

FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

~ BEEF CATTLE ~

Beef cattle are raised to gain as much weight as possible in the shortest time. This usually means a grueling ride to a feedlot where the animal is subjected to inappropriate feed, social chaos and crowded living conditions.

OVERVIEW

Of all food animal production, beef production appears to have changed the least in the past 100 years. On the positive side, cattle spend much of their lives on the open range (in free-range conditions). Mothers and their young have the opportunity to interact naturally. However, beef production still raises some serious animal welfare concerns, particularly in feedlots.

In 2009, there were **13.94 million** cattle and calves in Canada. Over three million cattle were slaughtered. The discovery of BSE (Mad Cow Disease) in 2003 greatly affected the cattle industry in Canada.

LIFE ON A CATTLE FARM

Beef cattle begin their lives on the open range where they are born. They typically spend the next four to five months grazing with their mothers, until they reach a weight of about 160 to 230 kilograms. The calves are then weaned from their mothers, and may be sent to a “back-grounding” lot, where their diets are changed from grass to hay and grains to begin fattening them for slaughter.

When they reach around 400 kilograms, the cattle are moved to feedlots. Calves who are not “back-grounded” go directly to feedlots.

Feedlots raise serious welfare concerns. These “finishing” lots range in size, with the largest ones accommodating up to **40,000** cattle. Initially the cattle are fed a diet consisting mainly of hay and forages, with their feed gradually becoming 90% grain. Grain feed causes the cattle to gain weight more quickly than grass, thus making them fatter and their meat more appealing to consumers. However, grain feeding wreaks havoc with the animals’ digestive systems because cattle are ruminants suited to eating grass, not grains. Grain can cause bloating, diarrhea and extreme discomfort.

More and more, larger feedlots are becoming the norm in Canada. In feedlots, cattle are forced to live in extremely crowded and filthy conditions, often causing severe eye, respiratory and skin conditions, as well as stress and anxiety. Cattle are social animals, yet the stable social groupings established on the range are destroyed in feedlots, throwing the animals into social chaos.

PAINFUL PROCEDURES

Branding - Hot-iron branding is used as a way to prove ownership of cattle. It entails pressing a hot metal bar against the animal’s body, causing **third-degree burns**. An animal can be branded several times in his or her lifetime, depending on the number of times the animal changes ownership. Branding is painful and stressful for the animal, is done without anesthetic or analgesia, and can cause weight loss and anorexia.



Beef Cattle in Quebec Feedlot

Castration - Castration, the removal of the testes in male cattle, is usually performed at the same time as branding, when the animal is between two weeks and two months old. Castration is typically performed with a knife, but can also be performed with the emasculator or the elastrator, both of which stop the blood flow to the testes, causing them to eventually fall off. This painful procedure is also performed without anesthetic or analgesia.

Dehorning - Dehorning can be an extremely painful procedure, particularly for older animals whose horns are more developed and full of sensitive nerve endings. It is often performed by stockmen, not veterinarians, and without anesthetic. Because it is so painful for the animals, many must be physically restrained during the procedure.

According to producers, horned cattle cause damage to other animals' hides on the range, in feedlots and during transportation. Furthermore, horned animals take up more space in feedlots and on trucks.

TRANSPORTATION

The transportation of cattle presents serious welfare issues, especially when animals travel long distances. This is the case in Western Canada, as most of the feedlots are in Alberta, and many cattle farms are in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Transport trucks are not heated in winter or cooled in summer, leaving the animals unprotected from inclement weather.

Cattle can be forced to go days without food or even water during transport. According to regulations under the *Health of Animals Act*, cattle may be transported without food, water, or rest for up to 52 hours. However, because these regulations are not adequately enforced, it is feasible that the time without food or water can be even longer.

There are **health problems** such as bruising, injury, shipping fever and stress-related conditions associated with transportation. Because the animals are crowded, they are susceptible to disease from other cattle, particularly if the animals come from feedlots, which can be breeding grounds for disease.



Steer on a trailer in transport to slaughter

Photo credit: Twyla Francois/CETFA

“Downer” cattle are another tragic aspect of the beef industry. Downers are sick or injured animals who are not able to stand or walk on their own. As a result, they have to be dragged off the truck upon arrival at the slaughterhouse. Downer animals should never leave the farm, but instead should be humanely killed on the farm.

ALTERNATIVES

Unlike other organic meat industries, “certified organic” beef does not necessarily mean the animals are raised more humanely. In some cases, they are still sent to feedlots. Though some certified organic bodies have minimum space requirements, others do not, and most allow procedures like castration, branding and dehorning.

The best way to ensure beef has been humanely raised is to purchase beef from cattle not subjected to feedlots which have been fed a diet of grass their entire lives.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The **Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals** is working to end the suffering caused by intensive beef production. You can help make a difference:

- Eliminate, or reduce, the amount of beef you eat, and replace it with other protein-rich foods, such as tofu and beans.
- Don't buy factory-farmed beef. Choose beef that is “grass-finished” or “pasture-raised” (sometimes called “natural” beef). These animals are not sent to feedlots, and spend their entire lives on the range.
- Ask your local grocery store to stock alternatives to factory-farmed meat, eggs and dairy, and to ensure that these alternatives are clearly labeled (contact information, guidelines and suggestions are on our website).

For more information, please contact us.

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