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THE PEOPLE'S WATCHDOG

## A FLOOD OF EXCUSES

How insurers try to justify price hikes

## WRAP RAGE

Our fight against absurd packaging

## THE FACTS ON FISH OIL

## TESTS

Espresso machines  
Pizza makers  
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*What's your beef?*

We take the trip from pasture to plate







## Pleased to meat you

From paddock to plate – where did your steak come from and what happened along the way? **Elise Dalley** explains

**F**rom direct sales between farmer and butcher, to a complex chain of agents, finishers, processors and wholesalers, the path from paddock to plate can vary widely.

### Down on the farm

There are more than 70,000 beef producers in Australia managing 27 million head of cattle. But the cattle aren't all treated in the same way. The market has developed two main ways of processing meat to satisfy consumer demands.

The **sustainable path**: For farms practising this model, animal treatment, tracing of origin (or provenance) and soil health are central themes, as is the health value of the meat. Rotational grazing, where cattle are moved around rather than being left in one pasture, is popular as it gives the grass an opportunity to regrow and minimises compaction of soil. However, this model is resource intensive, and it can result in more expensive meat for consumers.

The **industrial production model** is how most beef finds its way to the supermarket shelves. Here, making a profit

tends to take precedence over soil health, provenance and in some cases even quality of the meat. Cows raised this way generally spend their early months or years on a farm, before moving to a feedlot to be fattened on a high-protein grain diet.

Soil aides, such as phosphate, can provide farmers with near-immediate boosts in pasture growth.

While these chemicals don't pose a direct risk to consumers, the nutritional standard of grass that has been exposed to chemicals and not allowed to flourish naturally by rotational grazing and complementary farming methods is questioned by advocates of biodynamics. Some are critical of the nutritional density (the protein content and number of other

nutrients present) of beef raised under industrial practices.

### Feedlot frenzy

A feedlot, or "finishing yard", is a confined area where cattle are fed a high-protein, grain-based diet to maximise weight gain before sale. As most cattle are sold by the kilogram rather than by quality, it's common for farmers to feel pressured to produce cattle of a marketable weight as quickly as possible, regardless of factors that can affect animal growth, such as climate and rainfall. This has contributed to the development of feedlots.

Dougal Gordon, CEO of the Australian Lot Feeders' Association, the peak national body for the feedlot industry, says that in addition to this, consumer demand for grain-fed beef has encouraged feedlot "finishing" of cattle. Grain-fed beef has a softer texture and richer flavour than pasture-fed beef. In order to market beef

**33kg**

Estimated amount of beef each Australian ate in the 2010-11 financial year

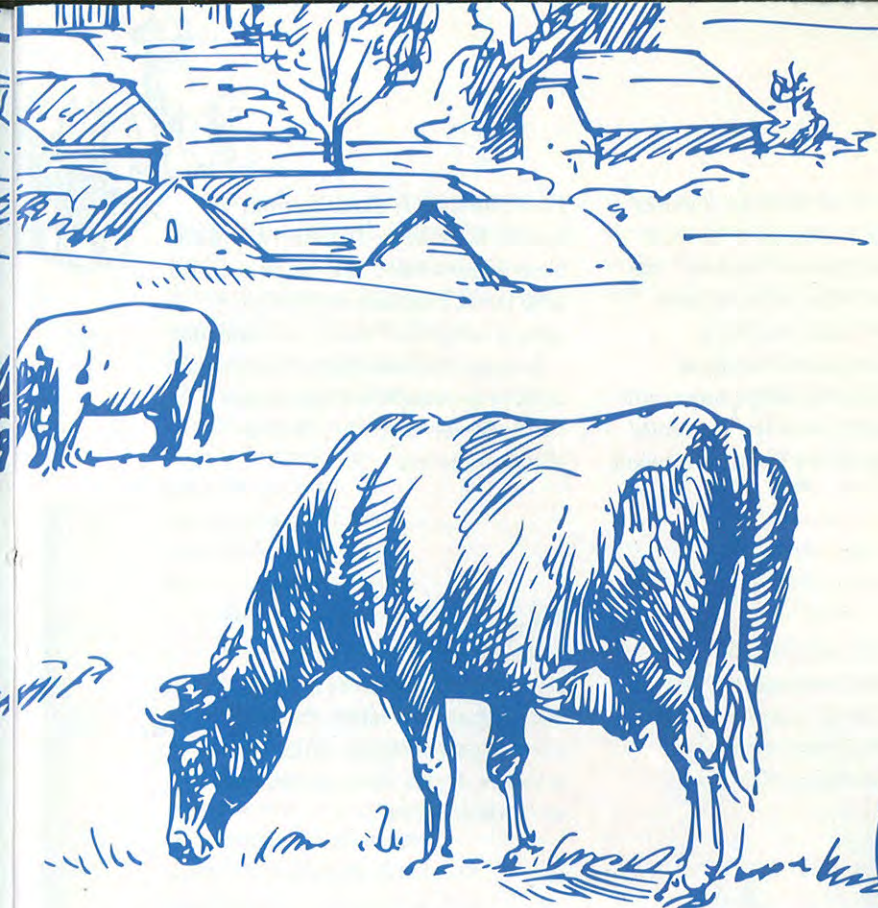
**Queensland**

Biggest producer of beef in the country

**2.1m tonnes**

Beef and veal produced in Australia in 2010-11\*





**9m<sup>2</sup>**

Minimum stocking density required per head of cattle in an Australian feedlot

as grain fed in Australia, cows must spend between 60 and 70 days in a feedlot on a high-protein grain diet. For export, this requirement increases to 100 days.

Australia currently has about 600 accredited feedlots and, according to Gordon, between 70-80% of all cattle produced for Coles and Woolworths spend two to three months in a feedlot before being taken to the abattoir.

### It's common for farmers to feel pressured to produce cattle of a marketable weight as quickly as possible

Glenys Oogjes, executive director of animal protection organisation Animals Australia, says that while the feedlot sector is well regulated, there are some problems with the current standard. "There is a problem inherent in taking a grazing animal out of a paddock and putting it on a high-protein grain diet in a pen. From a behavioural and welfare point of view, we are concerned."

Inadequate shelter for animals in feedlots is also a concern. Some do offer shade, according to Gordon, but it is not a legal requirement. The RSPCA argues that even cattle breeds adapted to hotter

climates naturally seek shade, and feedlots should provide this shade without compromising the ability to dry out the pens following wet weather. Gordon says about 60% of cattle in all feedlots currently have access to shade and believes the remainder are mostly located in southern and alpine areas.

Upon arriving at a feedlot, some cattle are given hormone growth promotants

(HGP). While the World Health Organization and the Australian government allow the use of HGPs in animals for human consumption, the EU does not. Gordon says animals that have been injected with HGPs – which can improve growth rates by 15-30% – aren't inferior to those who haven't, although it does reduce marbling, which contributes to flavour. Coles has stopped selling beef with HGPs and Woolworths also offers some HGP-free beef products.

Accredited feedlots are independently audited on an annual basis for animal welfare, environmental and food safety ▶

#### WHERE'S THE BEEF?

##### Grass fed or pasture raised

Beef that has been pasture fed is known for its intense beef flavour and firm texture.

##### Grain-fed or feedlot beef

The industry standard requires steers to remain in a feedlot for 60 days and heifers for 70 in order to be sold on the domestic Australian market as "grain fed". Grain-fed beef has a soft texture and rich flavour.

##### Organic beef

The Australian Certified Organic Standard

2010 governs certification

for both Australian Certified Organic and Organic Growers of Australia. Farms, abattoirs and butchers can apply for certification. Feedlot

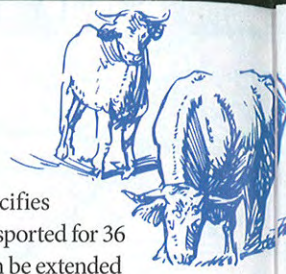
feeding of livestock is not permitted, although in certain cases farming systems that are "naturally ideal" for finishing livestock may be permitted when the natural environment is not suited to fattening animals. To be labelled organic, beef must only eat feed that is certified 100% organic.

**Biodynamic beef** Biodynamic farming incorporates organic principles and places emphasis on maintaining balance in the soil, noting the importance of caring for not only animals and plants, but also the soil from which they are able to grow.

**Free-range beef** Similar to beef advertised as grass or pasture fed, free-range beef generally means animals haven't been confined in a feedlot.

**Hormone free** During time on a feedlot, it's common for beef cattle to be injected with slow-release HGPs to speed up fattening before sale.





issues. However, visits are announced and results are not publically available.

### Off to the abattoir

From an animal welfare perspective, one of the shortest but most important steps in the paddock-to-plate journey is transportation to and treatment within the abattoir. "What happens

to the animal in the time that it moves from farm to kill is the part you want to guarantee is the most humane," says Grant Hilliard, owner of sustainable meat supplier Feather and Bone.

The increasing centralisation of abattoirs in Australia means more cattle are facing lengthy journeys. *The Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals:*

*Land Transport of Cattle* specifies mature, fit cattle may be transported for 36 hours without water. This can be extended to 48 hours if animals aren't showing signs of fatigue and weather is favourable.

Despite this, some research has found cattle to be considerably dehydrated and noticeably tired after 24 hours of transportation.



### WA

Abattoirs are audited at least twice annually and audits are usually announced. Unannounced audits will occur if considered appropriate.

### NT

Two audits each year (where practicable given wet weather season) and all visits are announced due to large travelling distance between Darwin and remote cattle stations.

### QLD

One audit per year and more often where compliance is not demonstrated. Random checks are also part of routine verification activities. Audits can be announced and unannounced.

### NSW

Two audits per year, plus one dedicated animal welfare audit. Frequency is performance-based and can be up to once per month for poorly performing abattoirs. Additional inspections may also occur. More than 90% of total audits and inspections are unannounced.

### VIC

Four audits per year, possibly more often in the case of non-conformance or less in the case whereby proof of a capacity to self-manage quality assurance is demonstrated. Additional unannounced inspections can also be conducted.

### SA

At least two audits each year, more often after evidence of non-compliance. Majority of visits are unannounced; however, in some instances audits may be announced where company representatives are required to spent significant time with the auditor.

### TAS

A minimum of two announced audits per year. Unannounced audits can be conducted if the department is made aware of possible hygiene breaches or as a random measure to encourage compliance.

(Note: Audits are official visits, most often announced, to examine business records for compliance throughout a certain period. In some states, additional inspections are carried out in between audits for spot checks. These can be announced or unannounced.)



The regulation of abattoirs happens at a state or federal level, depending upon whether the abattoir is used for export or domestic purposes. Export abattoirs are regulated by DAFF Biosecurity, while abattoirs working wholly for domestic purposes are regulated by individual state authorities that enforce a national standard (see left). Meat that passes through an export-accredited abattoir may also be sold domestically.

While export abattoirs require that a DAFF Biosecurity veterinarian be on site during the slaughter process, domestic meat abattoirs need only employ an internal animal welfare officer. Although the Australian Meat Industry Council, the peak representative body of meat processors and retailers, guarantees best practice welfare standards in all abattoirs, Animals Australia campaign director Lyn White says the lack of independent oversight in domestic abattoirs leaves farm animals “incredibly vulnerable”.

According to Animals Australia’s Oogjes, animal welfare is generally of a higher standard in export-accredited abattoirs, due to the vet’s legal duty to report welfare breaches or health-related issues to both DAFF Biosecurity and the relevant state authority. Nevertheless, a Freedom of Information request, lodged by Oogjes in March last year and shared with CHOICE, details 55 reports of animal welfare breaches at Australia export abattoirs between 2009 and 2011, including many relating to ill, injured, moribund or “DOA” animals at export facilities. The breaches ranged from animals with pink eye and gangrene infections to ingrown horns, broken limbs and cattle in the very late stages of pregnancy, some full term and calving on arrival. Emergency slaughter was

often required, yet in many cases it was not clear what action, if any, state authorities took after receiving incident reports from DAFF Biosecurity vets.

While the regulatory mechanisms vary in export and domestic abattoirs, little information is available to consumers about audit results of the abattoirs our meat comes from. Name-and-shame registers exist in some states, and the NSW Food Authority recently uncovered animal welfare breaches at all 10 domestic slaughterhouses in that state. Despite this, there’s no way of knowing which meat processing facility the steak you buy at the supermarket has come from.

Animals Australia, together with the RSPCA, has called for the introduction of CCTV in all domestic abattoirs to increase transparency in an effort to protect both animal welfare and consumer interests.

### Provenance to plate

Once leaving the abattoir, beef can be broken down in dedicated processing facilities and sold by the box or pallet load, or on-sold as a whole carcass. The National Livestock Identification System ensures all beef produced for consumption in Australia can be traced from property of birth to slaughter for biosecurity, meat safety and product integrity. However, once the animal is broken down and packaged for sale on the supermarket shelf, this flow of information stops and in most cases is not passed onto the consumer.

“Consumers aren’t too worried about which farm [the cow comes from] – they just want confidence that Coles knows.”

argues Allister Watson, Coles general manager of meat. Some Coles premium steaks do include provenance, though processing details aren’t on the packaging. Provenance is also not on the packaging for most beef sold at Woolworths. And while Aldi claims every piece of beef it sells is traceable, the information is unavailable at the point of sale.

### Everyday staple or luxury?

Given the sustainable models of farming generally result in higher prices on the shelf, is everyday consumption of meat a luxury we can really afford? Hilliard believes it is, provided the process is managed with respect. “We need to know which farm it came from, how the animals were grown, how they were transported and finally how they were slaughtered.”

The first step? Move back to the soil, he says, and work upwards. The health of the soil can do a lot for the quality of grass and, in turn, the health of the animals upon it. “At a very direct level, ruminants [animals who break down plant-based material and are characterised by their four-chambered stomach] have a very strong part to play in increasing soil fertility,” Hilliard says. “If they’re used well for this purpose – moved quickly from area to area, working in unison with other animals to stimulate soil health – pastures will improve.”

Another move, already prevalent in the fine dining restaurant scene, is one back towards the use of secondary cuts and an acknowledgement of provenance. Either way, it’s clear that if you’re interested in sustainability, the more transparent the process means the more peace of mind you’ll have that you’re purchasing a sustainably grown, quality cut of beef. ■

**10,000**

Number of beef cows  
Coles purchases  
each week

**11,500**

Number of beef cows  
Woolworths  
purchases each week

