

## Food in the Anthropocene

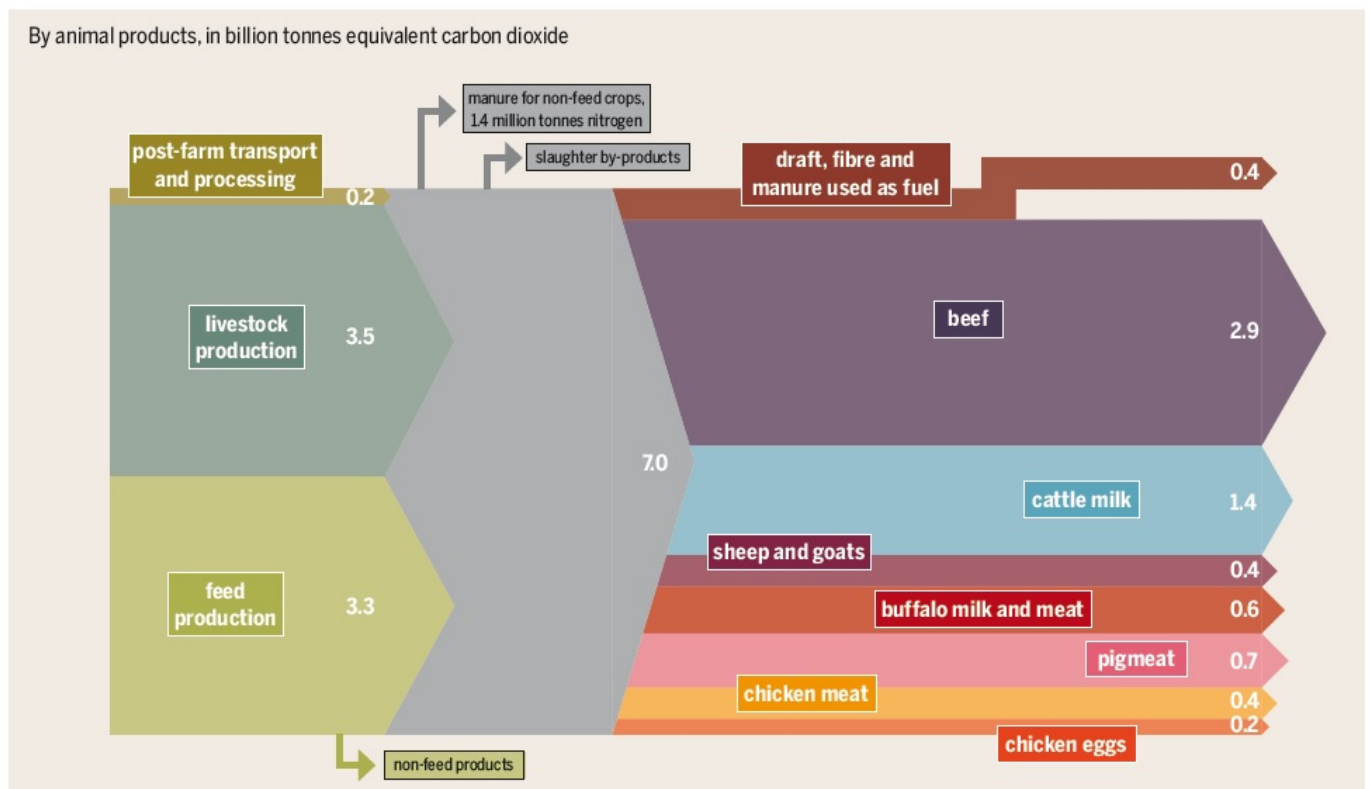


That's the title of a new report from a world-class working group of scientists commissioned by [EAT](#), a non-profit that means "to catalyze a food system transformation," and the venerable British medical journal, [The Lancet](#). The report is ambitious, offering us nothing less than a global agenda "for healthy diets from sustainable food systems."

The rationale for this critical report is twofold, first, as far as healthy diets go, we are sorely lacking today: [20% of global deaths](#) are caused by poor diet. Only smoking exceeds poor diet as a risk factor for premature mortality. But, although 820 million people are undernourished today, just over two billion adults are overweight or obese. Three quarters of deaths worldwide are from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) with poor diet high among the list of risk factors. It has to be said as well that that's just on the diet side. There are enormous negative health consequences from air and water pollution in how we source our food. I have been writing a book on meat, fish, and feed and I've just finished the chapter on health impacts and my hair is well and truly on fire.

The second reason for this report is that we have been sorely taxing our "[planetary boundaries](#)" with our food systems. Consider the greenhouse gases driving climate instability. Of the 52 billion tons of carbon-dioxide equivalent (CO<sub>2</sub>e) gases we produce each year, a good estimate puts the burden from [agriculture, forestry and other land-use changes](#) at 20% of that total. (Other estimates are higher.) But just for livestock, we are looking at 7 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e. Here's how that breaks out:

What you don't see on your plate: greenhouse gas emissions from global livestock supply chains



Then there is the water and air pollution from agrochemicals wreaking havoc on public health, destroying fisheries by [creating marine dead zones](#), and the massive biodiversity loss from [deforestation for cattle ranching and soy production](#) (to feed China's pigs).

There's a lot to know about how our food and our agricultural production are hurting us and our precious, fragile planet. I've written long chapters on land use, air pollution - including climate change, water pollution, and health impacts. That's the bad news. But the good news is that we can make changes and ... the big surprise is that we can be much healthier as a result and make huge progress in reversing planetary environmental degradation at the same time. Yes, the preponderance of our environmental problems come from [fossil fuel](#) extraction, transportation, and combustion, not to mention the corruption that is associated with all that, and we sorely need to address these problems, but we also have to get at our food systems.

*Food in the Anthropocene* has five strategies for a transformation:

1. Seek international and national commitment to shift toward healthy diets
2. Reorient agricultural priorities from producing high quantities of food to producing healthy food
3. Sustainably intensify food production to increase high-quality output
4. Strong and coordinated governance of land and oceans
5. At least halve food losses and waste, in line with [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)

Much easier said than done, to be sure. But there is a tremendous amount of movement in the

right direction for all of these strategies. I have been researching and writing about the many problems associated with what we eat and how we produce it: from the specter of Big Food's malign influence on our diets and food systems, to the land use changes wrought by animal agriculture, to water pollution and air pollution - very much including greenhouse gases, to the dire health effects of our food and our farming. My draft, so far, has a lot of bad news.

But there is a huge and growing wellspring of glad tidings. For instance, public health authorities and policy makers are increasingly embracing the importance of modulating our diets away from a massive reliance on animal protein to more "plant-forward" meals. Corporations, big institutional food service operations, restaurants and chefs, food writers and the home cooks who rely on their advice are moving more and more to healthier menus. Farmers are increasingly realizing the value of agroecology and [consumers are embracing organic food](#) as never before. Environmental activists have been seeing the direct connections between our industrial farming practices and breathtakingly destructive pollution flows. The public is becoming more aware of the manifest cruelties in how we raise livestock and are demanding change. Farmers and fishers around the world are reasserting their rights to a clean environment, fair trade, and prosperous lives for their families and their communities. Scientists, economists, journalists, and educators are building a bulletproof case for the critical agenda espoused in this new report: "healthy diets from sustainable food systems."

You can get the summary and the full report [here](#). There is, of course, much more to be said about this science and this movement. I've been working on my book and talking to many people about where we need to go and how to get there, and I'll be checking in from time to time to report on some of my findings.