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REDUCTION IN MEAT CONSUMPTION?

By Andy Cowan

This is a follow-up to an article in the last ADF in reference to a story in The Guardian, a UK newspaper, which was written on Monday 26th January. It was explaining a study to cut global warming emissions across the National Health Service (NHS), Britain's national health organization. Amongst other things, such as more phone-in GP surgeries and asking surgeons to visit people at their local doctor's surgery, a plan to offer patients menus that would have a no meat or dairy option was suggested in order to cut NGS carbon emissions.

Last year, NHS published what was believed was the biggest public sector analysis of carbon dioxide, the biggest greenhouse gas, which showed the organization's emissions in 2004 were 18.6m tones and rising. This accounts for more than 3% of all emissions in England, and if the NHS was a country it would have been ranked as the 81st biggest polluter in the world that year, between Estonia and Bahrain.

The article also revealed that last year, the United Nations climate chief, Rajendra Pachauri, provoked a global debate when he said having a meat-free day every week was the biggest single contribution people could make to curbing climate change in their personal lives, because of the chemicals sprayed on feed crops and the methane emitted by cattle and sheep. Also, the German federal environment agency went further, advising people to eat meat only on special occasions. It was thought that the move would cut the relatively high carbon emissions from rearing animals and poultry and improve health. Last year the NHS served 129m main meals, costing £312m, according to the Department of Health figures.

As if this was not enough, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), an animal rights organization, wants Duke University Medical Center in Durham to go vegetarian. PETA sent a letter to the Duke University Medical Center urging the hospital, the flagship facility of the Duke University Health System, to stop serving meat to patients and hospital workers.

The proposal is meant to be linked to animal rights, to human health and to earth-friendliness. PETA is using the above mentioned study by the National Health Service, which says cutting meat in hospitals would be good both for patients' health and for the environment. It seems that growing and transporting meat is a leading cause of environmental degradation according to a report done by the United Nations.

PETA believes that Duke University Medical Center has an opportunity to make its meals a lot more earth-, animal-, and health-friendly by serving patients delicious meatless fare. A PETA Executive believes "...a hospital should be the last place you'd expect to find food that makes the planet and patients sick."

As a producer of meat myself I am intrigued at the lack of data (that I think is important) provided by these reports and studies. For my own peace of mind I would attempt to gather data which involved, for example, the relationship of the following. Assuming, for simplicity's sake, that I use a rotational grazing system of pasture management, I have minimal tractor usage, I have minimal fertilizer input, I do not irrigate, I cut and store 3 tonnes of hay per hectare each year and I can produce 200kg of meat per hectare per year. How much carbon am I producing? If I am a successful farmer and raise the organic matter content in the soil by 0.1% each year, how much carbon is stored in the soil by my actions? This is the sort of information I would want to see figures on before I estimated my contribution to carbon emissions. If I had a good silty clay loam soil with a bulk density of 1250kg/m³ an increase of 0.1% in the organic matter would mean that I am adding about ... a 15cm top soil weighing 1875 tonnes per hectare (100 x 100 x 0.15 x 1.250) starting with 3% OM and rising to 3.1% OM ... OM rising from roughly 56 tonnes per hectare to 58 tonnes per hectare ... and increase in OM of 2 tonnes per hectare. So, if I was following this model, I would add about 1 tonne of carbon per hectare to my soil each year. I would be interested if anyone knew how much carbon I was producing to store this tonne. I would also be interested in discovering how much carbon is produced/stored in the production of high water usage crops, such as rice, in Australia. It is an interesting quandary and one that will be with us for a long time.