

What Does Meat Have to Do With It?

Cara Anaam

What industry would you guess is responsible for 18% of the *greenhouse gases* released into the *atmosphere* worldwide? If you guessed it was the airlines or long-haul trucking or coal-fueled electric plants, guess again. It is actually an industry many Americans take advantage of every day. We don't think of it as a major polluter and most of us wouldn't associate it with greenhouse gas *emissions*. What is it?

Meat!

According to a 2006 report from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 30% of the earth's ice-free land surface is now devoted to feeding and raising cows, pigs, and chickens, which provide us with our hamburgers, pork chops, and drum sticks.

How does modern meat production contribute to climate change?

- When cows and pigs eat a lot of grains, they *emit* a lot of gas – greenhouse gas!
- Farmers use *petroleum-based* fertilizers to grow the grains that feed the cows, pigs, and chickens. Petroleum-based fertilizers are made from – you guessed it! – fossil fuels, which emit greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.
- It takes 16 pounds of grain to produce 1 pound of meat. The soil gets exhausted from creating all that grain, so farmers use even more petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizers.
- 260 million acres of forest have been cut for animal agriculture. Forests are “*carbon sinks*” (see p. 10). We need them to clean *carbon* out of the air and keep the *carbon cycle* in balance.
- Processing the meat and transporting it from big industrial farms to supermarkets all across the country creates more carbon emissions.

It is not realistic for everyone to stop eating meat. Animals can be a good source of protein, whether in the form of meat, milk, cheese, or eggs.



Cattle, like the ones shown here on a feedlot in Iowa, contribute to greenhouse gases.

Their skins or wool can keep us warm. Small herds grazing on grasses can help keep the ecosystem (including humans) healthy and in balance. The key is to raise them in ways that protect the earth.

Cara Anaam is co-editor of The Change Agent.

What do you think?

Do you think there is a way raise cows, pigs, and chickens for their meat that *wouldn't* cause greenhouse gas emissions?

Have you ever raised animals for food? How did you (or your parents) do it?

Write about how this article affects you.

Learn more about the energy used to produce food in the “What’s on your dinner plate” activity from <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras>.

