

Raising & Eating Beef

Is eating beef bad for the planet?

Recent media coverage indicates that cutting back on beef consumption will help the planet because beef production isn't sustainable. Other reporting comes to the opposite conclusion. So, should you keep enjoying cheeseburgers and steak, or not?

Here are some important things to keep in mind concerning beef sustainability.

Cattle can eat things we can't

When cattle eat, the feed they consume is swallowed, fermented, regurgitated, and chewed again. This ruminant digestive system means cattle can extract nutrients from plants that non-ruminants like humans cannot, and transform those nutrients into foods (meat and milk) that we can utilize.

This means land which can support grass and other forages but is otherwise unsuitable for crop production can still produce food for humans by being utilized for grazing. It's important to note that all beef

Sources: Bovivida (Dr. Jude Capper), Beef is Killing the Planet...and Elvis is Riding a Rainbow-Belching Unicorn, <http://bit.ly/1seLK7E>; The Beef Checkoff, Raising Beef Isn't Sustainable? It's More Sustainable Than You Think, <http://bit.ly/1cGluEj>; Journal of Animal Science, The environmental impact of beef production in the United States: 1977 compared with 2007, <http://bit.ly/1Bjyslv>; National Cattlemen's Beef Association, Raising Sustainable Beef: A scientist's point of view, <http://bit.ly/17xXb1g>; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990–2012, <http://1.usa.gov/1bIGst1>; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions, <http://1.usa.gov/N3IYPN>; Wall Street Journal, Actually, Raising Beef Is Good for the Planet, <http://on.wsj.com/1e92YAN>

cattle, including those fed to market weight in feedlot operations, spend at least the first six months of their lives grazing on pasture or rangeland.

It also means that by-products from food, fiber, and fuel production which cannot be used directly for human food can be converted by cattle into nutrient-dense, human-digestible beef. Distillers and brewers grains from the ethanol and beverage industries, cottonseed and cottonseed meal from cotton fiber and cottonseed oil production, and sugarbeet pulp from sugar production are some examples of products used in cattle feed which might otherwise go to waste.

Grazing lands have many benefits

Modern beef production still relies heavily on grazing. Maintaining rangelands and other pastureland provides consistent habitat for both native flora and fauna. Grass and other forages prevent soil erosion and promote water infiltration. Finally, grasslands play an important role in carbon sequestration, removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it within plants and soil.



Beef production keeps improving

Leading beef and dairy expert Dr. Jude Capper of Washington State University has published research which shows that modern beef production uses 33% less land, 12% less water, 19% less feed, and has a 16% lower carbon footprint while requiring 30% fewer animals to produce the same amount of meat as was produced 30 years ago. Bottom line: Over time, raising beef has become far more efficient without compromising animal welfare.

Livestock emissions are low

According to the U.S. EPA, 28% of the total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in 2012 were from the transportation sector, while just 10% were from the entire agricultural sector. Broken down further, just around 3% of U.S. emissions result from all livestock production.

As Dr. Capper points out, “If everyone in the United States ate one less meatless meal per week, this is equal to .44 percent of the U.S. carbon footprint (using EPA data). This one single action will not save the planet but could have a very negative impact on public health.” ■

Local Mom's Perspective

“Does beef production have an impact on the environment? Of course it does. So does crop production, driving your car, and even washing your clothes. Just about everything humans do has an impact; it's inevitable. What is important is to remember that cattle farmers are taking steps to mitigate detrimental impact and in many cases are able to positively impact the environment in the process. It's not fair to judge beef production practices and the people who employ them without getting all the facts.” ■

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