

PRESS RELEASE: For immediate release – no embargo

Title: Cutting Europe's meat and dairy intake is beneficial for health, environment and climate

Subtitle: How much do food choices affect pollutant nitrogen emissions, climate change and land-use across Europe?

A new report, published today, quantifies for Europe how much reducing meat and dairy in our diets would reduce air and water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. The report also considers the health benefits of reduced meat and dairy consumption.

Reductions in meat and dairy would also free up large areas of farmland for other purposes such as food export or biofuels.

The report 'Nitrogen on the Table' is a follow-up of the 'European Nitrogen Assessment' (ENA), published in 2011 and has been prepared by the 'Task Force on Reactive Nitrogen' of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

The current European diet is characterized by large amounts of meat, dairy products and eggs, leading to an intake of saturated fat and red meat that exceeds health recommendations. Livestock production in the EU is the driver of around 80% of the losses of nitrogen from agriculture. These losses cause a number of environmental problems including threats to human health and biodiversity.

The report suggests that halving the current consumption of meat and dairy within the EU would not only have considerable health benefits through changes in food consumption patterns, but also achieve a reduction of around 40% in agricultural nitrogen losses and a 25% - 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture.

The report states:

- Around 80% of the total emissions of ammonia, nitrate and of nitrous oxide – a powerful greenhouse gas - from EU agriculture are related to livestock production.
- Reducing the consumption of meat and dairy would lead to food consumption patterns that are better aligned with international dietary recommendations. This would lead to lower prevalence of cardiovascular diseases and colorectal cancer. However only the most radical change - a 50% reduction of all meat and dairy consumption - brings the average intake of saturated fats within a range recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).
- A lower consumption of meat and dairy products, followed by a proportional reduction of livestock production in the EU would lead to lower nitrogen losses, as well as to lower greenhouse gas emissions and to a lower land use per EU citizen. In the case of a 50% reduction of all meat and dairy, nitrogen losses would be around 40% lower. Greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture are predicted to be reduced by 25-40%.

The report authors comment that the EU Common Agricultural Policy could assist in transforming the current agriculture system into a system that sustains healthier dietary choices and has lower environmental impacts. If livestock farmers were to be rewarded by retailers and consumers for

higher environmental and animal welfare standards, the economic impact on the livestock sector could, to some extent, be mitigated.

The report was launched today at the European Parliament in Brussels.

The launch was hosted by Ms. Sirpa Pietikäinen, MEP, Co-chair of the EP Sustainable Food Systems group. Ms Pietikäinen said, "Our food production can be harmful for our health and for the environment. Through more holistic food policy that integrates the many aspects of food production – health, safety, environment, agriculture – we have the possibility to produce our daily meals in a more sustainable way."

Henk Westhoek, program manager for Agriculture and Food at PBL (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency) and lead author of the report, said, "The report clearly shows that reducing meat and dairy consumption to 50% of the present intake has large benefits for both human health and the environment. The intake of saturated fats would be better aligned with health recommendations, instead of being too high. Nitrogen losses from EU agriculture would be reduced by around 40% and greenhouse gas emissions would be reduced by 25 to 40%."

Prof Mark Sutton, Environmental Physicist at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, co-chair of the Taskforce on Reactive Nitrogen and co-author of the report said, "Improving our food choices to stay within dietary recommendations would have a major benefit for the environment by reducing nitrogen pollution. Our results show that realistic change in European diets would reduce pollution by 40%. This is similar to what can be achieved by technical measures in agriculture. It is now up to society to decide what the balance should be between the two."

Janez Potočnik, Co-Chair UNEP International Resource Panel (IRP), also spoke at the launch. He said, "A change towards diets with a lower consumption of livestock products has clear environmental and health benefits. The question is not whether we should or shouldn't do something, and not when, but rather how. Addressing people's dietary choices and restructuring of agriculture are neither easy nor popular,, but unfortunately it is unavoidable. Strategic planning to foster that behavioural change would need to be accompanied by active measures to address new market opportunities. The role of policy leaders is not in comfortably denying reality until an uncomfortable end, but rather in guiding us on an uncomfortable walk till we reach a comfortable end."

Notes to editors

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Report link: Westhoek H., Lesschen J.P., Leip A., Rood T., Wagner S., De Marco A., Murphy-Bokern D., Pallière C., Howard C.M., Oenema O. & Sutton M.A. (2015) *Nitrogen on the Table: The influence of food choices on nitrogen emissions and the European environment*. (European Nitrogen Assessment Special Report on Nitrogen and Food.) Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Edinburgh, UK. The report is available on-line at http://www.clrtap-tfrn.org/webfm_send/592 .

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