

# The meat industry is doing exactly what Big Oil does to fight climate action

By Jennifer Jacquet

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This spring, politicians stampeded to defend the centrality of meat in the American diet. When Colorado’s governor issued a proclamation encouraging people to avoid eating meat on March 20, Nebraska’s governor called it “a direct attack on our way of life” and countered by declaring “Meat on the Menu Day” on the same date. In response to a false story that President Biden planned to limit Americans’ meat consumption, Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-Colo.) told him to “stay out of my kitchen.” The Texas House just passed a measure to bar plant-based meat substitutes from using the words “meat” and “burgers” on their labels.

Though the idea that meat is under siege may be exaggerated for dramatic effect, nearly 1 in 4 Americans reported cutting back in 2019, according to Gallup. The second-most-common reason, behind health concerns, was the environment. Scientific assessments attribute 23 percent of total global warming to the livestock sector, citing operations that use energy and fertilizer, cause deforestation, and release methane (which has more potent warming effects than carbon dioxide). Air pollution from animal agriculture now causes more deaths annually than emissions from coal-fired power plants, according to a study published Monday.

Since at least 2006, when the United Nations published a report, “Livestock’s Long Shadow,” cataloguing the sector’s global environmental impacts, the industry has been borrowing tactics from the fossil fuel playbook. While meat and dairy producers have not claimed that climate change is a liberal hoax, as oil and gas producers did starting in the 1990s, companies have been downplaying the industry’s environmental footprint and undermining climate policy, as my colleagues Oliver Lazarus and Sonali McDermid and I have written in a recent study.

For decades, the meat industry, acting through major agricultural trade groups such as the Farm Bureau, has pressured lawmakers to prevent environmental regulations. More recently, that’s taken the form of resisting climate regulations, including rules on greenhouse gases and emissions reporting. Our research found that all 10 of the largest U.S. meat and dairy companies have lobbied against environmental and climate policies: Lobbying activity at Cargill, for example, peaked during the negotiations over — and defeat of — cap-and-trade in 2010. (The United States, of course, is far from the only country whose climate policy caters to its agricultural sector: Even New Zealand, celebrated for its 2019 law committing to carbon neutrality, has a generous carve-out exempting methane from that target.)

These companies have also invested millions in direct political efforts. Between 2000 and 2019, nine of the top 10 U.S. meat and dairy companies spent a combined \$26 million on federal political campaigns, largely supporting Republican candidates, who typically oppose interventions designed to slow climate change. When we analyzed such expenditures as a share of revenue, we found that Tyson, the largest emitter of the U.S. meat and dairy companies, spent twice as much as Exxon on political campaigns and 33 percent more on lobbying. Of course, agricultural producers have a whole host of political interests, such as farm appropriations and school lunch programs, that seem far removed from climate. But many of these efforts, from land-use policies to crop incentives, are intertwined with emissions.

Like fossil fuel companies that funded research to promote climate skepticism, meat and dairy companies have funded experts to undermine scientific findings. After the United Nations published its report on animal agriculture, for example, Frank Mitloehner, a scientist at the University of California at Davis, challenged the results. Mitloehner did not contest the absolute contributions of beef producers to climate change; rather, he criticized the report's comparison with the transportation sector, calling the analysis "lopsided" for counting only vehicle emissions from driving. Still, when the U.N. authors acknowledged the inconsistency, major news outlets from CNN to Fox ran articles that questioned or outright denied that meat production significantly contributed to climate change. None of this coverage acknowledged that the Beef Checkoff Program, an industry initiative that aims to encourage beef sales, had paid Mitloehner \$26,000 to conduct his study. Mitloehner, whose training is in animal science, not climate science, remains one of the most prominent academic defenders of Big Meat; his recent activities include industry presentations and white papers downplaying the climate impacts of methane.

(Contacted by a Washington Post editor, Mitloehner said: "I am committed to research that is allowing farmers to lessen the greenhouse gas contributions of their herds. My study was with merit, as the authors of 'Livestock's Long Shadow' acknowledged. I did not attempt to undermine the work of the authors from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Rather, I was able to help set the record straight about the true impact of animal agriculture on global warming. In fact, I later became chairman of a FAO global livestock project called LEAP. Funding from the Beef Checkoff helped support one undergraduate student for two quarters during the production of the study mentioned above. A majority of the funding for my research has come from governmental agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency and California Air Resources Board. My job as an animal-science researcher and extension specialist requires me to work with the livestock sector. I could not do my job any other way — nor would I want to. Animal agriculture is not the main source of climate change that many would have us believe. That notwithstanding, it does in fact contribute to climate change, which is why I work diligently to help farmers reduce that contribution.")

Meat- and dairy-funded trade associations do similar work. The North American Meat Institute, insisting that there is "much uncertainty" about climate change, publishes "fact sheets" that selectively count only manure management and animal digestion byproducts as contributors to emissions. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association website includes an animated explainer, "Tough questions about beef sustainability," that minimizes the industry's role in environmental problems, from water use to carbon emissions. In response to congressional plans to address climate issues or reports calling for dietary changes, these groups contend that the beef supply chain has environmental benefits, such as cultivating soil for carbon storage. They also point to data showing that farmers and ranchers have become more efficient, producing meat and poultry using fewer resources. Changing food consumption, they contend, is not a "silver bullet."

Animal agriculture companies have also developed specialized greenwashing techniques. Methane and land-use changes to grow feed account for 85 percent of animal agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions. Yet meat and dairy companies typically focus their sustainability campaigns on carbon dioxide and on using renewable energy to run their operations — even though energy use represents a small fraction of animal agriculture emissions. Hormel Foods recently said it is “on a path to zero,” referring not to the company's own emissions but to matching 100 percent of its energy consumption with renewable sourcing by 2030. Last month, JBS, the world's largest meat company, took out a full-page ad in the New York Times promising to reach “net zero by 2040,” and announced commitments to both “net zero greenhouse gas emissions” and no deforestation. This was a startling shift from a company that, as recently as 2019, discussed emissions reduction only in terms of energy use, without mentioning methane or land use. The notion of a “net zero” JBS is reminiscent of BP's rebrand as “Beyond Petroleum” more than 20 years ago.

The rhetoric from agricultural producers echoes that of fossil fuel producers. Both industries claim that climate science is inconclusive and call for more research. Fossil fuels are portrayed as essential to fighting poverty, and meat as key to combating world hunger. Remember the oil industry's opposition to a carbon tax? Sara Place, a scientist who worked for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, preemptively wrote an article on “Why Taxing Beef Isn't the Answer.”

What unfolded with fossil fuels suggests at least one path for meat and dairy. Instead of clean coal, the industry might tout carbon-neutral beef, regenerative agriculture and responsible grazing. Just as natural gas from fracking was presented as a “bridge fuel,” we might expect marketing to encourage consumers to switch to “bridge meats” like chicken or salmon (which, like natural gas, have their own significant environmental impacts). The agricultural industry will also invest in technological solutions — such as an algae diet to reduce methane in cattle — to avoid making more substantial changes that would hurt its bottom line.

But there's also a key difference between these industries: consumer preferences. Americans may not have much choice about the source of the electricity that lights their homes, but they do choose what to eat three times a day. The United States has the highest per capita meat consumption rate in the world, thanks in large part to industry efforts, from advertising to pressure on the government to shape dietary guidelines. That leaves Americans with a lot of room to change. As activist Leah Garcés puts it, it is easier to turn half of Americans' meals vegetarian than to turn half of Americans vegetarian.

The public learned about fossil fuel industry tactics over decades of inquiries from journalists, researchers, lawyers and civil-society groups such as the Climate Investigations Center, unearthing a long paper trail. Big Agriculture is just beginning to be investigated in the same way. Some climate scientists and activists fear that food issues might distract from efforts to curb fossil fuel use; certainly, meat and dairy companies would prefer to keep the spotlight on energy and transportation. But even if we stopped using fossil fuels entirely, the current emissions from the global food system would make the climate goals of the Paris agreement difficult, if not impossible, to reach. The U.S. pledge to the Paris agreement makes just one reference to “farm animals,” and not a single reference to “meat.” It is time to ask why.

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