Background	The beef industry is complex. Each segment is different from the next, but they must work together to bring safe, wholesome, nutritious and delicious products to dinner tables around the world.
Seedstock	**Seedstock producers** concentrate on raising breeding animals with optimum genetics. They produce bulls, heifers, semen and embryos that meet the specific needs of others in the beef production chain.
Cows and Calves	The beef production process starts with **a cow-calf producer** who breeds animals that will produce great tasting beef. The producer considers other factors too, including desired calf characteristics and whether calves will be suitable for the environment in which they will be raised. For instance, in hot regions, Brahman cattle may be selected for their ability to withstand hot weather. Cow-calf producers raise their cattle on range or pasture land for up to a year after which many are sold to other beef cattle operations. Some producers keep their cattle on the range to produce grass-finished beef.
Auction Markets	When cattle are ready for market, many are sold through a **livestock auction market**, which transfers ownership to the next level in the production chain. These markets seek to obtain as much value as possible for the animal, bringing in many different potential buyers. There are 815 fixed auction facilities in the United States, according to the USDA.
Stocking / Backgrounding	Some animal buyers are **stocker producers** who purchase young animals (about 6 to 10 months old, called stockers) and put them on pasture until they achieve the desired weight to move onto a feedlot. Cattle on stocker operations are usually kept for about five months, depending on the region and its growing season. Stocker producers are also referred to as **backgrounders**. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) defines backgrounding as the preparation of young cattle for a feedlot, getting them accustomed to new facilities and feeds.
Cattle Feeding	**Cattle feedlots** vary in size, from less than a hundred head to as many as 100,000 head. Most are located in the Midwest, Plains, Southwest and the Pacific Northwest, providing grain and roughage to animals to generate a consistently tender and flavorful beef product. Cattle are normally placed in feedlots when they are 12 to 18 months of age and remain there approximately four to six months. Feedlot owners may purchase cattle or operate a contract feedlot where the cattle are owned by stockers or cow-calf operators who maintain ownership of the animals throughout the feeding process. Some ranchers and stockers also operate their own feeding facilities. According to USDA, there were about 2,200 cattle feedlots in the United States in 2002 that had a capacity of 1,000 head or more.
Beef Packing Process	Feedlots often have marketing arrangements with meat **packing plants**, which typically purchase animals when they are 18 to 22 months of age or weigh between 1,000 and 1,250 pounds. These facilities are required to follow strict government guidelines that provide oversight for each operation. USDA inspectors are stationed in all federally inspected (FI) packing plants, overseeing the operation's safety, quality and animal welfare standards from the time animals enter the plant until individual beef products leave it. In 2004, there were 689 FI meat packing plants across the U.S. Plants that do not sell meat outside their respective states are not required to employ USDA inspectors; however, they are required to have state inspection systems that meet or exceed USDA's inspection requirements. Most packing plants fabricate or process major primal cuts (chuck, round, rib and loin) into subprimal cuts that are sold to retailers and foodservice operators. Some plants sell subprimals to **meat processing facilities** that cut subprimals into individual steaks and roasts for restaurants, or create marinated or pre-cooked items.
Meat Marketing and the Consumer	Finally, **retailers and foodservice operators** sell beef products to **consumers** in supermarkets or restaurants. These outlets are responsible for assuring the final safety and quality of the products. Ultimately, consumers dictate the actions of the beef production chain by determining what kinds of beef they want and at what price. Market signals, such as amount and types of beef purchased, start with consumers and are passed back through the production chain. Beef producers then adjust their product to meet the desires of consumers. For instance, beef cattle are much leaner than just a decade ago as a result of demand for lean products. There are now 29 cuts of beef that meet government guidelines for lean.

Funded by The Beef Checkoff
For more information, contact the beef checkoff at beefboard@beefboard.org.
Updated 10/2007