

Animal Agriculture Needs Voices in the Sustainability Conversation

Sustainability and the environmental impact of animal agriculture have been hot topics for several years. The discussion around these concepts was only heating up in the first months of 2020 until COVID-19 started to fundamentally change lives and take over the news cycle. Right now, most people are focused on public health and weathering the economic challenges brought on by many businesses in the U.S. shutting down for weeks and travel coming to almost a complete halt. While the media and public's attention has shifted elsewhere, it's almost certain that the conversation around sustainability will re-emerge once our world returns to some semblance of normal. The animal agriculture community needs to prepare to engage more actively in that conversation in order to ensure that consumers and influential decision-makers have access to accurate information.

There is a clear and persistent narrative within the public dialogue that animal agriculture has a detrimental impact on the environment. This messaging is coming from many different directions, ranging from seemingly credible sources like the *Lancet* medical journal to celebrities. In January 2019, the EAT-Lancet Commission Report on Food, Planet and Health was published in the *Lancet*. The report claimed that people must drastically reduce their meat and dairy consumption to be healthy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.¹ Its prescriptive global diet severely limits meat and dairy consumption, drastically departing from U.S. dietary guidance. Quantity and calories caps apply to staple foods, such as a suggested seven grams of beef, 29 grams of chicken and less than half an ounce of egg (about 1/5 of an egg). While the report was widely criticised by many prominent scientists, it generated media headlines such as "Eating meat has 'dire' consequences, experts say."² On the other side of the apparent credibility spectrum, actor Joaquin Phoenix pushed for several 2020 awards shows, including the Golden Globes, to go vegan for their pre-show meals for environmental reasons.³

Other voices are also driving increased attention to the allegedly high environmental impact of meat consumption. For example, an initial draft of Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's "Green New Deal" resolution put forth in February 2019 stated, "we set a goal to get to net-zero, rather than zero emissions, in 10 years because we aren't sure that we'll be able to fully get rid of emissions from cows and airplanes that fast."⁴ The reference was later removed, but it had already generated considerable media attention. In March 2019, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that all city public schools would be adopting "Meatless Mondays" and serving students all-vegetarian meals every Monday. According to de Blasio, "cutting back on meat a little will improve New Yorkers' health and reduce greenhouse gas emissions."⁵ Another city official claimed that "reducing our appetite for meat is one of the single biggest ways individuals can reduce their environmental impact on our planet."⁶

Even a few restaurant chains have said they are going to cut back on their meat and dairy offerings to meet sustainability



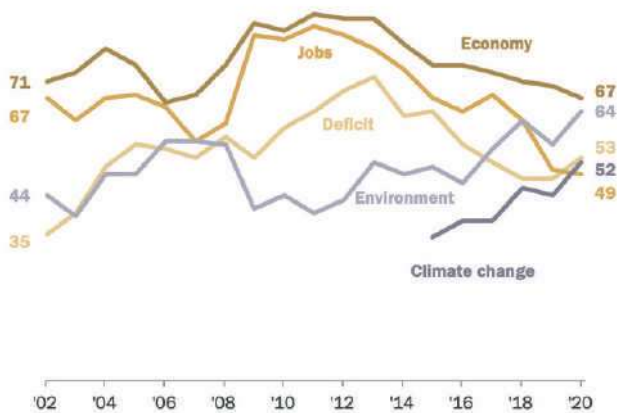
goals. Earlier this year, fast casual chain Panera announced plans to drop meat from half of its menu.⁷ According to Panera's CEO, this move is "better for you, and better for the world, and better for the environment, and better for animals." Having a sizeable, nationwide brand making such a decision should certainly get the attention of the animal agriculture community. Panera's leadership stated this shift is in response to consumer demand, but that seems inconsistent with consumption data, as 2019 per capita meat consumption was up nearly five pounds over 2018 – with 2020 projected to be even higher.⁸

Alternative protein companies are all too quick to try to take advantage of this conversation, with companies like Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat using exaggerated claims about the environmental impact of eating meat to promote their products. For example, Impossible Foods claims "most leading climate scientists and thought leaders recognise the urgency to transition from animals to plants at the centre of our global food system" and states its goal is "to replace the need for animals as a food-production technology – globally, by 2035."⁹

To some degree, the sustainability discussion is driven by genuine consumer interest. Public interest in protecting the environment is on the rise. According to Pew Research Center data, more Americans today say protecting the environment and dealing with global climate change should be top priorities for the president and Congress compared to a decade ago.¹⁰ Consumers don't just believe that the government is responsible for addressing this issue. In a recent global online survey, 81 per cent of respondents felt strongly that companies should help improve the environment.¹¹ This mindset impacts views on meat consumption as well. According to research from the Center for Food Integrity, consumers are "increasingly concerned about the impact of meat consumption on the wellbeing of themselves and their families, as well as their concern about the impact on the environment."¹²

For the first time, environmental protection rivals the economy among the public's top policy priorities

% who say ___ should be a top priority for the president and Congress



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-13, 2020.

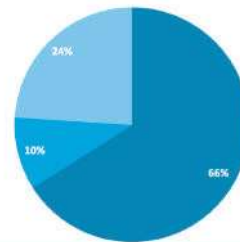
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Unfortunately, some activist groups are taking advantage of consumer interest in the topic and attempting to use this buzzword to spread a negative message about animal agriculture. Many animal rights activist groups have started using messages about the environment in their quest to urge people to leave meat, milk, poultry and eggs off of their plates, and unfortunately those inaccurate claims have started to be taken as fact by some. Consumers that are looking for ways that they can do their part to help the planet may be hearing from activists and celebrities that reducing their consumption of meat and dairy is the best way to do that, even if that is far from accurate. Activist groups make outlandish claims, such as attributing 51 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions to animal agriculture or saying that animal agriculture is responsible for more emissions than the transportation sector.¹³

Clearly, discussion about animal agriculture and sustainability seems overwhelmingly negative. Some members of the animal agriculture community question why they should engage in the sustainability conversation when it is generally quite negative. The answer is simple – if animal agriculture isn't at the table, we'll have no say in what's on the plate. Ultimately, that may mean meat, poultry, dairy and eggs may end up off of the plate. The sustainability conversation isn't going anywhere, and if farmers, ranchers and others in agriculture don't join in, it's only going to separate us more from consumers who take the idea of caring for the planet very seriously. That's actually a value that all of us in animal agriculture share with consumers – after all, who relies more on a healthy planet than people who depend on the soil, water and air for their livelihood. Despite all of the efforts of activist groups to convince them otherwise, most consumers actually already agree that meat and dairy have a role to play in a sustainable diet. According to International Food Information Council research, two-thirds of consumers think an environmentally sustainable diet can include protein from both animal sources and plant-based sources, while only 10% disagreed.¹⁴

While consumers indicate interest in sustainability and believe animal protein can indeed be "environmentally sustainable", they have trouble defining the term. In IFIC's recent research, 40 per cent of respondents were unsure if an "environmentally sustainable diet" was the same as a "sustainable diet," while 34 per cent acknowledged that they

MOST BELIEVE PROTEIN FROM ANIMAL AND PLANT-BASED SOURCES ARE OKAY FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE DIETS



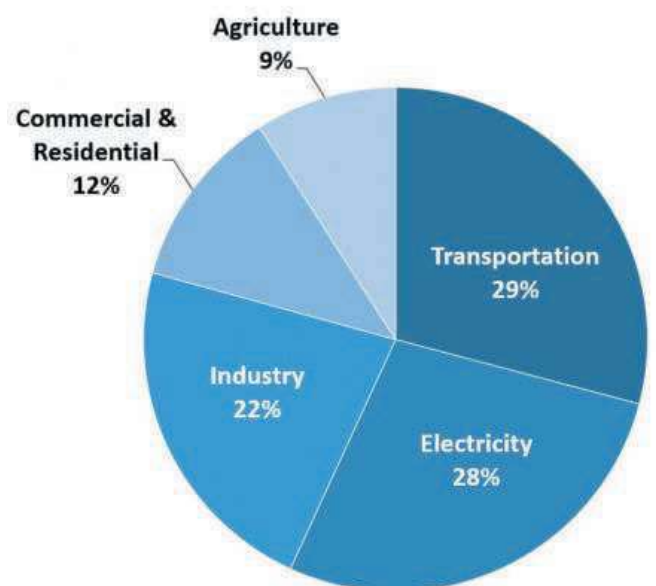
Q7. Do you think an environmentally sustainable diet can include both protein from animal sources (for example: poultry, pork, beef, lamb, cow's milk, eggs or seafood) and protein from plant-based sources (for example: tofu, soy milk, beans, tempeh, nuts, seeds, legumes)?

INTERNATIONAL FOOD INFORMATION COUNCIL, FOUNDATION | 2020

were not the same.¹⁵ Activist groups want to take advantage of this uncertainty to fill in their own definition of sustainable which would not include animal agriculture. That's why the animal agriculture community needs to make sure we are at the table and offering resources to consumers and influencers.

In reality, animal agriculture has a much smaller environmental footprint than some claim. Based on the Environmental Protection Agency's 2016 report, the following sectors/activities contribute to greenhouse gas emissions accordingly: transportation, 28 per cent, energy, 28 per cent, industry, 22 per cent and agriculture, 9 per cent.¹⁶ The agricultural figure includes animal agriculture at 3.9 per cent. Globally, the Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that livestock produces 14.5 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions from human activities.¹⁷ There is no comparable full life-cycle assessment for transportation, but the head of the livestock sector analysis and policy branch of the FAO has stated that direct emissions from transportation versus livestock can be compared and amount to 14 versus 5 per cent, respectively.¹⁸

Total U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Economic Sector in 2017



Animal agriculture also has an excellent story to tell on proactively reducing its environmental impact. Due to innovative farm practices and new technologies, the environmental impact of producing a gallon of milk in the U.S.

in 2017 shrunk significantly since 2008, involving 31 per cent less water, 21 per cent less land, and a 20 per cent smaller carbon footprint.¹⁹ On the beef side, compared to 1975, it takes 36 per cent fewer cattle to produce the same amount of beef today in the U.S.ii From 1960 to 2015, pig farmers in the U.S. used 75.9 per cent less land, 25.1 per cent less water, 7 per cent less energy and have a 7.7 per cent lower carbon footprint.²⁰ The resources used to produce one dozen eggs have been cut considerably with 26 per cent less feed, 32 per cent less water and a 71 per cent lower carbon footprint since 1960.²¹ This kind of information, coupled with personal stories of how farmers, ranchers and others involved in animal agriculture contribute to a sustainable industry by adopting practices to keep animals healthy, can help the industry feed consumers' hunger for information on sustainability.

Everyone with a livelihood that depends on animal agriculture needs to take a more active role in setting the record straight. There are some prominent voices who are already making significant strides in helping animal agriculture take a seat at the table when it comes to sustainability. Frank Mitloehner, PhD, is a professor and air quality extension specialist in the Department of Animal Science at the University of California, Davis. He has extensively researched and written on the topic of animal agriculture and the environment and is also a renowned speaker.²³ More recently he has become active on Twitter using the handle @GHGGuru to engage in sustainability discussions and has also produced a series of informative videos.²⁴ Sara Place, PhD, chief sustainability officer with Elanco Animal Health, is also an outspoken advocate for keeping sustainability conversations science-based and tweets using the handle @DrSPlace.²⁵ Many dietitians have also gotten involved in busting sustainability myths as the nutrition conversation is closely intertwined. Nicole Rodriguez, RDN (@NRodriguezRDN), Marianne Smith Edge, RD (@MSmithEdge) and Leah McGrath, RD (@LeahMcGrathRD) are all examples of credible voices on the topic of sustainable nutrition.

In order to effectively engage in sustainability discussions, it is helpful to compile a list of resources that can be passed along to curious consumers. The Animal Agriculture Alliance produces a Sustainability Impact Report each year that explains how animal agriculture is making strides in managing its environmental impact as well as other key areas.²⁶ Other animal agriculture industry groups also maintain sustainability research and resources, including the Beef Checkoff,²⁷ the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef,²⁸ National Pork Board,²⁹ the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy,³⁰ the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Poultry and Eggs³¹ and the North American Meat Institute.³²

Public interest in sustainability is not going away, and neither will activist groups' attempts to spread misinformation to advance their goals. Everyone involved in animal agriculture needs to take a moment to understand what forces are behind this frequently negative narrative and how the animal agriculture community can play a more active role in the sustainability conversation, including correcting myths and exaggerations about emissions and other environmental impact measures. Healthy animals and the use of tools to keep production efficient are very important components of that, making the animal health industry an important player in this discussion as well. If we want to stay on the plate, we need to make sure to be at the table when sustainability is up for discussion.

REFERENCES

1. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/less-beef-more-beans-experts-world-needs-diet-233148854.html?guccounter=1>

2. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/01/commission-report-great-food-transformation-plant-diet-climate-change/>
3. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/how-joaquin-phoenix-vegan-ized-awards-season-1275760>
4. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/07/alexandria-ocasio-cortezs-green-new-deal-keeps-farting-cows-for-now.html>
5. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/135-19/mayor-de-blasio-chancellor-carranza-brooklyn-borough-president-adams-citywide#/0>
6. <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/135-19/mayor-de-blasio-chancellor-carranza-brooklyn-borough-president-adams-citywide#/0>
7. <https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/panera-to-make-half-of-menu-plant-based-climate-change-2020-1-1028809367>
8. <https://www.drovers.com/article/2019-meat-production-and-consumption>
9. <https://impossiblefoods.com/mission/2019impact/>
10. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/19/how-americans-see-climate-change-in-5-charts/>
11. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2018/the-education-of-the-sustainable-mindset/>
12. <https://www.foodintegrity.org/research/illuminate-research/illuminate-animal-protein/>
13. <https://www.cowspiracy.com/facts>
14. <https://foodinsight.org/consumers-insights-future-of-food-sustainability-food-waste/>
15. <https://foodinsight.org/sustainability-healthy-diets/>
16. https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Mitloehner_05.21.2019.pdf
17. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i3437e.pdf>
18. <https://news.trust.org/item/20180918083629-d2wf0>
19. <https://academic.oup.com/jas/article/98/1/skz291/5581976>
20. https://www.beefresearch.org/CMDocs/BeefResearch/Sustainability%20White%20Papers%20and%20Infographics/US_Sustainability_Overview.pdf
21. <https://library.pork.org/media/?mediaId=ADC40992-FA2B-4F50-B20EA2FE6DAD02CE>
22. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5011411/>
23. <https://animalscience.ucdavis.edu/people/faculty/frank-mitloehner>
24. <https://twitter.com/GHGGuru>
25. <https://twitter.com/drsplace>
26. <https://animalagalliance.org/issues/sustainability/>
27. <https://www.beefresearch.org>
28. <https://www.usrsb.org>
29. <https://www.pork.org/environment/sustainable-pig-farming/>
30. <http://sustainabilityalliance.usdairy.com>
31. <https://www.us-rspe.org>
32. http://meatmythcrushers.com/documents/Meatmythcrushers_brochure_final_lowres.pdf



Hannah Thompson-Weeman

As vice president of communications, Hannah Thompson-Weeman develops and implements the communications strategy for the Animal Agriculture Alliance, a nationwide, industry-united non-profit organisation working to bridge the communication gap between farm and fork. Thompson-Weeman holds a B.S. in agricultural communication and an M.S. in agricultural and extension education from The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.

Email: hthompson@animalagalliance.org