Department of Primary Industries
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Primefact

Market specifications for cattle

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Australian beef competes with beef from other countries and other meats for market share. Supplying carcases that meet the specific requirements of domestic and international customers is crucial in ensuring that Australian beef remains competitive.
Meeting market specifications also contributes to the profitability of beef producing enterprises. End users pay premiums for carcases and cattle that fit specifications, discounting those that don't. Understanding the specifications for different markets enables producers to match their enterprise with those requirements. Regardless of the market, an ability to consistently supply suitable stock benefits both producers and processors.

Market specifications

Individual domestic and international markets are defined by some combination of specifications (Table 1). Producers need to manage their breeding and nutrition programs, and continue to improve their live animal assessment, to ensure the highest percentage of cattle are suitable.

Table 1. Specifications that maybe included in different markets

Live animal	Carcase	Other
weight (full or curfew)	weight (HSCW)	lifetime traceability
sex	ex	accreditation (eg Meat Standards Australia, European Union, grass fed)
fat score	fat depth (p8 & rib)	
breed	hump height	Hormone growth promotant (HGP) use
muscle score	butt shape	
age (dentition)	pH and Meat colour	
	Fat colour & distribution	

Producers should be familiar with the specific requirements of their end market as these can vary between companies. General information is provided for the following market segments.

Store weaners

Store weaners are sold on a liveweight basis and there are no sex or breed restrictions, nor weight or fat specifications. Better muscled weaners consistently sell at a premium with previous analyses of National Livestock Reporting Service data showing that each muscle score increase resulted in an additional 15 to 30c/kg liveweight.

The expanded feedlot sector for angus steers has also resulted in a large shift in supply of purebred angus weaners. Producers should be mindful of the positive impacts of crossbreeding on other parts of their business, particularly in harsher environments where store weaner production is favoured.

Light veal

Calves are processed with carcass weights between 90 and 150kg. There are no sex, breed, or minimum fat requirements although calves that show “bloom”, reflecting good nutrition and no growth setback, are preferred. The number of calves required for this market has declined and there is only one processor producing light veal in NSW. As there are more lucrative markets for heavier carcases, beef calves are usually only supplied during drought. Dairy (and their crosses) bull calves are suited to this market, albeit at reduced grid prices due to their lower yielding carcases.

Butcher

Milk-fed, grass or grain finished, 0-2 tooth steers or heifers with high yielding carcases around 150–220kg are suitable for this market. There are no breed restrictions, although well muscled animals with early to moderate maturity patterns are suitable.

Producers often use terminal sires (generally a European or Composite) and improved pastures or creep feeding to ensure that well muscled carcases also have adequate levels of fat (around 3–8mm P8 fat). The number of animals required for this market is also declining, due to the increased use of ‘boxed beef’ or cryovacs by butchers, and the premiums available for heavier carcases in other markets.

Creep feeding can help finish young cattle for the heavy butcher market.

Photo: Todd Andrews

Supermarket

Heifers and steers with 0 (preferred) to 2 teeth producing 220-320kg carcases with 5-17mm P8 fat are suited to this market. Animals can be grass finished, grain assisted or grain fed (50-80 days) depending on company requirements.

Feedlot entry weights can be around 280-400kg but there is a trend towards heavier carcases requiring heavier entry weights (340–450kg liveweight). Crossbred heifers are favoured for grainfeeding as they are generally cheaper to buy and quicker to finish.

MSA grading principals are used to underpin carcase quality for this market. The use of HGPs (generally the less aggressive oestrogen based) is allowed by some supermarkets but not others. In addition, some market segments have breed restrictions, for example requiring less than 25% of either or both European and *Bos Indicus* content. This ensures that animals

meet fat cover specifications and eating quality, given the short feeding period.

Yard weaning reduces sickness and mortality of cattle that are finished in feedlots.

Photo: Todd Andrews

Feeders

The Australian feedlot industry has expanded to meet increased international demand, surpassing 1.5 million cattle on feed in 2025. Supplying feeder animals to meet this market also allows producers the flexibility of selling younger, lighter animals without the concern of carcase specification downgrades, especially during dry seasons.

Feeder animals are steers and heifers that have been backgrounded on grass, sometimes with supplementary feed, to reach 380 – 500kg liveweight with 0-2 teeth. Incremental discounts generally exist for lighter (350-380kg), heavier (500-550kg) and >2 teeth animals. There are no fat or other specifications although there are often restrictions around pinkeye scar tissue and other visual assessment factors. The NSW feedlot industry is based largely on angus steers.

Heifers fatten quicker than steers and so are generally suitable for shorter feeding periods, with later maturing or crossbreeds helping to reduce over fatness.

Short fed feeders

Steers from all breeds are fed for 100-130 days depending on end markets. For example, high *B. indicus* content steers are fed (mostly in Queensland feedlots) for lower value, commodity markets while Euro x British steers and angus or angus X British steers are fed for branded or higher end service markets. Some heifers can also be fed for this market.

Animals are fed to produce carcase weights of 280–400kg (average 350–360kg). HGP use is generally accepted for lower value, commodity markets but is often not permitted for branded or premium markets.

Mid fed feeders

Angus steers are generally fed for 150-180 days to produce a 350-450kg carcase with Marble Score 2-4+. HGPs may or may not be acceptable, depending on marbling requirements of the final product, including distinguishing between androgen and oestrogen types. Animals may also require lifetime traceability, depending on the feedlot. Moderate to later maturing steers suit this market. Some programs feed angus steers with no HGP for over 200 days, seeking higher marble scores.

Long fed feeders

This market is mostly based on vendor bred (or known Wagyu genetics) F1 Angus x Wagyu steers weighing 400-500kg with and no HGP are grain fed for up to 270-300 days and processed at carcase weights of 420-470kg, averaging 440kg, with marble scores >6.

Purebred or fullblood Wagyu 350-450kg liveweight steers and heifers are also fed for 400 (heifers) to 500 days (steers) to produce a highly marbled carcase weighing up to 500kg.

It is important for producers to maintain stock liveweight gains >0.6kg/hd/d throughout their

life, especially during drought, to ensure that marbling potential is reached. Nutritional setbacks can reduce marbling scores of otherwise well finished carcases.

Angus x wagyu cattle aimed at long fed markets should on a high plane of nutrition throughout their life to maximise marbling potential.

Photo: Todd Andrews

Jap ox / export steer

Grass finished steers with carcase weights 300 – 440kg and 5–32mm P8 fat.There are no breed or age restrictions for this market although steers with more than 4 teeth are progressively discounted.

Traditionally an important market in lower fertility areas where animals take longer to grow and fatten, this market has declined in importance with 0-2 tooth store condition feeder steers more profitable and allowing greater management flexibility.

European Union (EU)

This market requires grass or grain finished steers or heifers with carcase weights 260-420kg, with no more than 4 teeth and 5–22mm P8 fat. Other restrictions include a ban on HGPs; EU property accreditation with the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (including NLIS reconciliation and property audits); and sourcing cattle only from EU-accredited properties (concessions apply for bulls and approved replacement females).

There are no breed restrictions and mid to later maturing animals (eg European breeds and their crosses) enable high carcase weights to be achieved efficiently. Premiums for EU feeder steers and grass finished stock have become more variable but can be significant.

While most feeder markets require angus steers, producers supplying supermarkets, certified grass fed or EU markets can take advantage of hybrid vigour to sell mixed sex and breed consignments.

Photo: Todd Andrews

Certified grass fed

Most processors have branded beef markets that offer premiums for MSA graded carcases from animals that have never eaten cereal grain or genetically modified feed (such as white cottonseed) and have not been administered antibiotics or HGPs. Producers must be company certified, generally requiring annual on-farm audits.

These markets accept British and British cross steers and heifers, with a percentage of *B. indicus* generally accepted. Some markets have incremental premiums for additional marble scores and accept animals with up to 4 teeth to facilitate this.

Meat Standards Australia (MSA)

This is an over - arching meat grading scheme that is used to underpin branded beef programs. There are no breed, age or other restrictions, and a range of objective carcase measurements (hump height, HGP status, ossification, marbling etc) are used to predict eating quality of the carcase as indicated by an MSA index score.

In practice however, additional market stipulations (eg dentition, breed, sex) are often used to determine market eligibility and grid pricing. Premiums may be based on MSA index score, marble score or some combination of both.

MSA grading uses objective carcase data, rather than live animal factors such as breed and dentition, to quantify meat quality.

The MSA grading scheme requires that each step of the supply chain is accredited, including producers, sale yards, processors and retailers, and each has a set of guidelines designed to maximise eating quality.

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