



CASE FOR SUPPORT

WHY DIVEST FROM INDUSTRIAL LIVESTOCK?



INTRODUCTION

As the production of meat, dairy and eggs has grown, most farming systems have intensified, focusing on increasing productivity above everything else. 72 billion meat chickens, 7 billion laying hens, 1.3 billion pigs, 1.1 billion goats and sheep, and hundreds of millions of beef cattle are now slaughtered each year¹. But this increasing production comes at a heavy price for the environment, workers, local communities, and farmed animals.

In this briefing, we lay out the environmental, social justice and animal welfare cases for industrial livestock divestment. Please refer to the Activist or Councilor guides for the financial case and why investor engagement will not work with this industry.

WHY DIVEST? THE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM OF INDUSTRIAL LIVESTOCK

CLIMATE IMPACTS

Climate change is the defining risk of the 21st century. Livestock are responsible for about 14.5% of the total annual anthropogenic (human-caused) greenhouse gas emissions globally². Livestock production accounts for 56-58% of the food sector's emissions, despite providing only 37% of our protein and 18% of our calories³. Ruminant livestock like cows and sheep produce methane through their digestion processes, which is released when they belch. But livestock also contribute to climate change through land use change, feed production, manure, and processing and transport. A 2018 study of over 40,000 farms revealed that although there is variation in the environmental impact of livestock depending on the production method, even the very lowest impact meat, farmed fish and dairy products still almost always cause much more environmental harm than the highest impact vegetable and cereal products⁴.

It is clear that there must be a reduction in animal protein production and a transition to plant proteins, not just a shift in the type of animal protein we consume. If current trends continue, the global meat and dairy industry will account for almost half the world's 1.5°C emissions budget by 2030 - that is, the amount of emissions we can safely emit to stay within 1.5°C of global heating⁵. This is projected to rise even further to 81% by 2050⁶. Reducing meat production is not an optional bolt on to our efforts to transition away from fossil fuels - it is essential for us to stay within safe levels of climate change. Every route to the UK meeting net zero modelled by the Committee on Climate Change includes a transition to 20-50% lower meat consumption, with the CCC calling it "particularly important"⁷. The National Food Strategy - the first independent review of England's entire food system for 75 years, and commissioned by the government - recommends that the UK transition to 30% less meat consumption by 2030⁸. The Eating Better coalition of over 60 civil society organisations calls for the UK to reduce its meat production and consumption by 50% by 2030⁹. The benefits of meat reduction are projected to be huge - providing the clearest route to decarbonize agriculture. It is estimated that halving global meat consumption, substituting this with vegetable-based equivalents, and regrowing vegetation like woodlands on the land spared by reducing livestock production would save and offset a stunning 10.4 mtCO₂eq/year¹⁰, which is equivalent to roughly 20% of total global emissions.

Finally, an estimated 30% of global methane emissions comes from the burps, farts and manure of livestock; methane is a particularly powerful but shorter-term greenhouse gas, which if reduced would buy the planet vital time to reduce longer-term greenhouse gas emissions¹¹. If we are to achieve a world with lower meat production and consumption, we face the choice of what is the worst form of livestock production, which should be scaled back: industrial livestock corporations are the best candidates due to their reliance on mass-production of low-price, low-welfare meat and dairy, and hardwired growth imperative to maximize shareholder profits. The world's five biggest industrial livestock companies combined emit more greenhouse gases than ExxonMobil¹². A lack of media scrutiny has allowed these companies to remain largely invisible, compared to the fossil fuel giants. But industrial livestock companies and their hunger for global growth are just as incompatible with a future safe from climate crisis as fossil fuel companies.

LAND USE, DEFORESTATION AND BIODIVERSITY LOSS

Industrial livestock is also a disaster for land use. Meat, aquaculture, eggs, and dairy already use about 83% of the world's farmland, despite providing only 37% of our protein and 18% of our calories¹³. This isn't just grassland - 40% of the world's cropland is used to grow animal feed¹⁴. This makes the growing livestock sector and its demand for animal feeds such as soya the biggest driver of agricultural land use expansion, which drives deforestation. Habitat loss is the biggest driver of biodiversity loss¹⁵, leading to displacement, suffering and death for wild animals in precious and fragile regions such as the Brazilian Amazon and Cerrado. The large volumes of wild-caught fish used as animal feed for farmed fish, and farmed animals like pigs, increases overfishing, with associated negative effects on species extinction¹⁶.

There is plenty of land and ocean to feed everyone on the planet sustainably, whilst replenishing nature and biodiversity to save our world from ecological breakdown - but the industrial livestock sector currently wastefully monopolises this land for its own profit. It is estimated that halving global meat consumption and substituting this with vegetable-based equivalents would result in a 67% reduction in agricultural land use¹⁷. This can be achieved through the targeted defunding and regulation of the industrial livestock industry, and a just agricultural transition to good green jobs in agro-ecological farming and nature restoration.

WATER AND SOIL DEGRADATION

Industrial livestock farming causes soil, water, and air pollution due to the use of fertilizers, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, and the waste this industry generates. Around one-third of global water use is related to animal production¹⁸. Every year approximately 1.3 million tonnes of pesticides are used to grow crops destined for animal feed. Fertilisers and manure are linked to more than 400 dead zones in rivers and oceans throughout the world—places where nothing can live¹⁹. The Netherlands is currently looking at proposals to reduce livestock numbers by 30% to deal with the "nitrogen crisis" caused by manures²⁰. Industrial factory farms often generate more manure than can be absorbed into the soil surrounding the facilities, so the manure is often stored in large lagoons or over-applied to fields which results in excessive nitrates and other nutrients polluting local soils and water systems²¹. A recent study found that halving global meat consumption and substituting this with vegetable-based equivalents would result in 64% lower acidification and 55% lower eutrophication⁹, improving soil and water health²².

⁹ Eutrophication: Excessive richness of nutrients in a lake or other body of water, frequently due to run-off from the land, which causes a dense growth of plant life.

WHY DIVEST? THE SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND HEALTH IMPACTS OF INDUSTRIAL LIVESTOCK

DIETARY COLONIALISM AND INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE:

The Global North (the United States, Canada, Europe, Israel, Australia, New Zealand and Japan) are responsible for 92% of all excess carbon dioxide emissions – “colonizing the atmosphere” by emitting far more than their fair share²³. In contrast, the poorest half of humanity, who will bear the brunt of climate change’s effects, were responsible for only 7% of global carbon emissions between 1990 and 2015²⁴. These inequalities extend to food. The huge land use and emissions of livestock production disproportionately feeds the high-meat diets of wealthy countries in the Global North, whose diets take up an unfair share of global resources. For instance, the diets of the world’s richest 10% are roughly 13 times more energy intensive than the diets of the poorest 10%²⁵. The diet of the average Indian, Nigerian or Thai citizen requires about a quarter of the land per person than the diet of the average Brit²⁶. The negative effects of these high-meat diets in the global North are disproportionately experienced by people in lower-income countries in the global South – from the worst effects of climate change, to the forced dispossession of small farmers and indigenous people from their land to produce livestock and grow animal feed for export, rather than feeding people locally. While rich countries use up such an unfair share of global resources, there is virtually no space for lower-income countries to lift their people out of poverty without risking a breakdown of global ecosystems. For instance, if every country in the world adopted the UK’s high-meat diet, global land use by agriculture would have to nearly double²⁷ – causing deforestation and habitat destruction on a catastrophic scale. But if wealthier countries take a fairer share of global resources by shifting to lower-meat diets not dependent on industrial livestock, there is plenty of land available to feed everyone on the planet and restore nature to regenerate the earth.

EXPLOITATION OF COMMUNITIES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Industrial livestock frequently displaces communities, destroys forests, depletes soils and pollutes the environment – at the expense of small farmers and local and Indigenous communities²⁸. Land grabs by livestock corporations for livestock housing and stocking, or growing animal feed like soya, are well documented²⁹. For instance, Amnesty International found that cattle farming is the main driver of illegal land seizures that violate human rights in Reserves and Indigenous territories in Brazil’s Amazon rainforest³⁰. Mongabay have documented how violent displacement and killings of indigenous peoples in Nicaragua have been committed in pursuit of grazing cattle on deforested land³¹. The large volumes of wild-caught fish used as animal feed are often sourced from countries including Mauritania, Chile and Peru where overfishing scandals are rife and exporting valuable fish for animal feed risks diverting nutritious food from local people, many of whom face hunger and malnutrition³². In the EU, there were 3.4 million less poultry and livestock farms in 2016 compared with just 11 years earlier in 2005, as massive industrial livestock farms put millions of smaller-scale farmers out of business³³. In the UK, 110,000 livestock and poultry farms went out of business between 1990 and 2016, a 34% decline³⁴, whilst over 800 US-style “megafarms” became established³⁵.

WORKER EXPLOITATION

A recent investigation uncovered evidence of widespread exploitation of workers by European meat plants, with many employees (particularly migrants) indirectly employed through subcontractors and agencies at extremely low (often illegal) wages with precarious work and limited rights³⁶. Studies on meat packing plants and slaughterhouses also regularly find evidence of high rates of injury and poor mental health³⁷. For instance, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration found that a worker in the meat and poultry industry lost a body part or was sent to hospital for in-patient treatment about every other day between 2015 and 2018 – higher injury rates than occur in sawmills, industrial building construction, and oil and gas well drilling³⁸. Meatpacking companies like Tyson Foods,

Smithfield and JBS were found to have some of the highest levels of Covid-10 infections and deaths of all US food companies by a recent investigation³⁹.

PANDEMIC RISKS & ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE

South African scientists recently warned that intensive livestock farming creates the “perfect breeding ground” for the development of viruses, which could make covid-19 look like a “dress rehearsal”⁴⁰. Highly concentrated large numbers of animals found in large-scale intensive farming are more susceptible to infection and increase the risk of emergence of more virulent disease strains⁴¹. Destruction of animal habitats is also one of the biggest drivers of zoonoses (diseases which are transmitted from animals to humans) – and this land use change is in turn mainly driven by the expansion of livestock farming and its demand for animal feed⁴². The over-use and misuse of antibiotics in industrial livestock is rampant, used to prop up low welfare practices and keep stressed animals alive. 70% of the worlds antibiotics are used on farmed animals and increase the risk development of antibiotic-resistant superbugs found in supermarket chicken⁴³, or flu viruses such as H5N1⁴⁴. Superbugs are currently responsible for 700,000 deaths a year and are predicted to increase to 10million deaths a year by 2050 if we do not end the irresponsible overuse of antibiotics.

HEALTH

Fine particulate matter (air pollution) from food production causes 15,900 deaths per year in the US – and livestock production has been found to cause 80% of these deaths, with red meat having particularly high impacts⁴⁵. In fact, fine particulate matter from animal agriculture costs more in health damage than the sector contributes to the US economy⁴⁶. Communities living nearby to livestock farms are most effected, who are often lower-income or marginalized groups – for instance, a study of factory farms in North California found that they were located disproportionately next to black and latinx low-income communities⁴⁷. The high-meat diets promoted by industrial livestock companies also damage our health significantly. An Oxford University study found that reducing average meat consumption in the UK to two to three servings per person per week could prevent 45,000 premature deaths per year and reduce NHS costs by £1.2 billion per year⁴⁸.

WHY DIVEST? THE ANIMAL SUFFERING OF INDUSTRIAL LIVESTOCK

Industrial livestock companies represent the worst kind of meat and dairy production. They tend to rely on very intensive farming systems - often referred to as "factory farming" - characterized by high-density stocking of animals.

Animals are sentient beings, which means they can experience emotions such as joy, pleasure, pain, and frustration⁴⁹. In May 2021, the UK Government introduced the Animal Sentience Bill, which is the first time UK law specifically recognises animals as sentient beings⁵⁰.

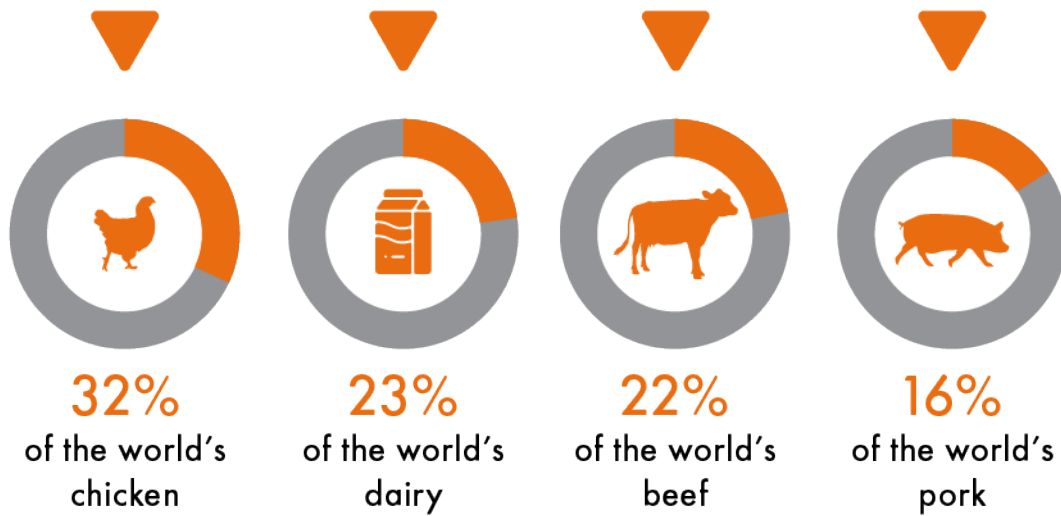
However, despite the overwhelming recognition that animals are sentient beings, billions of farmed animals continue to suffer throughout their lives.

Factory farms squash billions of genetically identical animals into stressful, barren environments, with no access to outdoor space or natural light. From the day they are born until the day they die, the animals suffer.

The cramped conditions and stressful environments mean that animals can't behave according to their natural instincts. Instead, many experience behavioural issues like aggression, cage-biting, chewing continuously on nothing until frothing at the mouth, feather pecking or cannibalism.

- **Meat chickens:** More than two thirds of the world's meat chickens are raised in intensive indoor systems, where each bird has a space smaller than an A4 piece of paper. Because of genetic selection, they grow large unnaturally fast. This often causes respiratory failure and sudden death, leg abnormalities, skeletal fractures, and skin problems.
- **Pigs:** Pigs are curious, sociable animals: they like to play, investigate their environment, and nest. However, around 600 million pigs live in intensive farms, where mother pigs spend their lives in cages too small to turn around in, pigs develop painful sores from the metal bars and the hard slats, and piglets have their tails cut and teeth clipped.
- **Meat and Dairy Cows:** Cows would naturally spend the day grazing on pasture but they are increasingly being kept in indoor system or on vast feed lots. This causes lameness and painful leg and udder infections. The removal of the natural diet of grass can cause digestive issues. Overcrowding causes anxiety and aggression in cows and they are being pushed to their physical limits to grow as large as possible or produce huge amounts of milk.
- **Aquaculture:** Fish kept in intensive farms are restricted to small, overcrowded areas with little opportunity to carry out natural behaviours. Many suffer greatly from infections and parasites, in some cases being eaten alive. For instance, Mowi has reported an overall 9.4% mortality rate for its Scottish salmon⁹. This industry is growing at an alarming rate with little thought being given to animals involved.

In 2016 the **ten largest meat and dairy** companies in each sector accounted for:



Together, daily, they slaughtered over
32 million chickens
500,000 hogs
120,000 head of cattle

Date of last available independently calculated data. Collated by IATP & Grain, available online at <https://www.iatp.org/blog/emissions-impossible>

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