



Dairy Cares Report

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The remarkable (and mostly untold) story of U.S. dairy's shrinking carbon footprint

All but unnoticed to the general public a few years ago, the topic of climate change and the now-familiar terms that go with it – carbon footprint, global warming and greenhouse gases – are common parts of the national discussion. That trend continued this month, as Congress enacted new legislation to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases in hopes of slowing the effects of climate change.

The vast majority of greenhouse gases are produced by burning fossil fuel: coal, oil, and natural gas. But some attention has also been focused on the role livestock animals play in the overall “budget” of greenhouse gas emissions. While the contribution of livestock is small compared to fossil fuels combustion, it is nevertheless important on a global scale.

How important? In the United States, animal agriculture is responsible for less than 3 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's 2008 inventory of such emissions. That's all of animal agriculture, of course, so the share of dairy farms is smaller, about 0.7 percent, again according to U.S. EPA.

Despite this relatively small share of the overall picture, there have been suggestions from some quarters (to be fair, most often from those who are not big fans of eating meat for other reasons) that consumers should consider reducing their consumption of meat and dairy products as a step toward saving the earth.

Before consumers set aside their cheeseburgers or yogurt, however, there are a few facts they should know. Much of the media “hype” about the contribution of cattle to climate change can be traced to a 2006 report from United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, titled “Livestock's Long Shadow.” The report suggested that worldwide, livestock farming contributes as much as 18 percent of emissions of greenhouse gases.

But why is the share of livestock emissions on a global basis **six times higher than in the U.S.** (even though Americans produce and consume far more meat and dairy products than most other countries)? **The answer breaks down to a single word: efficiency.**

Fully half of the greenhouse gas emissions identified in the United Nations report were attributed to deforestation. Unfortunately, as many developing nations attempt to increase their agricultural production to feed growing populations, they are doing so by

clearing forests – not only does this release carbon to the atmosphere, but destroying forests costs us an effective mitigation method for greenhouse gases, “sequestering” carbon by pulling it out of the atmosphere and locking it inside the wood of trees and other plants. Importantly, **deforestation is not an issue in the United States**, where forest acreage has actually increased in recent years.

Even more important is the superior efficiency of livestock farming in the United States, which leads to a much smaller carbon footprint for meat and dairy products produced. Due to improvements in animal nutrition, breeding, animal health and cow comfort, milk production has steadily increased in the United States for the past six decades:

- In 1944, there were 25.6 million dairy cows in the United States, and they produced 117 billion pounds of milk
- In 2007, there were 9.2 million dairy cows in the U.S., and they produced 186 billion pounds of milk (Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, <http://www.nass.usda.gov>)

That’s correct. Today with **16 million fewer cows than in 1944, American dairy farmers are producing nearly 70 billion pounds more milk**. What’s more, the overall carbon footprint of a glass of milk is **two-thirds smaller than it was 60 years ago**.

Summed up, the carbon footprint of U.S. dairy products has been shrinking dramatically for decades and is much smaller than the world average. What’s more, as dairy farmers embrace improvements in efficiency, that carbon footprint will shrink even more. In fact, the national dairy industry earlier this year adopted a goal of further reducing its carbon footprint by 25 percent by 2020.

And California dairies can be particularly proud – for years, California dairy farmers have led the nation in production efficiency, and today are responsible for about one-fifth of the nation’s milk supply.

It’s time for all Americans to do their part to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel and reduce the impacts of climate change. Americans also deserve a wide variety of nutritious foods – including dairy products – that are produced responsibly and sustainably.

The moral of this story for consumers: there’s no need to avoid dairy or meat, but it makes sense to be sure they were produced here in the U.S. by an environmentally efficient farmer (or at least someone who is meeting the high standards of U.S. farming practices). Dairy Cares members remain committed to assuring consumers that they can choose California-produced dairy products with confidence, knowing that they are produced close to home and unsurpassed for quality and environmental sustainability.

Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability for California’s dairy industry. Our members include the Alliance of Western Milk Producers, Bank of the West, Bar 20 Dairy Farms, California Dairies Inc., California Dairy Campaign, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America-California, Dairy Institute of California, Hilmar Cheese Co., HP Hood, Joseph Gallo Farms, Land O’ Lakes, Milk Producers Council, Turlock Dairy & Refrigeration, Western United Dairymen, and others. For information about Dairy Cares, visit our web site at www.dairycares.com, write dairycares@aol.com or call 916-441-3318.