Exxon Knew. Did Big Beef, too?

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Exxon, as well as many other fossil fuel producers, knew about the dangers of human-caused global warming and that their products were responsible since at least the 1970s. Instead of working to prevent harm, the fossil fuel industry worked alongside trade associations, public relations firms, and "merchants of doubt" to deny the very existence of global warming, which may be the greatest achievement in the history of the creation of ignorance. This damage and deception are the basis for numerous lawsuits against members of the fossil fuel industry.

From knowledge to denial in oil and meat industries

Having studied the fossil fuel industry, I began to look into whether other carbon-intensive sectors were using the same playbook. Meat and dairy production accounts for an estimated 20% of anthropogenic warming but gets far less than 20% of our global-warming-related attention. That is not an accident.

Just like the fossil fuel industry, the meat industry teamed up with trade associations, public relations, and "merchants of doubt" to distribute disinformation, downplay their role in global warming, and influence climate policy. Our research showed that all of the 10 largest U.S. meat and dairy companies had directly contributed to efforts that minimized the link between animal agriculture and climate change. For eight of the 10 companies, we found evidence of lobbying on climate issues between 2000 and 2019.

In 2006, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published a report with the first-ever estimate of the contribution of livestock to global emissions, concluding that it accounted for 18% of the total. One meat executive referred to the FAO results and how they were being used to encourage a reduction in meat consumption as "a public relations challenge". Cows are particularly large carbon polluters due to the feed that they require and the methane and manure they produce. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), the U.S. trade association for beef producers, funded a professor at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), Frank Mitloehner, to address the FAO report. UC Davis published a press release about his work titled "Don't blame cows for climate change." That was the beginning, and Mitloehner now runs a multi-million-dollar center at UC Davis to influence climate change understanding and policy. We documented how the meat industry helped transform this animal sciences researcher who studied feedlot dust into a climate expert, and how he, his university, his center, and his former students have contributed to obstructing climate understanding and action.

We now know that the meat industry knew about its role in global warming much earlier than 2006. Research we published last month showed U.S. cattle producers knew of livestock's contribution to global warming as early as 1989, when a member from the National Cattleman's Association (which became NCBA in 1996), attended an EPA workshop on the role of methane emissions from livestock wherein they concluded that globally "a 25%–75% reduction in [methane] emissions associated with livestock would produce a significant reduction in anticipated future global climate change from the greenhouse effect." The National Cattleman's Association was also well aware of attempts by civil society groups, such as the Greenhouse Crisis Foundation, which had teamed up with 30 members of Congress and 18 other groups to try to get consumers to "avert the global warming crisis". Fourth on their list was reducing meat consumption.

How Big Meat shaped climate narratives

An internal industry document we uncovered revealed the beef industry viewed this period as a crisis. Rather than adjusting their business models to address the

dangers, the beef industry continued plans to increase production and planned to "establish [a] system for monitoring the media and environmentalist advocacy group actions" and "enhance the image of the cattle industry". On a list of the 22 environmental issues that impacted the cattle industry was "atmospheric emissions".

We found that the National Cattlemen's Association then commissioned a Texas A&M University researcher to address the EPA's report. He concluded that cattle were not a significant source of GHGs, including methane (one of the primary features of industry-funded research being results that please the industry).

Some scientists argue that fossil fuel companies are more responsible for the emissions that occurred after 1988 because at that point, global warming was a public concern. That year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created, and NASA scientist James Hansen testified before Congress. By 1992, countries came together to create the United Nations Framework for the Convention on Climate Change. Also in 1992, Jeremy Rifkin published his book *Beyond Beef*, and a campaign of the same name launched, which was international in scope but focused mainly on the U.S. The Beyond Beef campaign urged consumers to cut beef consumption in half and replace it with vegetables and legumes. Beyond Beef was not that radical: it was not encouraging Americans to become vegetarian, or even to cut their meat consumption in half, but was aimed specifically at beef reduction because of beef's environmental impacts.

In response, the U.S. animal agriculture industry formed the Food Facts Coalition (FFC), an alliance of 13 industry groups, including the cattlemen, to defend the industry against "anti-cow arguments". FFC attended Beyond Beef campaign events and told reporters that the campaign was built on scare tactics and "a total disregard for science" and referred to it as the "Beyond Belief Crusade". The beef industry also launched the "do not blame it on Bossie" slogan (an early iteration of "don't blame cows for climate change") and hired the public relations firms Edelman and Burson-Marsteller to distribute "pro-beef material". In May 1992, the Beef Industry Council funded the marketing campaign "Beef. It's What's for Dinner" to promote beef consumption with an advertising budget of $42 million over the 17 months between then and September 1993.

Missed opportunities for real emissions cuts

And Americans did not eat 50% less beef. Had we done so each year, over the 32 years spanning 1992–2023, between 4 and 13 gigatonnes (Gt) of carbon dioxide equivalent could have been saved. The U.S. total emissions for 2022 were 6.2 Gt carbon dioxide equivalent. Instead of encouraging the low-tech and immediately available option of halving U.S. beef consumption, we incentivized small reductions in methane emissions among producers, mainly in the oil and gas industries. Cutting beef consumption in half would have been 24 to 80 times more effective than those efforts. Instead, the U.S. has the highest per capita meat consumption rate in the world, one assumes in large part due to industry efforts.

Civil society's ambition was diminished. Calls for cutting beef consumption in half in the 1990s turned to Meatless Monday in the 2010s, and today we hear "eat more plants" (which is not the same as eating less meat). Large environmental groups have stayed far away from dietary choices.

While Big Oil argues that individual consumers are responsible for climate change, Big Meat argues that individual choices do not make a difference. Americans missed a relatively easy opportunity to avert a huge amount of emissions, equivalent to one year of our current emissions, by making tweaks to our diets. The meat industry persuaded us that "we certainly can reduce our greenhouse-gas production, but not by consuming less meat and milk," and in so doing, they obscured one of our most powerful climate actions as individuals.

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