

UF-Gainesville Beef Cattle News Corner

We need to tell our story: livestock and climate change.

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A few weeks ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations sponsored body to guide global response to the climate challenge, published a new report on climate change and land use. Although the report was overall balanced, the reporting by the media was nothing but. Some reporting was so distorting, that even the IPCC complained about it. What media reported, was that IPCC has identified human diet as the driver for the accelerating loss of green cover across the Earth. Some media outlets went even further and reported that "IPCC recommends eating less meat for a cooler planet" and that "livestock emits more than half (51%) of global greenhouse gasses". The report did mention that changing to less carbon-intensive diets would be advantageous, but in no way indicated that we should become a society of vegetarians and vegans. The report also explicitly said agriculture and forestry combined sequester, or take out, more greenhouse gas from the air than it puts in. This fact was totally ignored by the media, while the message was the animal agriculture has a devastating role in climate change. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) calculated that livestock production in the US accounts for 4.2% of all greenhouse gas emissions, substantially lower than 51% that advocates often cite. When we also account for the fact that methane from cattle production is part of a natural carbon cycle that has been happening since the beginning of life on our planet, the impact on environment is even lower. The number of cattle is also often used to emphasize the magnitude of their environmental impact. The reality is that the number of ruminants in US today is essentially the same as in 1800s (bison and elk replaced with cattle), but the difference is that we now have 350 million people and 270 million vehicles.

This is not the first time when incorrect numbers are being published. In 2006, the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published a study titled "Livestock's Long Shadow," which received widespread international attention. The conclusion of the agency was that livestock was doing more to harm the climate than all modes of transportation combined. This claim was wrong, and has since been corrected by Henning Steinfeld, the report's senior author (the FAO analysts used a comprehensive life-cycle assessment to study the climate impact of livestock, but a different method when they analyzed transportation). However, most people never read the correction, and even today, the original numbers published are used by many media sources to support their agenda. The public is continuously bombarded with misinformation by agenda driven groups using social media and the damage is hard to undo.

Regarding the greenhouse gases, even if Americans eliminated all animal protein from their diets, they would reduce US greenhouse gas emissions by only 2.6 percent. We should also point out that technological, genetic and management changes that have taken place in U.S. agriculture over the past 70 years have made livestock production more efficient and greatly reduced the greenhouse gases per unit of product. According to the FAO's statistical database, total direct greenhouse gas emissions from U.S. livestock have declined 11.3 percent since 1961, while production of livestock meat has more than doubled.

Climate change demands urgent attention and the livestock industry has a large overall environmental footprint that affects air, water and land. These, combined with a rapidly rising world population, give us plenty of compelling reasons to continue to reduce the carbon footprint per kilogram of meat produced through increased efficiency. But we need to start with science-based facts. We, as an industry, also have to do a better job of telling our story. Farmers and ranchers need to know what the real impacts of livestock production are on the environment and share this information with the public, along with the commitment they are making to further reduce these impacts.

Agriculture has been the target of misinformation – numbers have been skewed, media coverage has been exaggerated and farmers and ranchers have been misrepresented. We have to become ambassadors of agriculture, farmers, ranchers and the truth about agriculture's contribution to climate change. With the population expected to triple by 2050, the question of how to feed the world remains — and we should thank our farmers and ranchers for being part of the solution to that problem.