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Dear President

Commission Communication on sustainable food

The Greek Presidency of the European Union and Compassion in World Farming recently organised a conference, *Averting Farmageddon: Sustainable Food for All*. During the event, a consensus emerged among many presenters and delegates that far-reaching changes are needed to the current EU model of livestock production and consumption. Without such changes we will not be able to address livestock's detrimental impact on resource efficiency, the environment, human health and animal welfare.

Our understanding is that the Commission Communication on sustainable food may well put its primary focus on reducing food waste, which is of course vital. More ambitious steps are needed, however, if we wish to move to a food system that provides nutritious food and promotes a healthy diet, that is less voracious in its use of land and water and that rebuilds soil quality while restoring biodiversity and ecosystems.

The signatories of this letter would be grateful if we could have a meeting with you to discuss our concerns.

Resource inefficiency

Industrial livestock production is deeply resource-inefficient, dependent as it is on feeding human-edible cereals to animals. The nutritional value consumed by animals in eating a given quantity of cereals is much greater than that delivered for humans by the resultant meat.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has expressed this core inefficiency succinctly: "When livestock are raised in intensive systems, they convert carbohydrates and protein that might otherwise be eaten directly by humans and use them to produce a smaller quantity of energy and protein. In these situations, livestock can be said to reduce the food balance".ⁱ

Adverse impact on environment

Using cereals as animal feed is a wasteful use not just of these crops but of the resources used to grow them. Much more arable land, water and energy are needed to provide a unit of nutrition from industrially produced meat rather than meat derived from grazing animals or animals fed on crop residues in integrated crop-livestock farms.

Research concludes that "Animal products from industrial systems generally consume and pollute more ground- and surface-water resources than animal products from grazing or mixed systems."ⁱⁱ

High demand for feed crops has led to intensification of crop production and monocultures. This has resulted in soil degradation, as farmers abandon traditional, sustainable methods of ensuring soil quality such as grain-legume rotations, fallow periods and manure. Biodiversity in agro-ecosystems is under considerable pressure as a result of intensified farming.ⁱⁱⁱ Intensive agriculture has played a major role in the decline in farmland birds, grassland butterflies and pollinators.^{iv}

The *European Nitrogen Assessment* (ENA) identifies five key threats associated with excess reactive nitrogen (N_r) in the environment: damage to water, soil (acidification of agricultural soils), air (and hence human health), the greenhouse balance, and ecosystems and biodiversity.

Writing in *Nature*, Jan Willem Erisman, one of the presenters at *Averting Farmageddon* and co-author of the ENA, describes the huge increase in N_r put into the environment as “one of the major environmental challenges of the 21st century”.^v

The ENA concludes that most of the industrial production of N_r in Europe is used for fertiliser to grow crops for animal feed. It states: “Human use of livestock in Europe, and the consequent need for large amounts of animal feed, is therefore the dominant human driver altering the nitrogen cycle in Europe”.

Health

The high levels of meat consumption that have been made possible by industrial farming are having an adverse impact on human health. The Commission itself recognises that overconsumption of animal protein can lead to obesity, diabetes, heart diseases and certain cancers.^{vi}

Modern western diets tend to contain too much saturated fat. In addition, they are often deficient in the beneficial omega-3 fatty acids and have excessive amounts of omega-6 fatty acids relative to omega-3. We need to give greater attention to the nutritional quality of our food rather than simply to the quantity that we produce. Free range animals, with their higher activity levels and consumption of fresh forage, often provide meat of higher nutritional quality - with less fat and higher proportions of omega-3 fatty acids - than animals that are reared industrially.

Fiscal policies

Many at the conference agreed with the Commission’s Communication on resource efficiency that market prices must reflect the true costs of using resources and their environmental impacts. The ‘hidden costs’ of industrial livestock production are immense. Subsidies should be redirected to encourage farmers to produce pasture-and land-based food. Tax incentives should be used to promote the production and consumption of high quality, rather than industrial, meat.

Do we need a 70% increase in food production?

Some argue that to feed the anticipated world population in 2050 of 9.6 billion, food production must increase by 70%. On the basis of this figure we are told that further intensification of agricultural production is essential.

The 70% figure was contested at the conference. It is based on the assumption that by 2050 the whole world population will be eating the Western diet. Data published by UNEP^{vii} and the World Resources Institute^{viii} show that we could feed the anticipated increase in population by halving food waste and halving the amount of cereals that, on a business as usual basis, would be used for animal feed by 2050.

Conclusion

We recognise that it would be inappropriate for the Commission to tell people what to eat. However, we urge the Commission’s Communication to set out a ‘direction of travel’ for EU livestock production and consumption that:

- Encourages the consumption of meat of improved nutritional quality and in quantities that support rather than undermine good health;
- Uses resources more efficiently and that, instead of damaging the environment, enhances soil quality, uses water sparingly without polluting it and restores biodiversity and ecosystems; and
- Delivers high standards of animal welfare and respects the animals, who provide meat, milk and eggs, as sentient beings.

Yours sincerely

The undersigned

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