



# The Wisconsin Beef Cattle Industry: A snapshot

While Wisconsin is known as America's Dairyland, the state's beef industry is also thriving. Beef cow numbers increased about 10 percent between 2000 and 2005, and there were approximately 245,000 beef cows in Wisconsin in 2005. Beef cows, beef heifers over 500 pounds, steers and other heifers (excluding dairy heifers) account for nearly 23% of the total cattle population in the state (Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics Service, 2005). While 1.2 million dairy cows dominate Wisconsin's rural landscape, beef is a growing business. This growth in beef cattle numbers appears to reflect an increase in the number of operations, along with the expansion of existing operations.

Wisconsin's beef industry is diverse. It includes traditional cow-calf operations in which brood cows are maintained on pasture and their calves are often weaned and sold, stocker operations that usually raise lightweight cattle primarily on pasture, operations that feed cattle in feedlots, farmers who raise genetically superior cattle for breeding purposes (seedstock producers), and farms where young cattle are taught to eat out of a bunk before heading to a feedlot (backgrounding operations).

Wisconsin's beef farmers and livestock specialists understand the overall characteristics of the beef industry in Wisconsin, but know less about the management practices employed by these diverse operations. A 2006 survey of Wisconsin beef operators sheds some light on their management and feeding practices, as well as their sales and income. This information will help farmers and those who serve the beef industry improve their businesses.

The 2006 Wisconsin Beef Cattle Farm Poll was conducted by CIAS in cooperation with UW Extension Beef Cattle Specialist Jeff Lehmkuhler.

This four-page survey emphasized forage and farm management strategies. The questionnaire was sent to 400 likely beef farmers chosen randomly from a list of 2,500 self-identified participants. The results of this survey are not statistically representative of the state's beef industry, as it was not possible to obtain a list of all beef producers in Wisconsin. With a seventy percent response rate, however, the results provide good information about the management practices used by many Wisconsin beef farmers.

## Wisconsin's beef cattle farms

The majority of beef cattle operations in Wisconsin in 2006 were cow-calf enterprises of about 45 cows, owned by the farmer-operator who ran the farm business. Sixty percent of survey respondents operating a beef farm had a commercial beef cow-calf herd. Some farmers had more than one type of beef enterprise, including the following: 34 percent of responding beef farmers ran a feedlot operation, 32 percent had a seedstock enterprise, 20 percent direct marketed their beef, 7 percent had stocker operations and 1.8 percent were organic.

Stocker operations were typically running 30 head per year, while finishing beef cattle enterprises tended to have about 40 cattle. The range of cattle numbers was wide, however, from the low single digits to the handful of beef farmers with over one thousand head in the state.

The size of farms in Wisconsin having beef operations is not unlike that of Wisconsin dairy farms, in part because 90 percent of active beef operations in the survey also grew crops in 2005. Apart from a very few farms with thousands of acres of cropland and pasture, the typical beef operation owned 265 acres, leased an additional 47 acres and used about 180 acres for cropland and 60 acres for pasture. The distribution of Wisconsin beef farms by acres owned is shown in the graph on the next page.

## Feeding and forage management practices

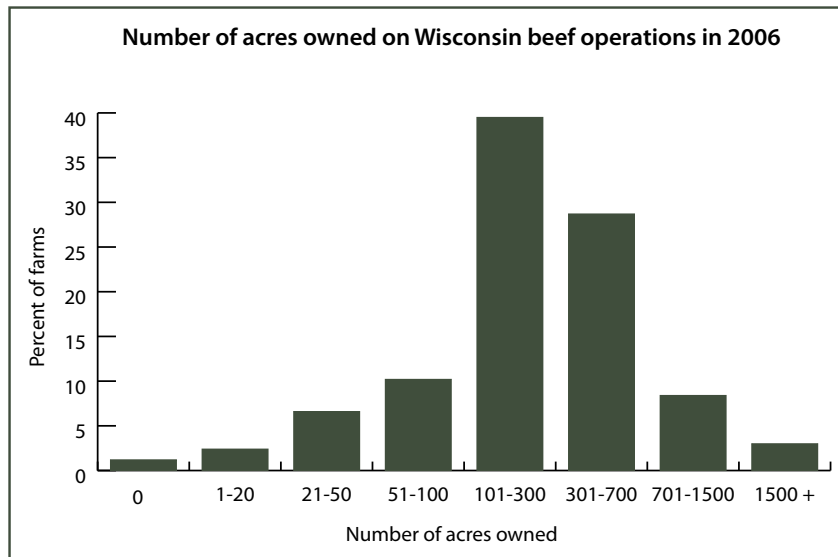
Most of the beef farmers participating in this survey fed raised or purchased hay for 150 to 180 days per year. Participating farmers with cow-calf herds raised



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### Sales and income

In 2005, the responding farmers sold about 40 beef cattle on average, although this number varied from none to 4,500 for the year. Over half sold their livestock at auction barns. Nearly a third sold animals directly off the farm, and ten percent direct marketed meat. Farmers received, on average, \$101 per hundred pounds of liveweight in 2005. Reported prices were much higher for seedstock and exhibition animals.

their cattle primarily on pasture. While the number of acres these farmers devoted to pasture for their beef cattle varied from zero to 1,650 acres, most used about 60 acres at a stocking density of one cow-calf pair or stocker per acre.

Nearly 8 out of 10 of these farmers supplemented their herds with very little grain, feeding zero to three pounds of grain per head per day. Another 13 percent of beef farmers fed their cattle three to six pounds of concentrate, while only a few farmers fed more. Less than 10 percent of farmers finished their beef cattle on pasture, though nearly two-thirds of those farmers used a grain supplement.

Pasture management approaches used in beef grazing tend to be less intensive than in dairy grazing due to lower returns and the resulting need to tightly control expenses. Labor inputs are also typically much lower in beef operations. Nearly 80 percent of the beef enterprises in this survey were part-time income activities. Eighty-five percent reported that they did not improve their pastures. The most commonly reported improvement was fertility enhancement through mechanically applied manure or chemical fertilizer, while less than a third of the respondents indicated they routinely soil sampled. While about one-third of farmers continuously grazed their beef cows, 40 percent moved their cattle approximately every two to four weeks. Three-quarters started their grazing seasons between April 30 and May 15, 2005, and most ended their grazing seasons between October 30 and November 15.

Since beef was a part-time enterprise for most of the responding farmers, half of them had non-farm jobs that provided their main support. Another 27 percent derived most of their income from other farming enterprises, and about 12 percent lived mainly on retirement income.

Two-thirds of those surveyed had household incomes between \$50,000 and \$200,000 from all sources, and over 80 percent were satisfied with their quality of life. In addition, most had grown up on a farm and 40 percent had dairy farmed at one time. These findings indicate that beef farming is a choice that many Wisconsin farmers find compatible with their lifestyles, backgrounds and desire to raise livestock.



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