

Climate Change: It's What's for Dinner

We all know that driving a gas-guzzling SUV contributes to climate change, but did you know that what you put on your plate could too? Here's how your food choices affect climate change and what you, as a consumer, can do about it.

The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization recently estimated that animal agriculture is responsible for 18 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. That is more than the emissions caused by cars and light trucks combined!¹

Here in the United States, six percent of our greenhouse gases come from livestock production, compared with 19 percent from transportation. While those statistics might not be as severe as the global numbers, they are still worth noting for the conscious consumer.²

How Does Livestock Cause Climate Change?

First, there is the manure, which releases methane. That is particularly true when it is stored in anaerobic conditions such as the waste lagoons often found at U.S. factory farms for pigs and dairy cattle or the huge manure piles connected to American cattle feedlots.³



A waste lagoon at a factory farm.



Clearing of the rainforest.

But methane released from livestock and manure is not the only cause of climate change, according to the United Nations report. Deforestation—the massive clearing of forests—also plays a big part. More than 70 percent of the Amazon rainforest's deforested land is used for pasture, and a substantial part of the remaining land is used to produce crops fed to animals. In the United States, 60 percent of the agricultural output of the Missouri-Mississippi basin is used to feed livestock because land once farmed for local human consumption is now used for industrialized feed production.⁴

More than 70 percent of the Amazon rainforest's deforested land is used for pasture.



Twenty percent of all fossil fuel used in the United States goes toward food production including running slaughterhouses and meat processing plants, fertilizer production, water usage to raise cattle as well as the post-agricultural processes of transporting, packaging, and storing food.⁵

Are All Animals Polluters?

Some studies estimate that feedlot beef (from cattle that are confined in pens and fed corn to fatten them up) require twice as much fossil fuel energy to produce as grass-fed beef (from cattle that spend their lives on pasture eating grass). Producing one pound of feedlot beef results in the production of 8 pounds of carbon dioxide, the equivalent of a third of a gallon of gasoline.⁶

It also matters where the animals are from. A rough estimate predicts that 120 million tons of CO₂ emissions are directly attributable to domestic food transport each year, and U.S. imports and exports likely account for an additional 120 million tons. International imports and exports are particularly ecologically damaging because air miles emit more CO₂ per ton-mile than any other form of transport.⁷

Worldwide, animal agriculture produces more greenhouse gas emissions than cars and light trucks do combined.

Twenty percent of all fossil fuel used in the United States goes toward food production.

Combat Climate Change with Your Fork!

1. **Buy smart** – Purchase food that is produced on small, local farms rather than large industrial operations, and choose organic grass-fed beef over conventional grain-fed beef.
2. **Be label savvy** – Demand Country of Origin Labeling for food so you know where it comes from. Find out how at www.foodandwaterwatch.org
3. **Be in the know** – Sign up at www.foodandwaterwatch.org to stay plugged into food issues that affect your dinner and your planet.

Endnotes

¹ Castel, V., P. Gerber, C. de Haan, M. Rosales, H. Steinfeld, T. Wassenaar. "Livestock's long shadow: Environmental issues and options." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, November 2006. Available at: www.virtualcentre.org/en/library/key_pub/longshad/A0701E00.htm

² Galst, Liz. "Earth to PETA; Meat is not the No. 1 cause of global warming." Salon.com, Oct. 22, 2007. Available at: www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/10/22/peta/

³ Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2005, April 2007, USEPA #430-R-07-002 ch 6, p 6. Available at: www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/usinventoryreport.html

⁴ Galst, Liz. "Earth to PETA; Meat is not the No. 1 cause of global warming." Salon.com, Oct. 22, 2007. Available at: www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/10/22/peta/

⁵ Wilkins, Jennifer. "Food Citizen: Fossil Fuels Consume Big Portion of Food Cots." Time Union (Albany), May 7, 2006. Available at: www.timesunion.com/AspStories/story.asp?storyID=479022

⁶ Galst, Liz. "Earth to PETA; Meat is not the No. 1 cause of global warming." Salon.com, Oct. 22, 2007. Available at: www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/10/22/peta/

⁷ Norberg-Hodge, Helena et. al. Bringing the Food Economy Home. (Bloomfield, CT: Kumerian Press, ISEC, 2002), p 31-32

For more information:

web: www.foodandwaterwatch.org
email: foodandwater@fwwatch.org
phone: (202) 797-6550

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