DISCUSSION STARTER

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Smoke screens, oily politics, and bull-poop

Is Big Livestock on the same path as Big Tobacco and Big Oil?

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By the 1950s the link between lung cancer and tobacco smoking was being confirmed.[1] Big Tobacco continued to resist change through misrepresenting science, fearmongering over illegal supply and tax revenues, and threatened or real legal action, amongst other activities.[2] Since the 1970s, Big Oil knew that fossil fuel burning was linked to global warming with "dramatic environmental effects before the year 2050." Despite this, Big Oil mounted a decades-long campaign of climate deception and denial, promoting doubt on the climate change link. Is Big Livestock on the same path: responsible for greenwashing the livestock sector, advancing doubt about solutions to climate change, and resisting change?

Two caveats

First, our 'Big Livestock' focus here is largely on large livestock companies, industry associations representing livestock farmers, and countries with significant livestock exports. Our focus is not on smallholder or pastoralist livestock keepers in the Global South. For them, livestock is often a crucial component of their livelihoods and climate resilience. Second, we acknowledge that there are many people working in Big Livestock who are committed to, and working towards, better livestock production systems. Our argument, rather, is with those individuals, organizations and industries that are unwilling, for economic reasons, to work to effect changes in livestock systems that would go a long way towards mitigating climate change.

Big Livestock is throwing words around like net zero, climate-neutral, carbon-neutral, low carbon beef, sustainable beef, and carbon-positive milk. We cannot let Big Livestock get away with such obfuscation, disinformation and false narratives, given that the livestock industry especially—cattle/beef—is one of the major contributors to greenhouse gasses (GHGs). Their rhetoric about climate-neutral livestock products deters consumers from seeing where major emission cuts can be made—for example, by increasing the proportion of plant-based products in diets. Here we highlight seven ways in which Big Livestock is greenwashing its actions and fighting change.

1. Promises not to be kept

In a six-year period in Brazil, 800 million trees have been cut down to cater for the rich world's desire for beef, despite the frequent pledges from the beef industry to only source cattle from deforestation-free farms. In 2021, JBS, one of the largest meat companies in the world, made the unbelievable pledge to be net zero by 2040, with no plans to reduce meat production.[3] A previous study had indicated they were the largest GHG emitting livestock company in the world, with emissions in the same order as the entire emissions from a country like Spain.

2. Obfuscation

"Lamb is climate neutral"—so announce the funders of the research – Meat and Livestock Australia—despite production having increased over the last decades.[4] Thus a consumer could easily decide that consuming lamb would be climate-friendly. Climate neutrality occurs when methane emissions are countered by the breakdown of methane in the atmosphere. Achieving neutrality would require a sustained 0.35% reduction in methane emissions per year by, for example, reducing emissions per unit of meat produced.[5] Can this reduction in emissions be sustained year after year? And in any case, reducing production would do more for reducing global warming than maintaining "neutrality".

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Many words are used to get us interested in consuming "climate-friendly" meat and milk. In USA, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association urges us to choose a "climatarian diet" that includes beef. In Sweden we can get LOME beef (Low on Methane). Looking behind these claims shows them for what they are—half-truths and misinformation. In the case of LOME, full accounting for emissions suggests that emissions reductions are closer to 10–15% rather than the exciting 90% that is claimed.[6] In this and other cases there is lack of transparency, partial accounting and missing information.

For smallholder and pastoralist livestock keepers in the Global South, livestock is often a crucial component of their livelihoods and climate resilience.

Export promotion agencies give a hard push on greenwashed facts. Bord Bia—the Irish agency marketing Irish food and drink—gives "facts" about how its membership has reduced GHGs by 6% from 2014 to 2020.[7] And yet if you look at the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) emission data for agriculture emissions, these increased by 13%.[8] The numbers do not add up, with the EPA being the reliable source. The Irish Farmers Association won the Greenwashing Enabler of the Year Award as well as the Fans' Choice Greenwashing Award. It was lauded for its inappropriate promotion of 'sustainable' beef and aggressive misinformation campaigns.[9]

Obfuscation also comes in the form of deliberate use of evasive language. For a recent IPCC report, authors recommended a shift to plant-based diets, stating that "plant-based diets can reduce GHG emissions by up to 50% compared to the average emission-intensive Western diet".[10] When the report was published this was changed to "sustainable healthy diets acknowledging nutritional needs", with no mention of what a sustainable diet actually looks like or any mention of the cuts that could be achieved (in developed countries) by shifting to plant-based options. Individuals representing Big Livestock countries were behind the changes.

3. False narratives

These come in many forms.

- "Ireland's new ten-year strategy for the Irish agri-food sector is called Food Vision 2030. ..... These plans are based on the conviction that Ireland's food production is fundamental to global food security ....."[11]
- Danish Crown—a pork producing company—state that they contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero hunger. "We supply safe and nourishing food to much of the world and promote sustainable agricultural practices in our supply chain."
- "The mission of JBS is to feed the world"
- "The relationship that French people have with meat remains as strong as ever, with 93% of people agreeing that consuming and cooking meat is part of our culture."
- Irish Farmers' Association "has protected and defended the interests of Irish farmers and their families...."

It is true that there are malnourished people, that there are protein (and micronutrient) deficiencies, that meat is a cultural tradition, and that farmers need support.

But these should not be the basis of false narratives. More than enough food is produced globally—hunger is much more an issue of food access, distribution and affordability. Animal-sourced foods are important for nutritional diets in the Global South[12] but the animal products produced from Big Livestock tend to go to the growing middle classes in the Global South where over-consumption is a rising concern. Meat may be cultural, but it is not cultural to over-consume meat; never have we as a society consumed so much meat.

Livestock farmers are in difficult economic situations and that is not likely to improve soon; farmers need support in transitioning to the new realities. We need a just transition, but Big Livestock steers away from words such as transition. Instead, it sticks with its false narratives and misleading facts. Big Livestock in Ireland hides behind a mirage of family farmers to conceal the reality of their supply chain. In the Irish beef industry, 55% of cattle farmers earn less than €10,000 annually, and only 3% earn more than €50,000—while a handful of big companies make most of the money.[13]

4. Creative accounting[13]

Food systems are complex with many different value chains and multiple ways even the same food can be produced. In addition, greenhouse gas accounting is not simple. Within this complexity, it is very easy to practice creative accounting. Emission intensity reductions are sometimes presented rather than absolute emission reductions. For example, there are many claims that meat or milk is being produced more efficiently, i.e., with fewer emissions per unit product. "We are being more sustainable". But the global community has to reduce the absolute level of greenhouse gasses, so accounting must not stop at emission intensities.

Partial accounting is another important way of creatively showing emission reductions. It is very important that so-called 'scope 3 emissions' are accounted for—the emissions from the supply chain. This includes livestock feed, which is where the bulk of emissions come

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Seven ways Big Livestock is painting greener pictures

Promises not to be kept
Big Livestock pledges net-zero goals but continues deforestation and high emissions.

Techno-fixes and offsets
Overreliance on technology sidelines vital dietary shifts and livestock reduction strategies.

False narratives
Big Livestock downplays environmental impact, emphasizing cultural traditions and global food security.

Funding resistance
Industry-backed research and protest hinder change and innovation.

Creative accounting
Emphasis on emission intensity masks absolute reductions; crucial supply chain emissions are often excluded.

Blocking the development of sustainable protein
Powerful vested interests exert political influence to thwart competition.

Obfuscation
Misleading claims and terms divert attention from significant emission reductions needed.

from. Many companies have failed to include scope 3 emissions in their promises.

5. Techno-fixes and offsets

Technology is undoubtably important in reducing emissions from food systems, but sometimes it is seen as the only option. For the red meat sector in Australia, scientists looked at different ways the livestock industry can become carbon neutral and various possible pathways were suggested. This was work funded by Meat and Livestock Australia.[14] Dietary shifts or reducing livestock numbers were not considered. The pathways also require drastic landscape management changes; for example, tree planting would be required to offset emissions on up to 11% of the current grassland area, and forests would need to be managed to avoid increased fire risk. The narrative is about the industry producing (more) meat and dairy if "new", "green", and "innovative" technologies are used.

Behind the marketing hype of achieving carbon neutrality is the issue that a considerable proportion of emissions reductions would be achieved by offsets, not by emissions reductions in the production process, yet another form of creative accounting.[15]

6. Funding resistance

Big Tobacco and Big Oil have shown us how funding is used to foster support for their industries. The tobacco industry hired a public relations firm that did a fantastic job of promoting controversy and increasing scepticism around the facts by funding "research".[16] Multiple organisations funded by the oil industry have played a key role in fostering climate change denial.[17, 18] Big Livestock also funds research, which tends not to look at any options that involve downsizing the livestock sector. In the US, the Center for Consumer Freedom—also linked to Big Tobacco—has mounted campaigns to discredit the plant-based industry.

Even more worrying is the direct funding to fostering resistance to change. Big Livestock companies in the Netherlands have been sponsoring farmer protests by the Farmers Defence Force.[19, 20] There is close alignment between Big Livestock companies, farmer protests and the new political party in the Netherlands—the BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB—Farmer Citizen Movement). A pig farming lobbyist and two partners from a communication agency that has clients in Big Livestock were behind the establishment of the new party, a party that, amongst other things, wants to promote meat consumption.

7. Blocking the development of sutainable protein

Powerful vested interests in Big Livestock exert their political influence to thwart competition created by technological innovations in sustainable protein.[21] Livestock farmers get 800–1000 times more public funding in the EU and USA than meat alternative companies, with cattle farmers in the EU receiving at least 50% of their income through direct subsidies. Meat producers spend 190 times more on lobbying government than the alt-meat sector in USA, three times more in Europe.

Can Big Livestock take a different pathway?

Does Big Livestock really want to go the same way as Big Tobacco and Big Oil? Big Tobacco in the US will pay a quarter of a trillion dollars in payments to settle litigation cases. Lawsuits abound in the oil industry and are likely to intensify in the years ahead. And we see lawsuits starting to emerge in the food sector. Mighty Earth has accused the Brazilian-based JBS of greenwashing in a complaint to the US Securities and Exchange Commission.[22] This alleges that $3.2bn worth of "green bonds" that were issued by the meat company were fraudulent and based on misleading information. In France, a consumer organisation is taking companies to court for what it regards as fraudulent carbon neutral claims. In Denmark, lobbyists are taking legal action against pork producer Danish Crown over its claims related to climate, like 'Danish pork is more climate-friendly than you think'.[23]

We acknowledge that many stakeholders in Big Livestock are searching for solutions and doing important work (on alternative feeds that reduce methane emissions, and improved manure management, for example), but those seeking and promoting such solutions need to also acknowledge that we need dietary shifts (less meat for the rich, more for the poor), reduced animal numbers (fewer livestock in rich countries, and more efficient animals in both rich and poor countries), and more research on plant-based and alternative proteins. Only with a full suite of options will we be able to tackle the climate crisis. Greenwashing, misinformation, false narratives and resistance to change needs to end.

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