

Agricultural policy is health policy



Reforming policy for a healthy animal agriculture

HEALTHY FOOD IN HEALTH CARE » FACT SHEET

Meat production in the United States has been steadily increasing since the 1960s and is projected to continue. The vast majority of this production focuses on maximum efficiency through an industrial production method which experts agree is unsustainable and presents an unjustified risk to **public health**.

Accompanying this production trend is unprecedented diet- and environment-related illness. While the agriculture and livestock industry aims to continue the growth, it is critical to reform the way food animals are raised and curb consumption and production to reduce the negative effects this system has on our health.

Reasons to act

- Industrial meat production is unsustainable and presents an unjustified risk to public health.
- There are more environmentally-sustainable ways to raise animals for food consumption, one that is healthy for the consumer and the environment.
- Health care professionals can improve public health by advocating for better food policy that curbs the negative consequences of industrial meat production.

Fact: Overconsuming meat is unhealthy

A growing body of research links the consumption of meat with an increased risk of coronary **heart disease** and cancer. One study found that each additional daily serving of processed red meat was associated with a 42% increased risk of coronary heart disease.

These results are confirmed by the National Institutes of Health, which finds a link between red meat and Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, and **stroke**. Furthermore, the World Health Organization found “each 50-gram portion of processed meat eaten daily (one hot dog) increases the risk of colorectal cancer by **18 percent**.”

Health care professionals can align their recommendations with the NIH, CDC, and WHO in directing patients to individually limit meat and increase plant-based protein as a way of reducing the risk of disease.

And by advocating for better food policy, health professionals can address the system and have an even larger impact on curbing the negative consequences of industrial animal food production.

Health Care Without Harm envisions a global food system comprised of a diverse network of local food systems that are transparent, health and wealth promoting, resilient, sustainable, fair, and economically just. The primary role of this food system is to conserve, protect, and regenerate the human and ecological systems that enable food production to support the needs of all eaters now and in future generations.

Fact: Industrial meat production practices have major health consequences

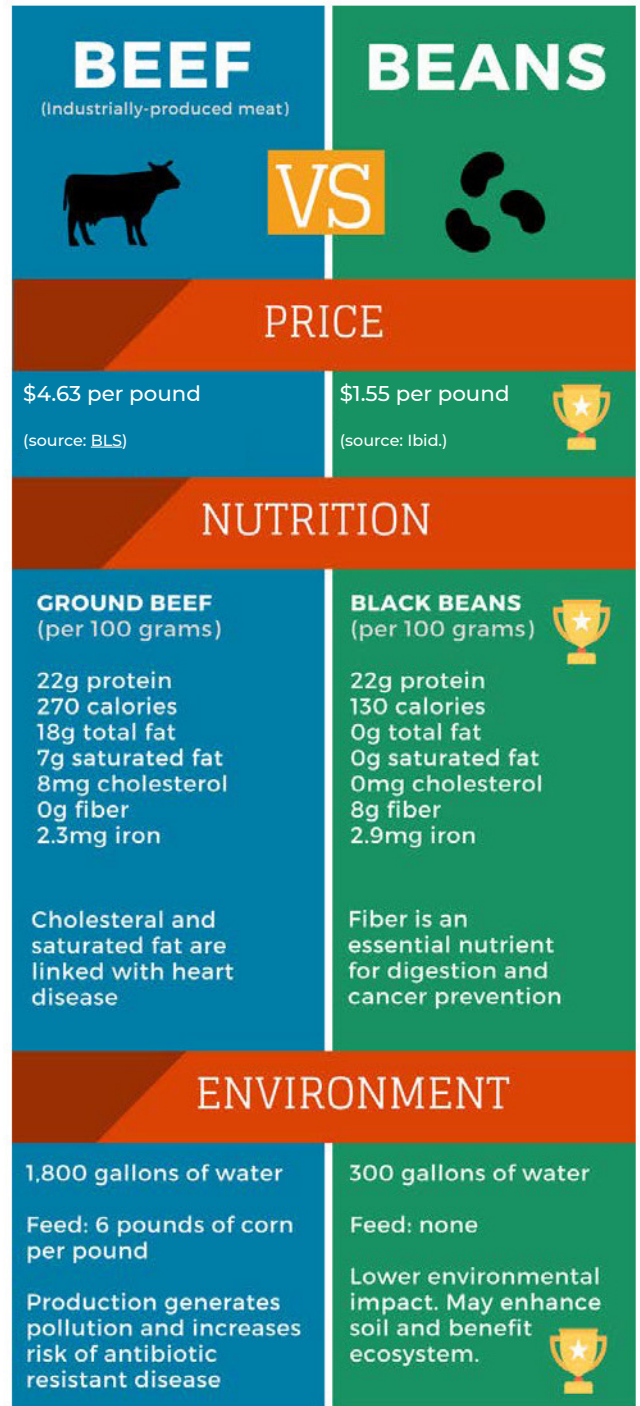
Toxins from manure and fertilizer used by the farm industry are polluting our water streams without repercussion, increasing health hazards in drinking water and seafood supply.

One of the most alarming examples of the environmental damage is the **“dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico** caused by animal-waste fertilizer runoff from corn and soy farms.

Another report from the Environmental Working Group shows the same contamination is making its way into human **drinking water**. Despite these consequences, policymakers have failed to act. The Clean Water Act does not regulate “agriculture storm-water discharges” so when heavy rain washes manure from a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) into a waterway, the company is exempted from liability.

Research has consistently found a link between poor air quality and higher rates of asthma and bronchitis – both for workers and **residents of nearby communities**. Manure generation is a major contributor to air pollution by emitting ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, methane, and particulate matter. Around 90% of global ammonia environmental emissions can be attributed to livestock production. Air pollution and associated health risks are closely regulated for other polluting industries, but until very recently animal production farms have been exempted from reporting requirements under the Clean Air Act. Today, only about 30 percent of CAFOs are reporting their hazardous air emissions.

Animal feeding operations also rely on antibiotics to prevent diseases that result from the **conditions** they are raised in. The widespread use of antibiotics has led to greater human exposure to antibiotic-resistant bacteria in the air, soil, water, and even on food. As a result, resistance to antibiotics has increased both the number and the severity of infectious diseases.



Policy opportunities

These policies support the industrial animal food production system and associated negative consequences:

- Subsidized corn and soy for animal feed leads to an artificially low cost of meat.
- Industry influence on dietary recommendations prevents clear public education on the health impacts of overconsuming meat.
- Permitting routine use of antimicrobials in industrial animal production drives widespread antimicrobial resistance.
- Exempting conventional animal production from liability under Clean Air and Clean Water acts contaminates the air and water needed for healthy communities.
- Funding pollution remediation for concentrated animal feeding operations supports business as usual.
- Holding animal agriculture to weaker workplace regulations creates greater stress and hazardous conditions for workers.

Experts estimate that antibiotic resistance already costs the U.S. health care system an additional \$21 to 34 billion annually, and the CDC estimates that 23,000 people per year die of infections that are resistant to **antibiotic treatment**.

Agriculture policy must actively discourage and strive to eliminate the routine, non-therapeutic use of antibiotics.

Fact: Meat production can be an occupational hazard

Industrial meat production is also among the unhealthiest occupations in the country. A 2016 study by the Government Accountability Office found that the rates of injury and illness in the meat industry are higher than all other manufacturing jobs.

Common injuries include sprains, cuts, burns, amputations, and skin disorders. Also, due to the chemicals and pollution that result from manure, roughly 70 percent of CAFO workers get acute bronchitis and 20 percent get **chronic bronchitis**.

The Department of Labor has suggested that this data gives a conservative estimate of the true number of injuries because current data collection does not count workers who were placed on leave or transferred to another job, nor does it include sanitation workers who work for the meat industry as they may be categorized as a different labor group.

Farm workplace regulation policies have made animal production workers incredibly vulnerable to health consequences.

Agriculture policy should maintain minimum standards similar to other hazardous professions.

Fact: Sustainable animal production is a real, viable option

There is a **better way to raise animals** for food consumption, one that is healthy for the consumer and the environment. Animals can be a keystone of an ecologically-sound farm when raised in an integrated way with produce, grain, and other plant production. Crop rotation allows for grazing and fertilizing in a symbiotic way that is beneficial to the environment, improves the nutritional quality of the meat, and encourages diversified farm outputs.

Bringing a holistic, health-conscious voice to agriculture policies means encouraging these farming practices and actively discouraging policies that support industrial-scale production of meat alongside dietary recommendations to reduce consumption, optimize health, and protect natural resources.

Taking action

Health-centered animal food policy should:

- Aim to increase research for sustainable animal agriculture practices.
- Reduce subsidies for the production of conventional corn and soy for feed.
- Increase production and consumption of plant-based proteins like legumes.
- Decrease food transportation by building regionalized production infrastructure.
- Encourage pastured meat production as part of an integrated system to rejuvenate soil, air, and water instead of depleting them.

Health professionals can serve as a welcomed voice to support for these policies through testimony and advocacy for their associated community and public health benefits.

Learn more about how health professionals can effectively engage with federal food policy, including the [2023 Farm Bill](#). [Learn more about our food initiatives](#).



Health Care Without Harm seeks to transform health care worldwide so that it reduces its environmental footprint, becomes a community anchor for sustainability and a leader in the global movement for environmental health and justice.

This fact sheet was produced by Health Care Without Harm's national **Healthy Food in Health Care program**, which harnesses the purchasing power and expertise of the health care sector to advance the development of a sustainable food system.

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