



## **Policy Suggestions for Green New Deal**

Submitted to the People's Green New Deal Working Group in August, 2019

### **Summary:**

Numerous recent studies have concluded that greenhouse gas emissions from animal agriculture are important contributors to the climate crisis. In fact, several reports and studies determined that a global shift in human diets toward a greater percentage of plant-based foods and less reliance on animal products is a necessary component of any successful effort to avert runaway global warming.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the needed reductions in production of foods of animal origins will require leadership and action at the governmental level. Animal agriculture is also one of the top contributors to numerous other serious environmental problems including deforestation, habitat loss, species extinction, air and water pollution, and more.<sup>2</sup>

The United States is one of the countries with the highest consumption of animal products. In fact, if the whole world ate as the US currently does, it would take 137% of the entire habitable surface of the earth to feed us all!<sup>3</sup> Because of our outsized contribution to the many challenges of animal agriculture, our position as global leaders, and our current policies that promote and incentivize animal agriculture, there is an especially great onus on the United States to take leadership on this issue. For any Green New Deal to comprehensively insure US practices are inherently sustainable, it must include an integration of policies and practices intended to reduce production of animal-based foods.<sup>4</sup> This document briefly describes nine sample policies.

The book *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, edited by Paul Hawken, offers numerous scientifically sound strategies, that, implemented together in a timely manner, would allow humankind to avert runaway global warming. The strategies in the book are ranked in order of the tons of carbon dioxide equivalent greenhouse gas emissions they would prevent and/or sequester. In the ranking, "Plant-Rich Diets" came in at #4, with over 66 gigatons of reduced carbon dioxide equivalents by 2050. That's higher than solar, higher than wind, and higher than electric vehicles. Given that animal agriculture is one of the largest drivers of the climate crisis, there is tremendous hope and potential in turning the crisis around through moving toward plant-based or plant-rich diets.

**Policies:**

The following nine policies will help reduce the production and consumption of animal products in the United States, resulting in drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, improvements in land and water use, decreased air and water pollution, reduction in habitat loss and species loss, improved health, and cost savings.

*Dietary Guidelines:* Change the Dietary Guidelines for Americans to the “Sustainable, Healthy Diet” pattern such as outlined in the EAT-Lancet report published earlier this year in The Lancet. The Canadian government did that recently.<sup>5</sup>

*Subsidy Switch:* Currently, the US government is heavily subsidizing unhealthy, unsustainable animal products: meat, dairy, eggs, and fish. Subsidies for healthy plant foods such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes, on the other hand, are minimal to non-existent. Institute policies to stop subsidizing meat, dairy, fish, and eggs. Start subsidizing vegetables, fruits, and legumes and whole grains that are grown for humans. Cease government buy-outs of surplus dairy so the dairy industry is vulnerable to the law of supply and demand.

*Taxation:* Institute a tax on production and/or purchasing of animal products, similar to the tobacco tax. Elimination of subsidies coupled with a tax would make the purchase price of animal products closer to the true cost of production and would result in decreased consumption. Include a rebate for all Americans to offset the increased cost so the tax is not regressive. David Robinson Simon’s book *Meatonomics* makes the economic case for this combination of taxing, eliminating subsidies, and giving a rebate, and concludes that these measures would result in a reduction of animal product consumption of about 44%, approximately 172,000 fewer annual deaths from diseases caused by overconsumption of animal products, a 3.4 trillion-pound annual reduction of carbon dioxide equivalents, hundreds of thousands of square miles of US land freed up to be potentially restored to forest, grassland, or other native habitat, \$26 billion annual savings to Medicare and Medicaid, and a yearly cash surplus of \$32 billion nationally.

*Mandated Reductions:* Create reduction mandates which entail reducing the size of livestock and farmed fish populations as they are consumed and/or die of natural causes. By stopping or slowing breeding, we can decrease greenhouse gas emissions.

*Incentivize Shifts Toward More Plants:* Create a fund to enable state and local governments, school districts, corporations, and other large consumers of food to increase healthy plant-based offerings and decrease animal foods. Such funds could be used for such things as offsetting planning and implementation costs, hiring consultants, or purchasing equipment to facilitate the shift. One school district in California reduced animal product purchases by nearly 30% over 2 years, and during that time reduced their food services greenhouse gas emissions by 14%, reduced water use by 42 million gallons per year, increased student satisfaction with the meals, and saved \$42K!<sup>6</sup>

*Address Access Issues:* People with low incomes may depend on cheap food staples that are often highly processed, unhealthy, and unsustainable. Their neighborhoods

often lack stores that sell healthy foods. Many people in these situations rely on government assistance to buy food, and the SNAP benefits they receive may be insufficient to purchase healthy food such as fresh fruits and vegetables, even if there is access in their neighborhoods. Currently, animal products may be very accessible to people in these food deserts, through fast food franchises and convenience stores. Policies that tax such foods and remove subsidies will raise the cost of animal products, potentially putting these foods out of reach of people with limited incomes. These access and income inequality issues must be addressed through policies that incentivize purchases of healthy foods. For instance, SNAP (formerly food stamp) benefits can be increased for purchases of healthy staples such as fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. Foods that are not healthy or sustainable, such as sugary drinks and processed meats, can either be eliminated from eligibility or discouraged through incentives for purchases of healthy foods. These incentives would increase such purchases, thereby encouraging convenience store owners to stock more such foods in their stores.

*Provide Support:* Major lifestyle shifts such as moving to a plant-based or plant-rich diet require support for adoption and maintenance. Offer grants to organizations that provide free or low-cost programs to help people make the transition.

*Support Farm Transitions:* Provide grants to animal agricultural operations for converting their farms to entirely plant-based foods. Such transitions have been done; for example, one farming couple transformed their chicken and cattle operation into a mushroom farm.<sup>7</sup> There are even organizations that are helping farmers with the transition. In an interview with a founder of one such organization, she described how farmers can actually make more money per acre if they make the shift.<sup>8</sup>

*Education:* Research has demonstrated a “major awareness gap about livestock’s contribution to climate change.”<sup>9</sup> Among those consumers who have more awareness, there is a greater willingness to change dietary consumption patterns. Therefore, it is essential that more people become aware of the link. Create a department within one of the US agencies such as the USDA or the EPA that is charged with creating marketing messages and public education materials about animal agriculture and climate change. Make the materials available free of charge to individuals, organizations, and state and local governments. Encourage state and local governments to engage in public education campaigns about the harms of animal agriculture and heavy animal product consumption. Provide grants to nonprofit organizations that engage in such campaigns.

**Conclusion:** The recent exponential increase of fires in the Amazon, mostly fires started intentionally to clear land for raising cattle or for growing feed crops for animals, drive home the critical nature of a global human dietary shift toward more plant-based foods and reduced animal products as an essential strategy for avoiding climate catastrophe. A combination of incentives, subsidy restructuring, taxes, education, and support such as those outlined in this policy paper can help Americans do our part to rein in the massive amounts of greenhouse gases associated with our meat- and dairy-heavy diets.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ripple, William J., Pete Smith, Helmut Haberl, Stephen A. Montzka, Clive McAlpine, and Douglas H. Boucher. "Ruminants, climate change and climate policy." *Nature Climate Change* 4, no. 1 (2013): 2,

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Doug\\_Boucher/publication/259466565\\_COMMENTARY\\_Ruminants\\_climate\\_change\\_and\\_climate\\_policy/links/0046352bdd7554fcd000000.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Doug_Boucher/publication/259466565_COMMENTARY_Ruminants_climate_change_and_climate_policy/links/0046352bdd7554fcd000000.pdf); <https://eatforum.org/eat-lancet-commission/> (accessed August 23, 2019); Willett, Walter, Johan Rockström, Brent Loken, Marco Springmann, Tim Lang, Sonja Vermeulen, Tara Garnett et al. "Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems." *The Lancet* 393, no. 10170 (2019): 447–492 (accessed August 23, 2019); and Hedenus, Fredrik, Stefan Wirsenius, and Daniel JA Johansson. "The importance of reduced meat and dairy consumption for meeting stringent climate change targets." (2014), <http://www.repubblicadigaia.org/alea/sites/default/files/art%253A10.1007%252Fs10584-014-1104-5.pdf> (accessed August 23, 19).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Campbell, B. M., D. J. Beare, E. M. Bennett, J. M. Hall-Spencer, J. S. I. Ingram, F. Jaramillo, R. Ortiz, N. Ramankutty, J. A. Sayer, and D. Shindell. 2017. Agriculture production as a major driver of the Earth system exceeding planetary boundaries. *Ecology and Society* 22(4):8, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-09595-220408> (accessed August 23, 2019); Stoll-Kleemann, Susanne, and Tim O'Riordan. "The sustainability challenges of our meat and dairy diets." *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 57, no. 3 (2015): 34–48, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00139157.2015.1025644> (accessed August 23, 2019); Beth Love, *Sensational Salads to Cool the Earth* (Santa Cruz, CA: WholenessWorks, 2016), 11–14; and Machovina, Brian, Kenneth J. Feeley, and William J. Ripple. "Biodiversity conservation: The key is reducing meat consumption." *Science of the Total Environment* 536 (2015): 419–431, [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/19196/Machovina\\_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAlloWed=y](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/19196/Machovina_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAlloWed=y) (accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Ritchie, "How much of the world's land would we need in order to feed the global population with the average diet of a given country?," Our World in Data, October 3, 2017, <https://ourworldindata.org/agricultural-land-by-global-diets> (accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Eat for the Earth is not the only organization to propose such policy shifts. An excellent guide to policy to reduce the impacts of animal agriculture to the climate emergency by a Harvard research fellow is Harwatt, Helen. "Including animal to plant protein shifts in climate change mitigation policy: a proposed three-step strategy." (2018), [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Helen\\_Harwatt/publication/329217587\\_Including\\_animal\\_to\\_plant\\_protein\\_shifts\\_in\\_climate\\_change\\_mitigation\\_policy\\_a\\_proposed\\_three-step\\_strategy/links/5c1a7cf7458515a4c7e9cea7/Including-animal-to-plant-protein-shifts-in-climate-change-mitigation-policy-a-proposed-three-step-strategy.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Helen_Harwatt/publication/329217587_Including_animal_to_plant_protein_shifts_in_climate_change_mitigation_policy_a_proposed_three-step_strategy/links/5c1a7cf7458515a4c7e9cea7/Including-animal-to-plant-protein-shifts-in-climate-change-mitigation-policy-a-proposed-three-step-strategy.pdf) (accessed August 23, 2019). A group of researchers also gives policy direction in a journal article: Mario Herrero, Benjamin Henderson, Petr Havlík, Philip K. Thornton, Richard T. Conant, Pete Smith, Stefan Wirsenius et al. "Greenhouse gas mitigation potentials in the livestock sector." *Nature Climate Change* 6, no. 5 (2016): 452, [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mario\\_Herrero2/publication/299311424\\_Herrero\\_et\\_al\\_NCC\\_Review\\_2016\\_SupInfo/links/56f0b92e08ae0dcdafd6b128.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mario_Herrero2/publication/299311424_Herrero_et_al_NCC_Review_2016_SupInfo/links/56f0b92e08ae0dcdafd6b128.pdf) (accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The Canadian government removed the dairy category from the guidelines and grouped dairy with other animal products, legumes, nuts, and seeds as 25% of the nutritional, sustainable diet they recommend to their citizens. That left 75% of the plate for healthy, whole plant-based foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. And given that healthy plant-sources of protein are included in the protein group with the animal products, it is likely that many Canadians following the guidelines will eat more than 75% plant-based and less than 25% animal-based. Here is a link to the guidelines: <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>.

<sup>6</sup> Kari Hamerschlag and Julian Kraus-Polk, "Shrinking the Carbon and Water Footprint of School Food: A Recipe for Combating Climate Change: A pilot analysis of Oakland Unified School District's Food

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Programs,” Friends of the Earth, February 2017, [https://1bps6437gg8c169i0y1drtgz-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/FOE\\_FoodPrintReport\\_7F.pdf](https://1bps6437gg8c169i0y1drtgz-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/FOE_FoodPrintReport_7F.pdf) (accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Kat Smith, “Cow and Chicken Farmers Switch to Growing Mushrooms,” LiveKindly, <https://www.livekindly.com/cow-chicken-farmers-switch-growing-mushrooms/> (accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Erin Rees Clayton, “From Animal Agriculture to the Plant-Based Economy,” The Good Food Institute, December 27, 2018, <https://www.gfi.org/transitioning-from-animal-agriculture-to> (accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Bailey, Rob, Antony Froggatt, and Laura Wellesley. “Livestock—climate change’s forgotten sector.” Chatham House (2014), [https://gastronomiaycia.republica.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/estudio\\_consumo\\_carne.pdf](https://gastronomiaycia.republica.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/estudio_consumo_carne.pdf) (accessed August 23, 2019).