

# Beef Cattle Ranching

## Interesting Facts

Beef animals are ruminants and like all ruminants they have four compartments to their “stomach”. When ruminants swallow grass or other vegetation the feed goes into the first section of the “stomach” called the rumen. Here it is broken down by billions of micro-organisms.

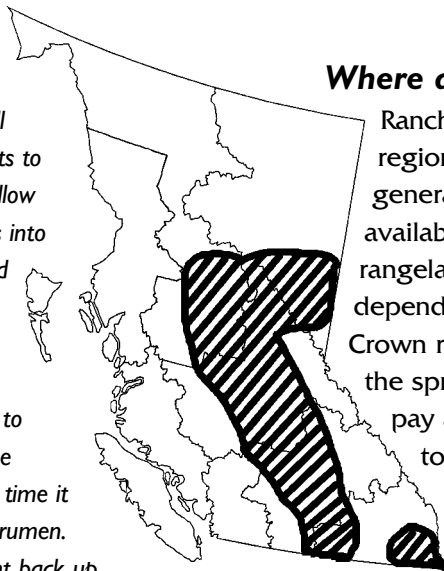
It is this feature that allows ruminants to digest tough cellulose and convert it to usable food. When the rumen is full the animal will lie down to rest. During this time it will burp up portions of food from the rumen. These portions called “cud” are brought back up into the mouth, chewed into a pulp and swallowed again. The chewed food goes on through the other three “stomachs” where it is digested. Other ruminant animals are dairy cattle, sheep, goats and bison.

## What is cattle ranching?

Cattle ranching is the raising of cattle for beef. A cattle herd is made up of calves (singular-calf, newborn male or female); heifers (female adult animals that have not yet calved); cows (female animals that have had a calf); and bulls (adult males); steers (castrated male animals).

These groups of cattle are separated during certain months. The cow herd is usually kept at the ranch headquarters during the winter months. The rancher feeds the herd stored feed that has been produced the previous summer. On most ranches in BC, the cows have their calves in the early part of the year. Once the grass begins to grow in the spring the cows and their calves are turned out on to pastures to graze. In many parts of British Columbia the cows and calves are moved onto forested rangelands for the summer months.

## Where are the ranches in BC?



Ranching takes place primarily in the Interior region of British Columbia. Cattle ranching generally is in areas where rangeland is available. Cattle harvest the grass of the rangeland. In BC, cattle producers are dependent on roughly 8.5 million hectares of Crown rangeland where cattle graze during the spring, summer and fall. The ranchers pay a fee to the government for the cattle to graze on Crown land. The rangelands complement the ranchers’ deeded land of approximately 1.5 million hectares.

An individual rancher’s deeded land would include the ranch home and buildings, calving areas and hay and crop producing lands.

## How many beef cattle do we produce?

In BC, there are approximately 195,000 beef cows. Adding the annual calf crop, yearlings, and bulls there are approximately 621,000 head of beef cattle in the province at any time.

## How are beef cattle produced?

It takes from 18 to 30 months for a beef animal to reach market weight. Often different producers are involved in the different stages of raising cattle: the cow-calf operator initially raises the calves; the backgrounder raises weaned calves on mainly forage diets; and the feedlot operator feeds calves a high energy grain diet until they reach market weights. There are many different combinations of these stages and not all animals follow the same path to reach market weights.

Cow-calf operations are the most common beef operations in BC. Cow-calf operators maintain cow herds and raise their calves from birth to weaning.

Each year a cow is expected to produce one calf. The cows are bred usually in late spring or early summer. A cow is pregnant for nine months. Newborn calves nurse their mothers and as they grow, they graze on pasture or rangeland with their mothers. When the calves are six to eight months old, they are weaned and moved to a backgrounding operation. The heavier calves may go directly to a feedlot.

Cow-calf and backgrounding operations are often combined. The backgrounding operations raise calves after six months of age, to take them to the feedlot stage. Backgrounders harvest hay and make silage for winter feeding. Rangeland and pastures provide forage for the other months. Backgrounded cattle go to the feedlot when their desired weight is achieved.

### **What happens when the beef cattle leave the ranch?**

Cattle that have been backgrounded are sold to feedlots to be finished before processing. Traditionally, animals are transported by truck or rail to be sold, most commonly through public livestock auctions. At the auction, the auctioneer sells the cattle to the highest bidder. In recent years, new marketing techniques have been developed including computer and satellite auctions where the cattle buyer bidding on the cattle may be hundreds or thousands of miles away from the cattle.

### **What challenges do ranchers face?**

One challenge that ranchers face is competition for the use of Crown-owned rangeland and water resources. Land and water uses which can conflict with ranching operations include domestic water needs, mineral extraction, native land claims, outdoor recreation, parks, subdivisions, timber production, wilderness areas, wildlife management areas and wildlife ranges. With good range management, cattle grazing is compatible with many of these other uses and usually improves the range for other uses. The ranching industry is active in land-use planning and works to co-operate with other resource users for present and future needs.

### **Who's involved in producing beef?**

- Ranchers/cow-calf operators
- Backgrounding operators
- Feedlot operators
- Veterinarians
- Machinery dealers
- Feed and fertilizer sales persons
- Auctioneers
- Truckers
- Packing plant workers
- Meat graders/inspectors/butchers

### **Contacts and other resources:**

BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands  
BC Cattlemen's Association



Photo by: Neil MacDonald