest of lot feeders to regularly remove manure as yard conditions are correlated with cattle performance. Manure is also a valuable soil conditioner which is composted and sold to farms, nurseries and market gardens. It can also be used to sequester carbon or produce energy. Any runoff from yards is collected in ponds and also used to irrigate crops. Licensing and audit requirements within Australia's strict environmental legislation and the industries quality assurance program (NFAS) ensure that soil, water and air pollution is prevented. It is in the interest of both the industry and the community that lot feeders are good environmental stewards.
- Feedlots offer a number of environmental benefits. Beef feedlot production is more efficient, with less land and cattle required, less stress placed on the environment and less greenhouse gas emissions produced. From an emissions perspective, superior nutrition enables feedlot cattle to reach market weights more quickly, meaning they produce fewer emissions over their lifetime. In fact, research has shown that grain fed beef requires; 45% less land, 76% less water, 49% less feed, while generating 51% less manure; and 42% fewer carbon emissions. Control over production inputs and outputs also provides more potential to reduce emissions further, reuse methane as a renewable energy source or use manure as a soil sequestration opportunity.
- Once cattle reach a condition which meets market or customer requirements, they are then transported for processing. A series of steps are undertaken to minimise cattle stress during transport and prior to processing. This not only maximises cattle health and welfare but also leads to better beef eating quality. Steps to minimise cattle stress include reducing transport times, time in lairage and preventing cattle socialisation with unfamiliar animals.