



# THE HIGH COST OF CHEAP MEAT

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**T**he meat at the center of many Americans' plates is also at the center of some of our world's greatest ecological and public health threats: deforestation, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, climate change, water pollution, diet-related disease, antibiotic resistance and more. The vast majority of animal products sold in restaurants and supermarkets, and served at institutions like schools and hospitals, in the U.S. comes from factory farms. On factory farms, billions of animals are raised in intensive, inhumane confinement. These factory farms generate a huge amount of toxic pollution that contaminates our air and water and deprives rural communities of the right to raise their families in a safe and healthy environment. This harm is exacerbated by agricultural policies that favor industrial animal agriculture.

## THE TOLL OF INDUSTRIAL ANIMAL AGRICULTURE ON OUR PLANET

The climate impacts of industrial animal agriculture are particularly alarming. Livestock production accounts for about 16.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, which is more than the emissions from all of the cars, trucks, trains, buses, boats and planes across the globe.

It takes an enormous amount of feed to raise the nine billion animals confined in our country's feedlots. For every one pound of steak, a beef cow requires seven to ten pounds of grain. Producing that quantity of feed requires massive amounts of fuel, fertilizers, pesticides and land. Animal products also require significant amounts of water— as much as 2,000 gallons of water per pound of beef. In other words, producing an eight-ounce steak requires as much water as eight showers. Aside from using a staggering amount of water and diesel fuel, GMO feed grain production requires the use of energy-intensive pesticides and fertilizers,

which often end up in our rivers, streams and groundwater. These inputs also impact our atmosphere: when fertilizer is applied to soil, it generates nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas with 300 times the warming effect of carbon dioxide.

Eventually, all of that subsidized animal feed will turn into mountains of toxic manure, which is spread back onto the fields or stored in big lagoon pits. This often leads to the leaching of pollutants found in animal waste, such as antibiotics and nitrates, into the groundwater or nearby streams. This waste also generates large amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas that is eighty-six times more potent a gas than carbon dioxide over a 20-year period.

Animals are pumped full of antibiotics to keep them alive in crowded and unsanitary conditions. In fact, 80% of all antibiotics are given to animals, and this overuse contributes to the rise of antibiotic-resistant "superbugs," a major public health crisis.

## CONSEQUENCES BEYOND CLIMATE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Industrial animal agriculture hurts rural communities and workers, too. Factory farms are disproportionately located in low-income communities and communities of color, where people are forced to withstand noxious odors and contaminated air and water. An estimated 50% of farmworkers do not have legal authorization to work in the U.S., exacerbating the dangers that they face, such as a fear of retribution for reporting injuries, workplace hazards and illegal conditions. Slaughterhouses are particularly dangerous workplaces, with a turnover rate exceeding 95-100% annually.

## PUBLIC POLICIES TO FIGHT INDUSTRIAL ANIMAL AGRICULTURE

We can drastically reduce the impacts of

industrial animal agriculture by changing public policies at the local, state and federal levels. We need to end the stranglehold that the meat industry has over our government and the market. Meat and dairy companies should have to pay for the environmental and public health damages that they cause. And instead of subsidizing industrial animal agriculture, governments should be incentivizing higher welfare, pasture-based, organic farming systems. In addition, we need to ask institutions – like restaurants, schools and hospitals – to use their purchasing power to promote sustainable, plant-based foods and better meat that is healthier for people and the planet. For instance, K-12 schools serve seven billion meals each year. If every public school swapped out a beef burger for a protein-rich veggie burger on the school lunch menu just once a month, it would save the equivalent of 1,407,533,657 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>, the equivalent of over 1.5 billion fewer miles driven.

## WE CAN MAKE CHANGE

Each of us has a role to play in advocating for a just and sustainable food system that does not rely on factory farming. To start, here are three things you can do as a citizen to fight industrial animal agriculture:

- Ask food purchasing businesses that you patronize, such as restaurants and hospitals, to serve less factory-farmed meat and dairy in favor of more plant-based meal options and pasture-raised, organic meat and dairy.
- Ask your city or county representatives to pass a policy that directs public dollars away from factory-farmed meat and dairy.
- If you have a child or grandchild in school, contact their school administrators and ask them to offer more plant-based meal options for lunch.