

‘Gigantic’ power of meat industry blocking green alternatives, study finds

Analysis of EU and US shows livestock farmers receive about 1,000 times more public funding than plant-based and cultivated meat

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Fri 18 Aug 2023 16.00 BST

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- Cows in a milking parlour in Iowa. Livestock production causes 15% of all global greenhouse emissions. Photograph: Charlie Neibergall/AP

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The “gigantic” power of the meat and dairy industries in the EU and US is blocking the development of the greener alternatives needed to tackle the climate crisis, a study has found.

The analysis of lobbying, subsidies and regulations showed that livestock farmers in the EU received 1,200 times more public funding than plant-based

meat or cultivated meat groups. In the US, the animal farmers got 800 times more public funding.

The money spent on lobbying the US government by meat producers was 190 times more than for the alternatives and was three times higher in the EU. The researchers also found that almost all dietary guidelines avoided highlighting the environmental impact of meat production and bans on alternative products using terms such as “milk”.

Cutting meat consumption in rich nations is **vital to tackling the climate crisis**. Livestock production causes 15% of all global greenhouse emissions. Cutting meat and dairy consumption also slashes pollution, land and water use, and the destruction of forests, with scientists saying it is the **single biggest way** for people to reduce their impact on the planet.

“The power of the animal farming sector, both in the US and in Europe, and the political influence they have is just gigantic,” said Prof Eric Lambin, who conducted the study with Dr Simona Vallone, both at Stanford University, US.

The researchers concluded that “powerful vested interests exerted their political influence to maintain the system unchanged and to obstruct competition created by technological innovations”.

Lambin said: “We found that the amazing obstacles to the upscaling of the alternative technologies relates to public policies that still massively fund the incumbent system, when we know it’s really part of the problem in terms of climate change, biodiversity loss and some health issues.”



Inside big beef's climate messaging machine: confuse, defend and downplay

The researchers said that tackling the problem would require government policies that ensured the price of meat reflected its environmental costs, potentially **via taxation**, increased research on alternatives, and better informed consumers.

Alex Holst, at the Good **Food** Institute Europe, said: “While European investment in sustainable proteins has increased in recent years, this study shows the sector is still only picking the crumbs off the EU’s table. The sector needs public investment to scale production and reduce prices [or] Europe risks missing out on the enormous benefits.”

The North American **Meat** Institute and Copa-Cogeca, Europe’s largest farming trade body, did not respond to requests for comment.

The study, **published in the journal One Earth**, analysed the major EU and US agricultural policies from 2014 to 2020. It found the amount of public money spent on plant-based alternatives was just \$42m (£33m) – 0.1% of the £35bn spent on meat and dairy. The former accounted for 1.5% of all sales. In the EU, cattle farmers got at least 50% of their income from direct subsidies.

For research and innovation spending, 97% went to animal farmers, with almost all of these funds aimed at improving production.

The researchers also highlighted restrictive labelling rules. Terms such as “milk” and “cheese” have been banned since 2017 in the EU for most alternative milk and dairy products. A **US proposal** would prohibit the sale of alternative meats unless the product label included the word “imitation”.

National dietary guidelines influence the many millions of meals served in public sector institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons. The researchers found there was no mention of the environmental impacts of meat and dairy in US dietary guidelines nor in all but four of the EU’s 27 member states.

“Dietary guidelines are shaped with a strong influence from industry representatives,” said Lambin. “However, the Nordic country guidelines have just been rewritten and for the first time clearly **promote a mostly plant-based diet.**”

Lambin said there were glimmers of hope for a shift to more sustainable diets, with **EU proposals** to accelerate the shift due to be adopted this year, funding in the US Inflation Reduction Act to help farmers cut emissions, and the **US approval of lab-grown chicken.**

“It’s not a level playing field at all at the moment,” Lambin said. “The new sector needs to be given its chance to expand and gain efficiency. After that, consumers will judge whether they like it or not, and scientists will judge whether it is really better for the environment and for health. But if it cannot even develop to a scale where we can make this assessment, it will be a lost opportunity to transition to a sustainable food system.”

A 2022 report from the Boston Consulting Group said plant-based meat was by far the **most effective climate investment.**