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From pasture to plate

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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The Buck Island Ranch herd is brought to the cowpens for management practices, just after sunrise on a frosty morning.

MARY MARGARET HARDEE PHOTO

Archbold's Buck Island Ranch is a large scale working cattle ranch in south central Florida, in the Headwaters of the Everglades. Buck Island Ranch is classified as a cow/calf operation, meaning the main goal is to maintain a breeding herd of cows that produce a calf annually.

Buck Island Ranch isn't home to just cattle alone! The ranch also serves as a natural wildlife corridor and sanctuary for biodiversity. There are documented species lists of records more than 450 plant species, 170 birds, 34 reptiles, 30 mammals, 19 amphibians and 16 fish. If you have had the opportunity to take a buggy ride at the Ranch, depending on what time of year you were there, you might have noticed the baby calves with the mother cows, what are called cow-calf 'pairs').

Have you wondered where the calves go from there? What happens between the pasture and the plate? Buck Island Ranch assistant Mary Margaret Hardee explains, "There are many different segments of the beef industry—Cow/Calf, Backgrounder, Feedlot, Harvest/Processing facilities, Retail, and then finally the consumer."

The Buck Island Ranch operations crew weans calves typically at 6 months of age and at roughly 400 pounds. When the calves are weaned the crew sorts calves based on sex, quality, and weight. After the weaning period is over, calves from the Ranch are shipped to either a backgrounder or directly to a feedlot. A handful of promising heifers from the calf crop are retained or kept on the ranch to be put back into the ranch's breeding stock. That is a very typical management practice for cow/calf operations.

A backgrounding operation is the 'middle man' between weaned calves and feedlots. They feed and care for the recently weaned calves to enter into the feedlots. Once the calves reach an average of 700-800 lbs. they are ready to enter a feedlot setting. This is where they will be finished. Finished weight is typically 1,350 pounds. In order to hit this target weight, they are fed a variety of different highly formulized rations that meet their nutritive requirements. Starter rations focus more on high forage, whereas finishing rations focus more on high energy concentrations.

For many decades most cow calf producers in Florida have had their cattle shipped out west to be finished: 65% of the cattle on feed in the United States are located in Texas, Nebraska and Kansas. In 2015 a handful of cattle producers, Florida Cattle Ranchers recognized the opportunity to return this part of the process to Florida, as it was decades ago. The goal was to raise and finish cattle in the state of Florida, producing Homegrown Beef from Pasture to Plate. However, according to Buck Island Ranch Manager, Gene Lollis, "Ranching is more than simply providing beef 'from a pasture to a plate.' It is about balancing production practices with our natural surroundings." The implications of this shift to full Florida production are far-reaching: supporting the local Florida economy, conserving natural lands and biodiversity, and even saving taxpayer money by reducing transportation and wear and tear on roads. To find out more about the Florida Cattle Ranchers and building a sustainable Florida, visit www.floridacattleranchers.com.

The development of the in-state market will allow the Florida producers to tell consumers the story of their ranches and their role in conservation as well as beef production. Contributing towards this group's goal, Buck Island Ranch now backgrounds many calves at Usher Cattle Company and finishes at Quincey Cattle

Company, both in Chiefland, northwest Florida. Once calves have reached their finished weight they are then shipped to a harvesting facility, FM Meat Products in Fort McCoy, Florida. This meets the Florida Department of Agriculture definition of a Fresh From Florida product.

Harvesting facilities bring in live animals and, in the most humane way possible, process them into the meat you buy in the grocery store or order off the menu at your favorite restaurant or fast food joint. Processing plants always operate with an agent from the United States Department of Agriculture to ensure safe, quality, and humane practices are in place. Nothing is wasted when an animal is harvested. Mary Margaret Hardee shared, “Here are some fun facts of things that are made from beef byproducts of which you might not be aware. From the bones, horns and hooves we get things like buttons, piano keys, adhesives, and cellophane. From fats and fatty acids we get things like chewing gum, soap, paint, cosmetics, and tires. From the intestines we get sausage casings, surgical sutures, and tennis racquet strings. From the hide and hair we get things like clothing, textiles, luggage, insulation and felt.”

From Pasture to Plate, and adhesives to insulation, Archbold’s Buck Island Ranch balances a successful working cattle operation with sustainable practices and environmental stewardship to preserve Florida’s ranching legacy while also protecting its lands and waters.