

Commentary: Animal agriculture's 'water footprint' is putting the planet in peril

March 16 2022, by Rebecca Libauskas



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If we looked at Earth from outer space, it would appear that our blue-and-green planet has abundant water. But of all that blue, less than 3% is freshwater, and less than 1% of that is available for use. More than a

billion people lack access to water, and 2.7 billion experience water scarcity for at least one month out of the year.

Water is a precious commodity, and we shouldn't waste a drop. Even though we drink, bathe in, and cook and clean with water, the most significant part of our "water footprint" comes from what we eat—and eating animals is the primary offender. So this World Water Day (March 22), let's do more than just turn off the tap while we brush. Let's make a real impact—by going vegan.

It's astonishingly wasteful to feed plants to farmed animals instead of eating the plants directly. Growing crops for animals to eat, keeping billions of animals hydrated, and cleaning filthy factory farms and slaughterhouses takes an enormous amount of water. In the United States alone, animal agriculture guzzles 36 to 74 trillion gallons of water per year.

Skipping showers and letting your lawn go brown isn't even a drop in the bucket compared with consuming meat, milk and eggs: It takes more than 2,400 gallons of water to produce a pound of beef but only 244 gallons to produce a pound of tofu.

Importantly, going vegan saves water and animals. Chickens, pigs and other animals are crammed into wire cages or metal crates inside windowless warehouses, and cows are crowded together in filthy feedlots. These animals will never get to root around in the soil, raise families, build nests or do anything else that's meaningful to them. After a life of misery, many are killed while still conscious.

Farming animals not only consumes massive amounts of freshwater, it also pollutes it with tons and tons of animal waste. About 68% of lakes, reservoirs and ponds in the U.S. and more than half of its rivers and streams are considered too polluted to use, according to a report by the

Environmental Protection Agency. The main culprit? Agriculture.

Raising animals for food also fuels the climate catastrophe, which exacerbates global water insecurity. Of all the contributors to human-made greenhouse gas emissions, animal agriculture is the second-largest. According to an eye-opening report by the Food and Agriculture Organization, foods with high environmental footprints—such as meat—contribute to unsustainable agriculture and water-quality degradation.

Evidence of the damage we're doing to the climate is clear to see in the increased frequency, intensity and duration of extreme weather events. The American West's ongoing "megadrought," for example, is the worst drought that area has seen in at least 1,200 years.

A global shift toward vegan foods could drastically curb [greenhouse gas emissions](#), according to a new model developed by scientists from Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley. Replacing [animal agriculture](#) and going vegan would effectively halt the increase in atmospheric greenhouse gasses for 30 years—giving us more time to end our reliance on [fossil fuels](#). And a University of Oxford study concluded, according to lead researcher Joseph Poore, that going vegan "is probably the single biggest way to reduce your impact on planet Earth, not just greenhouse gasses, but global acidification, eutrophication, land use and water use."

This World Water Day (and every day), the best way to reduce our water footprints—and save animals and the planet—is to go vegan. Each of us can save approximately 219,000 gallons of water a year just by eating plants and leaving the [animals](#) who share this planet with us in peace. Are you in?

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