Since 1990 the geographic distribution, age, sex and breed composition of the Australian beef herd has changed in response to seasonal conditions, the relative profitability of beef enterprises and the requirements of new markets. Growth in the north Asian beef export markets and in the live export market for cattle in south east Asia, Libya and Egypt have significantly influenced the composition of the beef herd.

The meat industry plays a vital role in both the rural and Australian economy. The gross value of livestock slaughterings exceeds $5.5b, representing more than one quarter of the gross annual value of rural production. Foreign exchange earnings from meat exports total about $2.7b, 20% of total rural exports. Beef and veal continue to account for almost 70% of this total.

HERD COMPOSITION

Total beef cattle numbers in Australia have increased from about 22.3 million in 1989 90 to 23.6 million in 19992000; however, the trends in northern and southern Australia differed markedly between 1996/ 97 and 1999/2000

See table 1

The overall increase in the national herd was driven largely by an approximate 9 per cent increase in the northern herd between 1996 97 and 1999 2000. That increase reflects herd buildup on northern properties (Queensland, Northern Territory and the northern pastoral regions of Western Australia) following dry seasonal conditions in the early 1990s and in response to improving beef cattle prices and the growth in live cattle export markets during the 1990s.

In contrast, cattle numbers in southern Australia (New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the southern beef regions of Western Australia) decreased by around 12 per cent between 1996 97 and 19992000. The decrease there may have reflected dry seasonal conditions in 1997 and 1998, particularly in Victoria and Tasmania, and opportunistic cattle turnoff during a period of higher beef prices.

AGE AND SEX COMPOSITION

The age and sex distributions of the Australian beef herd in 1999/2000 are shown in TABLE 1. The distributions are also shown separately for the northern and southern Australia herds. There was no appreciable change in age and sex distribution between 1996 97 and 1999 2000.

The relative stability in the age and sex distributions of the national herd between 1996 97 and 1999 2000 contrasts with the period 1993 94 to 1996 97, when the proportion of females and calves increased and the proportion of bullocks declined. Those earlier changes were largely a result of northern Australian producers adjusting to the requirements of the growing live export trade to south east Asia, a rebuilding of herds in Queensland with improved seasonal conditions and the supply requirements of the growing feedlot industry.

TABLE 1 BEEF HERD COMPOSITION 1999-2000(p)

	Replacement Heifers			Cows	
	Calves	1 2 yrs old	2 3 yrs old	4 6 yrs old	7 yrs plus
South	2 634 987	709 711	1 053 107	1 997 589	812 570
North	2 844 300	1411 910	1632 562	2 347 393	1189 567
AUSTRALIA	5 479 287	2121 621	2 685 669	4 344 982	2 002137

Other cattle

	1 3 yr old	4 6 yr old	7 yrs plus	Bulls	Total
South	1071 978	119 362	6 663	1 67 213	8 573 7 81
North	2 545 458	430 539	108 337	279 266	12 789 332
AUSTRALIA	3 617 436	549 901	115 000	46 479	21362 513

a Southern Australia includes New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the southern beef regions of Western Australia. b Northern Australia includes Queensland, the Northern Territory and pastoral regions of Western Australia.
Note: Figures in parentheses are relative standard errors. A guide to interpreting these measures of sample variation is included in 'Survey methods and definitions', as are explanations of other items.

See CATTLE – BREED COMPOSITION

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