

The Dalles Chronicle

Serving Oregon's Wasco, Sherman, & Hood River counties, and Klickitat County, Washington



CATTLE EYE the photographer nervously as they were sorted into pens for inoculation by Maupin rancher Keith Nantz last spring. Some environmentalists think beef is not a healthy food choice because of perceived harm to natural resources.

Beef nearly misses menu

By RaeLynn Ricarte
Thursday, January 8, 2015

A federal advisory group appears to be backing away from a proposal to make beef a less healthy food choice due to the perceived harm of cattle to the environment — and their potential contribution to global warming.

#The panel that makes recommendations to the U.S. Department of Agriculture has come under fire during the past week from ranchers and agriculture organizations.

“This is definitely outside the scope of their authority,” said Maupin rancher Keith Nantz, who heads the North Central Livestock Association.

“This is an agenda-driven recommendation at a time when we need a balanced approach to food production as the world’s population grows. Lean beef has a role in healthy diets and America’s ranchers are good stewards of the land. Many families have been earning their living from the same properties for generations, which they couldn’t do if they weren’t taking care of the resources.”

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., said language in the 2015 spending bill that was approved in December by a bipartisan vote of Congress and signed by President Barack Obama blocks the ability of the USDA to follow the lead of advisors.

Walden said current policy requires that recommendations be made solely on the basis of a foods' nutritional benefits. The government issues dietary guidelines every five years to encourage Americans to eat healthier.

"There is a concern that the advisory committee for the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans is considering issues outside of the nutritional focus of the panel," said Walden, whose Second Congressional District encompasses Hood River and Wasco counties.

"The advisory committee is showing an interest in incorporating agriculture production practices and environmental factors into their criteria for establishing the next dietary recommendations. The agreement (in spending bill) directs Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to only include nutrition and dietary information, not extraneous factors, in the final guidelines."

The Center for Biological Diversity contends that meat production takes a toll on the environment that needs to be factored into federal policies.

Stephanie Feldstein, director of the Population and Sustainability program for CBD, said the push to have environmental health considered in dietary guidelines has been going on for several years and will not stop until changes are made.

She said the USDA will issue draft guidelines within the next few weeks and her group and others plan to encourage people to demand action on behalf of the environment.

"We want to keep attention on the importance of including sustainability in the dietary guidelines," said Feldstein. "It's (environment) very tightly woven into what we eat and what government should recommend."

She said beef production "is an incredibly inefficient way" to feed the world's population.

A study by the National Academy of Sciences in 2013 determined that beef is harmful because cattle produce more heat-trapping gases per calorie than other livestock.

In addition, cattle use more land and cause more water pollution than other animals. Environmentalists contend the amount of methane gas released by cattle into the air contributes significantly to global warming, a further threat to mankind.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, agriculture is responsible for 18 percent of the total release of greenhouse gases world-wide — and cattle are a major contributing factor.

The U.N. reports that livestock now use 30 percent of the earth's available land surface and, as herds grow, more forests will have to be cleared to create new pastures.

Feldstein said CBD started a campaign in 2013 called "Take Extinction Off Your Plate" to encourage people to cut just one-third of the meat from their diet to protect resources.

She said plants grown in locations where they would thrive could need the nutritional needs of the world without harming the ecosystem.

Her organization contends that nearly 60 percent of the carbon footprint of the average U.S. household diet comes from animal products. And that U.S. livestock produce 500 million tons of manure each year, which pollutes both water and the air.

Nantz said few people who live in large urban centers visit rural ranches to observe the practices of cattle production. Instead, he said they listen to the “propaganda” of activists and base their opinions, and votes, on what they have heard.

The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association cites an Environmental Protection Agency report to show that cattle account for only 2.7 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. — with 26 percent coming from transportation.

“How can you understand what ‘working the land’ really means when you live in a big city that is filled with concrete and people in cars?” said Nantz. “In my opinion, people who live in cities need to spend more time cleaning up their own act and less telling us what we should be doing.”

He said cattle have been grazing in the west for about 150 years and have earned their place in the ecosystem. Their manure fertilizes the ground to feed future plants and grasses. With proper grazing management, there is a continual rejuvenation of vegetation and renewable resources are properly utilized. Fire danger can also be reduced by having grasses eaten before they cure and become flammable.

Nantz said ranching practices have adapted as new science became available to maximize production and better protect resources.

For example, he said many ranchers are restoring native grasses and plants that feed threatened and endangered species as well as cattle.

A study by Washington State University in 2007 found that today’s farmers and ranchers raise 13 percent more beef from 30 percent fewer cattle. When compared with beef production in 1977, the study determined that cattle are producing 16 percent less carbon emissions, using 33 less land for grazing and 12 percent less water.

“We have more of a vested interest in taking care of the land than anyone else because, if we don’t, we go out of business,” he said.

“Proper grazing can actually sequester carbons but environmentalists don’t want to give us credit for that.”

According to the NBCA, more than two-thirds of land used for grazing in the U.S. is not suitable for raising crops. The organization contends that, by grazing animals on these lands, ranchers double the area that can be used to produce food.

“If we go out of business, everyone loses,” said Nantz.

“There was climate change long before man showed up and, like all things, there needs to be balance in this discussion. With the global population doubling by 2050, we are going to need more food production and beef is a nutrition-rich choice.”