



Comments on Global Roundtable's Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Beef

Submitted by Friends of the Earth US

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft principles for sustainable beef. In addition to comments provided in collaboration with NRDC and others on the substance of the draft production principles, we urge you to explicitly address a major omission in the document, namely sustainable *consumption* of beef.

Improving the way beef is produced can yield important benefits including increased water conservation, energy savings and biodiversity; reduced greenhouse gas emissions; and cleaner air and water, improved animal welfare, among other things. However, reducing beef consumption (and therefore production) altogether, particularly in regions with high protein consumption, will generate far greater ecological and public health benefits.

It is well documented that beef is a highly inefficient way for humans to get protein. It is also clear that current rates of human consumption of animal products, especially beef, are unsustainable. If current trends continue, by 2050, global meat consumption is expected to reach 1.2 trillion pounds. Our earth's resources simply can not sustain this level of consumption. It is therefore critical that any discussion of beef sustainability also include the issue of sustainable consumption.

Numerous studies have highlighted the vast amounts of resources (land, water, pesticides, fertilizer, fuel) required for beef production. As [this peer reviewed study](#) published in the scientific journal, *Nature Climate Change*, points out, "Greenhouse gas emissions from ruminant meat production are significant. Reductions in global ruminant numbers could make a substantial contribution to climate change mitigation goals and yield important social and environmental co-benefits."

On a global scale, scientists have documented that the climate change and other environmental impacts and land needs of cattle are far higher than those of other farm animals. This recent [meta analysis of life cycle assessments](#) of protein foods, for example, found that beef's greenhouse gas emissions are five to ten times higher than pork and chicken and as high as 100 times higher than vegetable proteins.

Numerous studies have also shown the major water pollution, soil degradation, habitat degradation, biodiversity and public health impacts of beef production.¹

As was recently pointed out in this [Union of Concerned Scientists report](#):

1

http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/boise/AWAE/labs/awae_flagstaff/Hot_Topics/riphreatbib/fleishner_ecocosts.pdf; and <http://bioscience.oxfordjournals.org/content/53/8/759.full.pdf>

- “Producing meat requires large tracts of land and substantial biomass for feed, and is a less efficient food source than plants — and beef is the least efficient meat by far.
- Beef represents only a small part of humanity's food — less than 5 percent of the protein and under 2 percent of the calories — yet its cost, whether in terms of land, crops for feed, or global warming emissions, is much higher than other food sources.
- Producing a ton of beef requires approximately *20 times* more land on average than an equal amount of chicken or pork.
- Worldwide, cattle and other livestock consume more than six billion tons of biomass annually, versus less than one billion ton for chicken and pigs, yet the amount of food produced is practically the same.
- Global warming emissions from beef production are also much higher than other meat: 45 - 643 kilograms of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) per kilogram of protein, versus 20 - 55 for pork and 10 - 30 for poultry meat.”

The [Recent UN Climate report](#) agrees that reduced demand is a critical part of the solution to reducing livestock’s sizable ecological footprint.

For the first time, the latest UN IPCC report’s chapter on agriculture, forest and other land use explicitly addressed the import role that dietary changes or reduced consumption can play in mitigating climate change and addressing other environmental issues, pointing out that “changes in human diet can have a significant impact on GHG emissions.”

Reducing demand for beef, they point out, generally decreases inputs (fertilizer, energy, machinery) and land demand for cattle production. “The ecological feedbacks of demand side options are mostly beneficial since they reduce competition for land and water”

The report further points out that “GHG emissions may be reduced through changes in food demand without jeopardizing health and wellbeing by (1) reducing losses and wastes of food in the supply chain as well as during final consumption; (2) changing diets towards less GHG intensive food e.g. substitution of animal products with plant-based food, while quantitatively and qualitatively maintaining adequate protein content, in regions with high animal product consumption; and (3) reduction of overconsumption in regions where this is prevalent.”

In the context of the Global Roundtable’s Principles and Criteria for defining sustainable beef, one of the most important findings in the IPCC report is that “the potential to reduce GHG emissions through changes in consumption (that include some meat, fish and eggs) was found to be substantially higher than that of technical mitigation measures.”

The overwhelming evidence that too much meat production is bad for the planet and bad for our health has led many businesses and health professionals to embrace initiatives like “Meatless Monday” as well as the promotion of permanent menu changes that put less meat on the plate.

For example, Ikea recently announced the introduction of “meatless meatballs” with the [following statement](#):

“Reducing meat consumption is critical for saving wildlife, curbing climate change and protecting the planet. Providing meatless alternatives is an important way for retailers and restaurants to do their part, and we hope more companies will follow Ikea’s lead,” Feldstein said. “While we certainly remain

concerned about some of Ikea's other environmental practices, especially its history of sourcing wood from old-growth forests, switching to a more earth-friendly menu is a step in the right direction."

The Culinary Institute and Harvard School of Public Health have teamed up to create a new "[Menu's of Change](#)" initiative whose [core principles](#) strongly encourage restaurants and institutions to serve less meat, especially beef.

As described on their website, "Menus of Change® is a ground-breaking initiative developed by The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in collaboration with the Harvard School of Public Health—Department of Nutrition. Together, the CIA and Harvard are working to create a long-term, practical vision for the integration of optimal nutrition and public health, environmental stewardship and restoration, and social responsibility concerns within the foodservice sector and beyond"

A key principles under Menu Concepts and General Operations is as follows:

"Globally Inspired, Largely Plant-Based Cooking. Increase the ration of plant-centric foods and preparations to those from animal sources, leveraging flavor strategies of traditional food cultures around the world to support menu innovation"

Under Foods and Ingredients there are many references to serving less meat. Among them is the following principle on red meat:

"Red meat: Smaller Portions, Less Frequently. Feature red meat in a supporting role to healthier plant-based choices and also experiment with red meat as a condiment."

As many restaurants and institutions will be looking to the Global Roundtable for guidance around sustainability, it is vital that the sustainability principles clearly state that companies can make a significant contribution to reducing environmental impacts of their businesses by substituting some of their beef with less ecologically damaging proteins.

In light of the tremendous ecological, and public health benefits of reduced beef consumption, particularly in regions with high consumption, we urge the GRSB to explicitly address (e.g., in the preamble) the importance of sustainable (and therefore less) consumption of beef in the broader framework of beef sustainability.