



Black angus beef cattle in Marin County. Photo: Michael Woolsey

## SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: **Black Angus Beef Cattle (*Aberdeen Angus*)**

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When looking across the California landscape, one of the most common views a person is likely to see is a bucolic one – grazing cattle scattered across rolling pastures. If the cattle are all black in color, chances are you're looking at black angus beef cattle, the most common breed of beef cattle in the United States. Not only are they a driving economic force in California, black angus meet the needs of the cattle industry in many ways and provide us with a significant portion of the 66 pounds of beef the average person in the United States eats every year. They are also one of the most cost-effective means of managing grasslands. Their highly sought after traits, including quality of meat and hardiness, have made them a nearly ubiquitous feature of California's countryside.

George Grant first introduced black angus from Scotland to the United States in 1873. Black angus, as opposed to the closely related red angus breed, have solid black fur and are naturally polled (hornless). Producers initially mocked them as oddities as they were more accustomed to the red, horned breed of Shorthorn at the time. Soon, however, this breed grew popular due to its many attractive traits and usefulness for crossbreeding (Burke et al. 2004). Their lack of horns minimizes injuries in close quarters, such as feedlots. This is a popular and genetically dominant trait that is easily passed on to succeeding generations. Crossbreeding with angus also reduces the risk of dystocia, which results in difficult calving. They are a docile breed, relatively robust, calve easily, have excellent maternal instincts, and produce superior quality meat. American ranchers quickly realized their virtues,

and many more purebred angus were imported from their native range in Scotland (Aberdeenshire and Angus counties).

Considered the sixth largest commodity in California, all breeds of beef cattle and calves garnered cash receipts totaling 1.63 billion dollars in 2004. Their numbers for the last decade have remained stable in the United States with 315,000 head of angus registered in 2012. These make up a small fraction of the 5.4 million cattle raised in the United States, including 14,000 beef and 2,500 dairy operations in California alone (American Angus Association 2006).

As a grassland-dependent species, beef cattle typically require 1–1.5 acres of forage or approximately 27 pounds of dry weight forage material to maintain one cow-calf pair per year. They consume 6–12% of their body weight in water, or 0.75–1.5 gallons of water per 100 pounds of body weight per day, depending on climatic conditions, feed type, production level and salt intake. In California, many cow-calf, stocker, and certainly grass-fed operators raise their beef cattle primarily on pasture or rangelands and on other forms of roughage as opposed to grain feeds. During low forage production periods, supplementary feed may be provided, though this is not ideal due to the high cost of bringing feed in from other areas and the risks associated with introducing invasive species from potentially infested forage. With the dependence of livestock survival and growth so closely tied to the

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grasslands that support them, the health and productivity of rangeland systems are absolutely critical to sustainable livestock production.

Beyond food production, well-managed grazing also has the potential to provide an array of ecosystem services. These include essential habitat for native animal species such as wintering birds and waterfowl, mammals and invertebrates, as well as freshwater and anadromous fish (by reducing brush and invasive plant species in riparian corridors). Targeted grazing is used to 1) decrease fire hazards by reducing fuel loads, 2) reduce competitive non-native plant species, 3) encourage specific native plant species and/or communities, and 4) increase soil-carbon sequestration. Other benefits provided by managed grazing land include water catchments for public drinking supplies, as well as providing open space, beautiful vistas, and recreational opportunities.

Perhaps not the first to come to mind when considering the vast array of species that California's grasslands support, black angus beef cattle may be among the most common. They are the basis for a significant commodity in the state, produce a high-energy food source, and provide numerous ecosystem services when properly managed.



### References

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*The mission of the California Native Grasslands Association is to promote, preserve, and restore the diversity of California's native grasses and grassland ecosystems through education, advocacy, research, and stewardship.*