

Press release 20 July 2016

Effort sharing for the climate means cutting meat consumption and production – with a triple benefit for health

Unhealthy levels of meat consumption and production are simultaneously driving climate change, diet-related chronic diseases and resistance to antibiotics. A transition towards sustainable diets is necessary for a realistic climate strategy and represents the agricultural sector's main climate mitigation opportunity.

Today's publication of the Effort Sharing Decision proposal underlines the urgent need for effective action against climate change, as agreed by global leaders in Paris in December 2015. All sectors, including agriculture and food production, must contribute if the EU is to achieve its target of an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and the COP21 agreement to keep global warming "well below 1.5°C".

Current dietary patterns high in livestock products are incompatible with the aim of avoiding dangerous climate change. If left unchecked, the global rise in meat and dairy consumption will leave agriculture to account for nearly the entire annual emissions limit foreseen for 2050.¹ In addition, today's intensive models of livestock production are also driving the global health threat of antimicrobial resistance.²

Scenarios above 1.5°C will have a massive impact on human health and lives, not only due to changing weather conditions and environmental damage including droughts and disruption of food supplies, but also due to increases in cardiovascular, respiratory and infectious diseases, including malaria. Worldwide, between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250.000 additional deaths per year according to the WHO.³

Studies suggest that realistic changes in eating patterns in high income countries could reduce per capita greenhouse gas emissions by 25-50%.⁴ Positive climate action involving dietary change will also have significant further environmental and health co-benefits.⁵

Dietary change will boost agriculture's mitigation potential *and* improve global food security by reducing climate change impacts and freeing prime agricultural land for sustainable food, rather than livestock feed production. It will also take pressure off the world's valuable forests.

¹ Chatham House (2015) <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/changing-climate-changing-diets%20>

² AMR Review (2015) Antimicrobials in agriculture and the environment: reducing unnecessary use and waste, <http://amr-review.org/sites/default/files/Antimicrobials%20in%20agriculture%20and%20the%20environment%20-%20Reducing%20unnecessary%20use%20and%20waste.pdf>

³ WHO (2016) Climate change and health <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/>

⁴ Food Climate Research Network (2015) <http://www.fcrcn.org.uk/fcrn-publications/reports/policies-and-actions-shift-eating-patterns-what-works>

⁵ Springmann et al. (2015) <http://www.pnas.org/content/113/15/4146.abstract>

Westhoek et al. (2014) <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378014000338>

Stahl-Timmins (2015) reproduced in the BMJ: <http://www.bmj.com/content/351/bmj.h6316/infographic>



Even under most optimistic assumptions, agricultural technology change in itself cannot sufficiently drive down emissions.⁶ Support for climate-resilient farming methods must furthermore be embedded within a wider ecological strategy, have due regard for socio-economic effects on farmers and rural communities and be ethically acceptable. Nevertheless, the need to reduce meat production is unavoidable.

Nina Renshaw, Secretary General, EPHA:

“Meat overconsumption is associated with elevated disease and mortality rates. Livestock emissions are a major contributor to climate change and must be addressed under effort sharing actions. The good news is that the same action will improve our health three times over, by heading off the worst impacts of climate change, by steering us off the path to a future without effective antibiotics and by tackling the epidemic of chronic diseases related to unhealthy diets. Helping citizens adopt healthier, more sustainable diets where quality trumps quantity and farmers can achieve higher added value is a no-brainer and a great opportunity for Europe to set a healthy global example.”

Now it is for national governments to consider measures to foster the transition towards sustainable diets, among others by elaborating sustainable dietary guidelines and strategies to attain them and by calling for a Health Impact Assessment of agricultural policy in the framework of a Refit of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).⁷

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⁶ Bryngelsson et al. (2016) <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919216000129>

⁷ European Public Health Alliance (2016) “Three Steps Towards a Healthy Food Future” <http://epha.org/three-steps-towards-a-healthy-food-future-epha-submission-to-informal-eu-agriculture-council/>