

# PRO/CON: Will eating fewer pork chops help cool our climate?

By Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.11.16

Word Count **1,565**



South Korean animal rights activists wearing livestock masks stage a rally for farm animals slaughtered due to foot-and-mouth disease and bird flu, encouraging people to be vegetarians, Seoul, South Korea, Feb. 6, 2011. Photo: AP/ Lee Jin-man

## PRO: Livestock are producing way too much greenhouse gas

Around the world, people have been eating more and more meat. Unless this rapid growth is reversed, grazing livestock will continue to release more and more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens and other livestock release methane gas as a byproduct of food digestion. Other greenhouse gases are produced through the burning of fuels such as coal and oil.

Greenhouse gases build up in the atmosphere and trap heat. Over time, they have caused a sharp rise in average global temperatures.

This increase in temperature is known as global warming, or climate change. It has led to many serious environmental problems. For example, melting icecaps have caused sea levels to rise, threatening shorelines and island nations. Scientists say many other parts of the world may soon have too little water.

## **An Absurd Claim**

One way Americans can help reduce the buildup of greenhouse gases is by changing their eating habits. The huge farms that produce most of our meat say that beef, lamb, chicken and pork are healthy food choices. They are not.

Livestock production currently accounts for significant greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. The situation is not getting any better. Deforestation to produce more grazing lands also contributes to the growing environmental crisis.

The big livestock companies have mounted a highly misleading campaign to silence their critics. They have even gone so far as to suggest that vegetarians contribute more to greenhouse gas emissions than meat eaters. Nothing could be more absurd.

In 2006 the United Nations released a groundbreaking report, titled "Livestock's Long Shadow." It concluded that livestock caused 18 percent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions.

More recent scientific studies have been even more alarming. They have found that livestock are responsible for a whopping 51 percent of greenhouse gases. According to these studies, livestock produce more greenhouse gases than all the cars, trucks, airplanes, trains and ships in the world combined.

## **Alarm Bells Ringing**

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is an agency of the U.S. government responsible for protecting human health and the environment. It, too, has sounded the alarm bell over the production of methane gas by livestock.

The EPA believes livestock methane gas emission is a serious problem. It has stated that it accounts for one-third of all emissions created by U.S. agriculture.

The big livestock companies have made the problem worse by handling livestock manure carelessly. In order to save money, massive farms and ranches expose manure storage areas to oxygen and moisture. Such methods result in even higher methane levels in the atmosphere.

No one is calling for a ban on Big Macs or porterhouse steaks. However, the United States and other wealthy nations do need to consume less meat overall.

Now that consumers in China and India are able to afford meat products, global demand has skyrocketed. So have the harmful effects on the environment. Increased demand for feed grain for farm animals has also contributed to global climate change.

Reducing meat consumption must be part of an overall push for “clean” farming. Farming practices must be improved to make them less environmentally destructive. In particular, there is a pressing need for a system that can turn livestock waste into clean energy.

## **Good For The Environment**

Medical experts agree that reducing meat consumption also benefits one’s health.

However, the decision to be a vegetarian or a meat eater is a personal choice. Proposals by governments to impose meat and dairy taxes to offset the cost of environmental damage and public health problems go too far. Governments should not try to force people to eat one way or the other.

When it comes to the livestock industry and the environment, it is a far better approach to stick to the basic problem of greenhouse gas emissions. There is no need to add medical concerns to the debate.

The big livestock companies scoff at the notion of a link between their industry and climate change. However, consider a study conducted by the respected medical journal Lancet. It found that lowering one's meat consumption by just a half cup a day would significantly reduce methane emissions.

We can all afford to make that easy sacrifice. Our environment will be much better off for it.

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## **CON: Don't blame farm animals for all those greenhouse gas emissions**

Recently, representatives of most of the world's nations met in Paris for a major environmental conference. Together, they reached an agreement on what must be done to fight global warming.

Climate change activists are disappointed with the Paris agreement, however. Many feel it does not go far enough.

High on their list of policy goals is a tax on meat.

Such a tax would be similar to the "sin taxes" levied on tobacco and alcohol. These taxes are meant to discourage the use of those products, and help offset the cost of treating the illnesses they cause.

The theory is that meat, especially beef, is disproportionately responsible for greenhouse gas emissions. If we were able to change how people eat, tax supporters say, we could significantly slow climate change.

## **Argument Uses Fuzzy Math**

A plan to achieve the meat tax is laid out in a report released by the group Chatham House.

The group admits the issue is complicated. Yet it advises governments to push for the taxes through public relations campaigns that make the matter appear clear-cut. The reason for this, it says, is that people "respond best to simple messages."

This is an unusual suggestion for a group known for promoting open debate.

It is one thing to push vegetarian diets on the basis of health claims or animal rights. The environmental case against meat is a stretch, however. It requires fuzzy math and questionable science.

Those backing the taxes point to the United Nations Global Livestock Environmental Assessment Model, or GLEAM. The 2013 GLEAM claims livestock farming accounts for 15 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

However, the model was not developed for use in anti-meat campaigns. Rather, it was intended to help the livestock industry become more environmentally responsible.

Using GLEAM as scientific evidence to argue against meat consumption is far-fetched. It is like fighting organic agriculture because it relies on manure. No wonder tax supporters want to keep their message simple.

## **Considering Environmental Effects**

The idea that reducing meat consumption would make both humans and the Earth healthier is highly questionable. It is challenged by considering the environmental effects of switching to alternatives to meat.

For instance, growing almonds, a darling of health food fans, requires a huge amount of water. The U.N. has not yet calculated the water-footprint of your almond milk-based smoothie.

For years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has pushed Americans to eat less red meat, and more fruits, vegetables and grains. Suppose Americans did follow these dietary guidelines. What effect would it have on the level of greenhouse gas emissions?

Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University looked at just that question. They found that a shift toward eating more fruits and vegetables and less meat would increase greenhouse gas emissions by 6 percent. Energy use would go up 38 percent, and water use by 10 percent.

The British newspaper The Independent summarized the report this way: When it comes to greenhouse gas emissions, lettuce is "three times worse than bacon." Vegetarian diets, the paper said, "could be bad for the environment."

Of course, replacing meat with lettuce and comparing relative emissions is absurd. However, it underscores a major point: meat is a highly efficient source of nourishment — and tasty too.

## **Making The Problem Worse**

The Carnegie Mellon report explains that growing fruits and vegetables requires a great deal of energy. Much of the required energy use ends up producing new greenhouse gas emissions.

This is not the first study to challenge the simplistic "meat is bad for the environment" claim.

According to a recent University of Michigan study, a shift to a USDA-recommended diet would have unintended effects. Switching to a diet heavier in fruit and vegetables could result in a 12 percent increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

The truth is, science supports neither meat taxes, nor a move away from meat consumption. Neither step will help the environment. Indeed, both are likely to make the greenhouse gas problem even worse.

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## Quiz

- 1 What issue does the PRO author mention that the CON author does not?
- (A) the environmental impact of eating meat
  - (B) the impact that eating meat has on people's health
  - (C) the financial costs of eating meat
  - (D) the impact that eating meat has on animals' rights
- 2 What is one issue on which the PRO and CON authors AGREE?
- (A) whether meat produces too much methane gas
  - (B) whether meat production uses more fuel than vegetables
  - (C) whether meat is a necessary part of a healthy diet
  - (D) whether a new meat tax is a good idea
- 3 Which answer choice accurately completes the PRO author's MAIN argument below?
1. *Climate change is a problem caused by greenhouse gases.*
  2. *Meat consumption is a major cause of greenhouse gases.*
  3. *Therefore,*
- (A) people should consume less meat.
  - (B) everyone should be encouraged to be a vegetarian.
  - (C) the government should take steps to discourage meat consumption.
  - (D) farmers should find ways to reduce the amount of pollution in meat production.
- 4 How does the CON author provide a rebuttal to the PRO author?
- (A) by arguing that meat production does not contribute to greenhouse gases in the environment
  - (B) by arguing that the benefits of meat production outweigh the harm it may cause
  - (C) by arguing that reducing meat production will not necessarily reduce greenhouse gases in the environment
  - (D) by arguing that scientists have not determined the impact of greenhouse gases on the environment

## Answer Key

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