

# Dairy calf market pathways trends 2012–23

November 2023

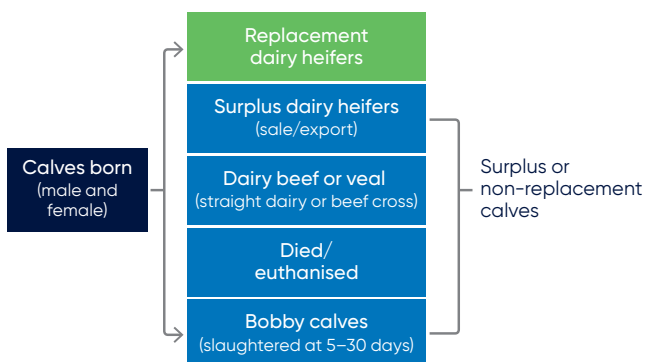
## What are 'bobby calves'?

Young calves processed at 5–30 days old and under 80kg are typically referred to as 'bobby calves'. On Australian dairy farms, most calves are separated from their dams at birth, with the majority of the female (heifer) calves raised as replacement milking animals or to be sold to other farmers. The male calves and some of the female calves born on dairy farms may follow one of multiple pathways:

- Transport to an abattoir at five plus days of age as a bobby calf
- Raised for beef production, either on the farm of birth or by specialist rearers
- If neither of above options are available nor economically viable, calves may be euthanased at birth.

The different pathways available to these calves are summarised in Figure 1.

**Figure 1** Dairy calf market pathways

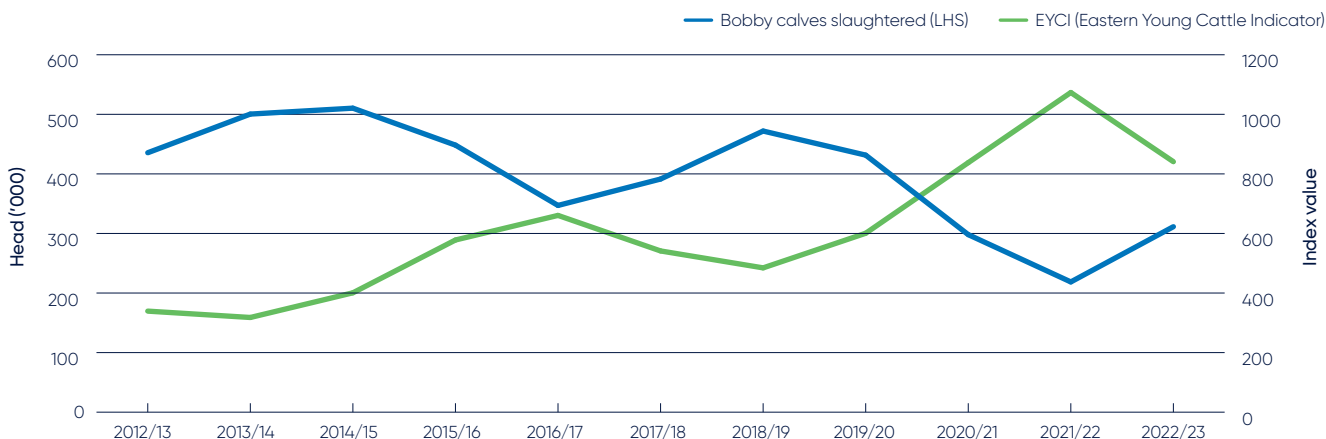


## How data is collected

As there is no mandatory cattle birth recording in Australia, and dairy-origin animals are undifferentiated from other cattle through the National Livestock Identification System (NLIS), there is no way of comprehensively tracking all dairy breed calves through the multiple pathways described in Figure 1. Therefore, we do not have accurate data for the number of dairy-origin calves raised to adults for beef, nor for the number of calves euthanased at birth. However, when bobby calves are sold to abattoirs, they attract a different levy to more mature animals, allowing reporting on the total number of bobby calves sold. The data below reflect the total leviable quantity of bobby calves sold with respect to the cattle transaction levy, sourced from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

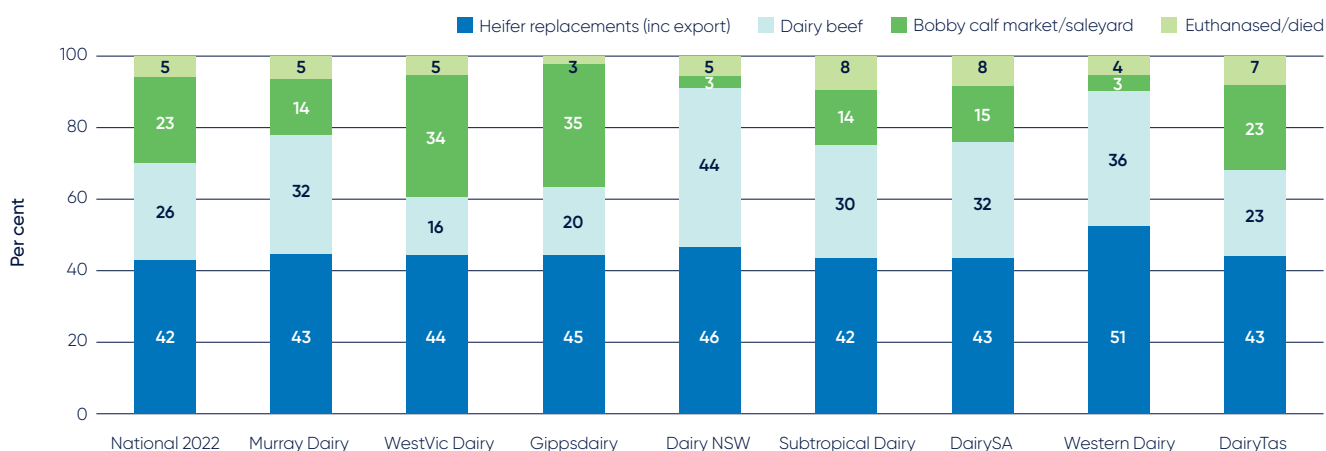


**Figure 2** Bobby calf slaughter numbers versus EYCI



Total leviable quantity of bobby calves slaughtered by fiscal year. Source: DAFF (Bobby calf slaughtered; MLA (EYCI))

**Figure 3** Calf pathways 2022



Source: Dairy Australia, 2022 Animal Husbandry and Genetics Survey

Information on the number of calves being managed through the different market pathways is also collected during Dairy Australia’s triennial Animal Husbandry and Genetics Survey. The 2022 results are presented in Figure 3. This information is self-reported by farmers from a representative sample and is therefore indicative in nature.

**Discussion**

Bobby calf processing rates appear to be strongly negatively correlated with beef prices, as indicated by the Eastern Young Cattle Indicator (see Figure 2).

Dairy farmers appear to be willing to direct calves away from bobby calf processing when demand for calves is strong.

An ongoing challenge for the dairy, beef, meat processing and retail industries is to establish sufficient value for dairy breed animals to enable reduced bobby calf processing rates in times of lower beef demand. As at February 2022, Dairy Australia is funding multiple projects to assist in reducing the number of bobby calves processed, and to ensure the welfare of those that continue to be managed through bobby calf pathways.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

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