FACT SHEET: Feedlot Finishing Cattle

Background	Family farmers and ranchers have finished cattle in confined settings for more than a hundred years. They found that cattle fed rations of grain and crop surpluses produced better tasting beef. Cattle feeding became more prevalent after World War I and through the Great Depression, but wasn't fully developed on a commercial scale until after World War II, when grain was plentiful, the economy was robust and consumers demanded tender, good tasting beef that was available year-round. Beef producers found that by finishing cattle uniformly, with plentiful feed grains, it was possible to reduce costs and provide a high quality product consumers valued. By far, most U.S. cattle feeding operations today are small, with fewer than 1,000 head. However, the 5 percent of operations with more than 1,000 head finish more than 80 percent of fed cattle. U.S. grain-fed beef has earned a worldwide reputation for its quality, consistency and taste. It has tenderness and a rich flavor that taste tests show are important to consumers. In fact, consumers will go out of their way to select beef cuts with these grain-fed characteristics.
The Cattle Feeding Process	Cattle are raised on range or pasture land for most of their lives (usually 12-18 months), then transported to a feedlot for finishing. These cattle usually spend about three to six months in a feedlot, during which time they gain between 2.5 and 4 pounds per day. The cattle are fed a scientifically formulated ration that averages 70 percent to 90 percent grain. On this special diet, cattle will gain about 1 pound for every 6 pounds of feed they consume. In the feedlot, cattle live in pens that house between 100 and 125 other animals and allow about 125 to 250 square feet per animal. Each animal has about 1 foot of space at the feed bunk during feeding, which normally takes place twice a day. Cattle always have access to water in the feedlot. The abundance of feed corn in this country contributes to the economic viability of producing grain-fed cattle. In fact, it will often cost more to raise cattle on pasture because it takes longer for the animal to reach market weight. That is why grass-finished beef can be more expensive than grain-fed product. Many cattle in feedlots are given growth promoting products that contain hormones, like estrogen, which is naturally occurring and found in both plants and animals. In fact, these hormones are produced by the human body in amounts hundreds of thousands of times greater than that used for growth promotion in cattle. A non-pregnant woman, for example, produces about 480,000 nanograms of estrogen daily; while a 3-ounce serving of beef from an implanted steer contains just 1.9 nanograms (a nanogram is a billionth of a gram). Stringent government feed rules assure that no ruminant by-products are fed to cattle. This, along with careful processing methods, assures that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or "mad cow" disease) is not a human health issue.
Feedlots and the Environment	Feedlot owners must be very attentive to the environment. Odor, water quality, air quality and land utilization are all factors for feedlots operators to consider and manage. For instance, if the feedlots become too dry, operators may use a sprinkler system to help keep the dust down. Windbreaks at the edge of a feedlot – fast growing trees or other types of vegetation – help keep dust and odors contained. Manure is removed from pens and used on crop land as natural fertilizer. In Colorado alone, this type of natural fertilizer is worth about $34.2 million a year. Cattle produce an insignificant amount of a greenhouse gas called methane. About 70 percent of methane emissions actually come from human-related activities such as burning petroleum, coal mining and oil and natural gas exploration and extraction. Oceans, wetlands, forests and rice paddies are also sources of methane in the environment.
Animal Welfare	The feedlot setting keeps cattle safe, separated from predators and able to congregate with other animals in inclement weather. Death loss in feedlots is generally less than 1.5 percent, partially because cattle are monitored regularly for illness. Sick animals are removed from their pens for treatment, allowing for individual care and attention. Cattle producers recognize the importance of animal health and well-being, both from a moral and economic standpoint. They know that well-nourished and content cattle gain weight more rapidly and efficiently. They gladly accept the responsibility of being stewards of the land and protectors of the animals in their care.