

Environment report: Change the food and farming system

If food waste were a country, it would have the third highest carbon footprint behind China and the US

by Kerry McCarthy Prospect Magazine May 9, 2019



Climate change protestors in Parliament Square. Photo: Shutterstock

The **looming** climate catastrophe is our biggest environmental challenge: from extreme weather events, to rising sea levels, to the mass displacement of climate refugees and species extinction. Finding solutions can seem impossible. But some of us in Parliament realise that the consequences of not **rising to the challenge** are simply too great.

Much of the focus since Labour's **groundbreaking** Climate Change Act in 2008 has been **around energy and fossil fuels**, as well as transport emissions. There's been much less talk about **the environmental impact of** our food and farming system.

It's been 10 years **since I first held a debate on** "The environmental impact of the livestock sector" in Westminster Hall, and almost as long since Friends of the Earth supported a Private Members' Bill on the same topic. The Sustainable Livestock Bill of 2010 was introduced by Labour MP Rob Flello, but **met the same fate as** most backbench bills. **To say the reaction back then was hostile is an understatement.** But now it feels like there's been a breakthrough, and it's been led by the public, not by politicians. This exciting moment must be seized.

A recent EAT-Lancet Commission report attributed up to 30 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions to the food system. Emissions from **the livestock sector** alone are 14.5 per cent of the total—mainly from animal feed production and processing, and what is politely described as methane emissions from ruminants. Deforestation and soil degradation remove natural forms of carbon storage, and the growing use of synthetic nitrogen fertilisers is also **a major concern.**

Ludicrously, we waste between 30-50 per cent of the food we produce; if food waste were a country, it would have the third highest **carbon footprint** behind China and the US.

Without change the food and farming system will, within 30 years, **single-handedly use up** the total Paris Climate Agreement emissions budget. Yet **it has barely featured in** climate change talks—the focus has been on the impact of climate change on farming, not the other way round. According to the UK's Committee on Climate Change, there has been no progress in reducing UK agricultural emissions for the past decade.

Hopefully the conversation is starting to change. The International Panel on Climate Change called for action last year, saying "we must limit the demand for greenhouse-gas intensive food **through shifts to** healthier and more sustainable diets." Adopting a plant-based diet would help reduce the area of land used for growing animal feed, allowing for reforestation: a natural source of carbon sequestration. Making 50 per cent of EU farming organic by 2030 could reduce the bloc's greenhouse gas emissions by a quarter, with better soil acting as **a carbon sink** and reduced use of mineral fertilisers.

The overall trend is still in the wrong direction, with more countries adopting western patterns of consumption, and greater industrialisation, as farmers try to produce more to compensate for the all-powerful supermarkets paying less.

The reduction of emissions remains an urgent priority. So is the government prepared to act? Michael Gove says he is: the Agricultural Bill proposes a system of farming subsidies based on “public money for public goods” post-Brexit. This could include rewarding farmers who take steps to reduce their carbon footprint, by planting trees and improving soil. There are calls for a “**net zero emissions** by 2050” target to be included in the Bill.

Gove has also appointed Henry Dimbleby, from the Leon restaurant chain, **to draw up an ambitious food strategy**, which he promises will cover public health, public procurement, food waste, climate change, better food labelling and more. There are opportunities to shape a fairer, healthier and more sustainable food and farming system. It’s up to us to seize them.

Explain the following words and phrases from their context:

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