

UF-Gainesville Beef Cattle News Corner

Beef is good for you and it is not bad for the environment!

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Whenever I talk to reports, the one question I can count on being asked is what I think about the growing message that we should stop eating hamburgers and steaks (or animal products in general) in an effort to save our planet. My answer is always the same: if saving the planet and protecting the environment is your goal, stopping eating meat is not the way to accomplish that goal. Cattle are an essential and sustainable part of a healthy diet and a healthy ecosystem. In fact, phasing beef out of our diets could harm people's health and worsen global inequality, without substantially improving the climate. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) calculated that livestock production in the US accounts for 4.2% of all greenhouse gas emissions. Compare that figure to transportation or power plants, which account for 29% and 28% of U.S. emissions, respectively. When we also account for the fact that methane from cattle production is part of a natural carbon cycle that has been happening since the beginning of life on our planet, the impact on environment is even lower. The number of cattle is also often used to emphasize the magnitude of their environmental impact. The reality is that the number of ruminants in US today is essentially the same as in 1800s (bison and elk replaced with cattle), but the difference is that we now have 350 million people and 270 million vehicles.

Regarding the greenhouse gases, even if Americans eliminated all animal protein from their diets, they would reduce US greenhouse gas emissions by only 2.6%. It is also important to keep in mind that technological, genetic and management changes that have taken place in U.S. agriculture over the past 70 years have made livestock production more efficient and greatly reduced the greenhouse gases per unit of product. According to the FAO's statistical database, total direct greenhouse gas emissions from U.S. livestock have declined 11.3 percent since 1961, while production of livestock meat has more than doubled.

Climate change demands urgent attention, and the livestock industry has a large overall environmental footprint that affects air, water and land. These, combined with a rapidly rising world population, give us plenty of compelling reasons to continue to reduce the carbon footprint per kilogram of meat produced through increased efficiency. But we need to start with science-based facts. We, as an industry, also have to do a better job of telling our story. Farmers and ranchers need to know what the real impacts of livestock production are on the environment and share this information with the public, along with the commitment they are making to further reduce these impacts.

Agriculture has been the target of misinformation – numbers have been skewed, media coverage has been exaggerated and farmers and ranchers have been misrepresented. We have to become ambassadors of agriculture, farmers, ranchers and the truth about agriculture's contribution to climate change. With the population expected to triple by 2050, the question of how to feed the world remains — and we should thank our farmers and ranchers for being part of the solution to

that problem. Regarding the cattle: they are not the source of our environmental troubles, but they are part of the solution of how to sustainably feed the world.