

## **Our Food Choices Affect the Environment**

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Choosing wisely what we eat can protect water quality, fight climate change, save family farms and rural communities and support the humane treatment of animals.

For a sustainable future, buy local food as much as possible. Support food co-ops, farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture. Eat organic food whenever possible - not only to reduce your exposure to residual hormones, antibiotics and pesticides but because organic methods are better for the larger ecosystems that support all life.

Cows, pigs and chickens that are allowed to range freely, fed on natural pasture as much of the year as possible, and raised without hormones and antibiotics are better for you and for the environment.

Animals grown in large feedlots and factory farms produce more waste than the local environment can handle. This fouls the air and water.

A new report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization says that the livestock sector is stressing many ecosystems and contributing to global environmental problems. Greenhouse gas emissions from livestock and their wastes, and from conversion of tropical forests into pastures, are an important factor in climate change. Livestock operations are also a major source of water pollution.

The UN report refers to the "provider gets - polluter pays" principle. Farmers and ranchers who are good environmental stewards deserve compensation for the ecosystem services they provide - such as maintaining water quantity and quality for downstream users, and storing carbon in a well-managed landscape of pastures, woodlands and wetlands. Those who pollute should pay.

When livestock operations are dotted around the landscape, animal manure represents a valuable fertilizer resource. When livestock is concentrated in factory farms, manure becomes waste.

Today in North America, cheap grain subsidized by US taxpayers is shipped from miles around to centralized animal production facilities. Hog factory farms can have 100,000 animals confined indoors, living on slats through which their wastes drop into huge sewage cesspools.

After slaughter, these mass-produced animals are shipped all over the continent. Shipping wastes fossil fuels and contributes to climate change. Artificially low grain prices - maintained through political lobbying by powerful corporations - are at the root of this unsustainable system.

Organizations such as the Husbandry Institute encourage consumers to exercise their buying power on behalf of a better environment. If you buy meat, ask:

What can you tell me about where this meat comes from?

Was it raised without antibiotics and added hormones?

Was it free range and pasture-fed from birth?

The same considerations apply to eggs and dairy products.

A "cheap food" system stresses families, rural communities, and the environment. It traps farmers into using bigger equipment, more fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides and pesticides, genetically-modified

seeds, buying out their neighbours' lands, draining wetlands, and employing foreign workers under unacceptable conditions.

The international Waterkeeper Alliance has launched a "Pure Farms, Pure Waters" campaign. It operates on a dual principle. Laws protecting water, air and workers should be strengthened and strictly enforced. And, farmers and concerned citizens should work together for environmentally and socially conscious food production, as an alternative to factory farming.

The Ottawa River Institute is promoting locally grown foods, farmers' markets, and food coops. Local food is not just a summer affair. We are rediscovering ways to store vegetables and fruits during our long Canadian winters, and experimenting with heritage varieties that keep better.

Promoting a diverse mixture of animals, vegetable, fruit and nut crops grown locally provides healthier diets and more sustainable economies. The UN report notes that government policies to reduce consumer demands on the livestock sector would "ease environmental pressure and costs."

As they say, you are what you eat. This applies to nations as well as individuals.