

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM

PRESENTED BY



The environmental impact of livestock farming

Committee Room 12, Tuesday 17 October 2017

Louise Davies, Head of Campaigns & Policy, Vegan Society

- Industrial livestock farming is incredibly harmful – farms are the number one cause of water pollution; pesticides kill biodiversity; and livestock produce as much CO₂ as all means of transport.
- We have an opportunity with Brexit to look at the system of farm subsidies, and question why we are subsidising such a damaging sector. We could be encouraging farmers to plant sustainable crops that have a positive impact on the soil.
- Agricultural subsidies could be replaced with direct payments and training for farmers who switch from livestock. The interests of future farmers are completely absent from policy discussions – they would benefit from a switch from livestock.
- Plant protein is nutritious, sustainable, healthy and ethical. The [Government's Eatwell guidelines](#) tell us we need to increase plant protein consumption by 90%.
- We need to see more support from government. For example, public procurement rules could change so public-sector canteens serve only UK plant protein. The Government needs to invest in R&D: Canada used to be on par with the UK in production of plant protein, but now exports twenty times as much, because the government has invested in it.

Antony Froggatt, Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House

- Globally, public awareness of the negative impacts of meat is very low – people don't recognise the scale of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. By 2050 global demand for meat is forecasted to account for nearly all of the globe's annual GHG emissions if we are to meet the Paris Accord's targets.
- A lot is being done to tackle emissions in sectors where there is public awareness – technology is driving system change, and governments and industries are collaborating to decarbonise. We are yet to see that in agriculture, because of the lack of awareness. People are starting to notice issues of land use for livestock farming, and it could be this that shifts opinion.
- Health concerns are driving much of the transport reform agenda post dieselgate. There needs to be a strong case for action for opinions to change – unhealthy diets are the third biggest killer in the world, and could cripple the NHS. People need to see that a shift in diet is cheap and relatively easy, and will drive our ability to meet our sustainability goals.
- Countries only report on the emissions that they produce, not what of everything they consume. This needs to switch, so rich countries fairly account for emissions of their imported meats – the problem is currently being masked.
- Brexit provides an opportunity to create a subsidy system that takes into consideration environmental externalities, which is in line with the [UK's Clean Growth Strategy](#).

Helen Harwatt, Sustainability Research Specialist, author of [Substituting Beans for Beef](#)

- Attempting to fight global warming through reduction in emissions from the energy sector alone will take decades to centuries – energy projects are long-term, and CO₂ has a slow effect on temperature. In addition to reducing CO₂ emissions, we need to reduce non-CO₂ – primarily methane and nitrous oxide.
- Methane heats the climate much more potently than CO₂ over a much shorter timeframe, and tackling livestock methane could deliver relatively quick results. Meeting climate change targets will require lifestyle changes, but dealing with the repercussions of climate change will be much harder than diet change now.
- Switching from consumption of beef to beans could have large health benefits because 87% of Americans don't get their RDA of vegetables. Pulses are vegetables, and are almost equal in terms of amino acids to beef, and have zero cholesterol.
- Beans have high protein content, but very low GHG emissions. Switching from beef to beans alone would meet 75% of the USA's emission reduction target for 2020. Beef only makes up 10% of calories in the American diet, so it wouldn't require substantial change.
- 1.5 times the landmass of California would be freed by the US switching from beef to beans. Rewilding this land could have a massive impact on carbon capture.
- The research paper has seen large public interest, but this high level of interest isn't yet reflected in the level of funding available for climate and food research, nor in policy making. Funders and policy makers need to see animal to plant protein food shifts as low-hanging fruit that would help meet GHG targets, provide public health co-benefits, and spare millions of sentient animals from the food system.

Audience Q&A

On the subject of **whether more should more be done to support the production of mock- or lab-grown meat**, it was pointed out that most require animal products so aren't vegan, and there was a feeling that they may not really be needed, because OECD countries currently eat twice the protein required. Mock meats are highly processed and often high in sugar. It was questioned whether British consumers, who strongly oppose GM food, would want GM meat. However there was acknowledgment that people have many reasons not to eat meat, so they may be suitable for some people, but we do not know how water- and resource-intensive these meats are. There is currently a regulatory vacuum, so they may not actually be very environmentally sustainable.

In response to a question of **how we can encourage more politicians to stand on a vegetarian/vegan platform** there was agreement that it can be hard for people to tell voters that they shouldn't eat meat. Louise said that many feel they have to represent their constituents that are farmers, but forget that all of their constituents will be impacted by climate change. Just as with flying, it is difficult to tell people how to live their lives, and meat is embedded in our food culture.

Asked about **how we can tackle the cultural link between masculinity and meat consumption**, Louise recommended the [#VegCurious](#) work carried out by the Eating Better Alliance, and Antony recommended the work that [WildAid](#) had done to reduce China's consumption of wildlife. Kerry mentioned a forthcoming documentary called 'Game Changers' produced by James Cameron.

Discussing whether **animal feed that is advertised to reduce methane emissions** in animals could help reduce GHG, Helen said that research shows technology can potentially reduce emissions from livestock by ~30%, but this is likely to be just 10% in practice due to various constraints. No feed improvement could bring emissions from beef down to the level of pulse production. These feeds are likely to be mainly used on intensively reared animals, and so raise other ethical issues.

Discussing **food waste**, and **whether a meat tax would lower meat consumption** without proscribing behaviour, there was support for the idea, though the suggestion that removing farm subsidies would have the same value, and would be more popular. There was acknowledgment that a meat tax would unfairly burden lower-income families, but a desire for the true cost of production, including water pollution and emissions, to be reflected in the price of meat. The taxation model is one the public accepts for alcohol and tobacco. Louise added that food waste is primarily due to the centralisation of food production, and that production needs to become more sustainable.

Members of the audience were supportive of the **promotion of hemp production, agroforestry and the consumption of fruit and nuts**, all of which have a positive environmental impact. The panel were very supportive. It was mentioned that when we have limited resources for global public policy, promotion of pulses would tick quite a few boxes in terms of health, climate change, water and land use. Hemp would too, but is stigmatised because of cannabis.

There was hope that **the government will at some point encourage less meat consumption** out of public health concern, and the transition needs to be as smooth as possible if it is to work. There may be opposition from the meat lobby – the US had included sustainability, including looking at the environmental impact of meat production, in its review of government recommendations of diet, but removed it under pressure from producers. Brazil now includes considerations about sustainability and the social aspects of diets in its recommendations, which is impressive considering it is a large meat producer.

The panel discussed the **positive opportunity of Brexit to shake up the UK's farming subsidies** away from meat producers, and to **include environmental standards for food in climate plans**. The Agriculture Bill may be the best opportunity for the next few years to win changes, but there is danger the UK could end up importing food from countries with lower environmental and ethical standards.

The panel agreed that **people should be encouraged if they wish to meat-reduce rather** than cut meat out entirely, because it still has an impact. Helen pointed out that the benefits of switching from beef to beans would not require full vegetarianism, just replacing some meat – that one switch would have a massive impact. Louise said that the Vegan Society supports less consumption of meat, but thinks people should see veganism as the goal, or aspiration, of that journey.