

Meat and dairy companies slow to commit to net-zero emissions, new analysis finds

29 March 2021



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The vast majority of the world's largest meat and dairy companies have not made an explicit commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, finds a new analysis by researchers at New York University.

The study, which appears in the journal *Climatic Change*, examines the [climate impacts](#) of the 35 largest meat and dairy companies around the globe as well as their influence in shaping political responses to [climate change](#).

It is the first peer-reviewed study to assess climate responsibilities of the largest meat and dairy companies.

"Large meat and dairy companies are not doing enough to tackle climate change, and countries are not doing enough in terms of holding them accountable," says Jennifer Jacquet, an associate professor in NYU's Department of Environmental Studies and one of the authors of the study. "In general, their commitments center on mitigating

energy use, with little focus on emissions resulting from animal and land use, which make the biggest warming contributions in the agricultural sector."

The assessment provides an in-depth look at the major animal agriculture corporations. While animal agriculture's role in climate change has been well-documented—it is estimated to cause nearly 15 percent of human-generated [greenhouse gas emissions](#)—previous analyses have mainly focused on the sector as a whole. The Climatic Change study centered on the largest meat and dairy companies.

The researchers, who included Oliver Lazarus, an NYU graduate student at the time of the study and now a doctoral student at Harvard University, and Sonali McDermid, an associate professor in NYU's Department of Environmental Studies, examined these companies' climate reporting and policies.

Of the 35 companies studied, only Dairy Farmers of America (U.S.), Nestlé (Switzerland), Danish Crown (Denmark), and Danone (France) made commitments to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. The other 31 largest meat and dairy companies, including JBS (Brazil), Cargill (U.S.), Hormel (U.S.), Fonterra (New Zealand), and Smithfield (China), have not. In addition, there are large discrepancies in how companies report emissions and plan to achieve mitigation efforts, if they do so at all.

"If you look at the individual companies, and how they claim to be working on climate change, their mitigation efforts focus on carbon dioxide, which is a small fraction of their [emission](#) across their supply chains," said McDermid. "They should be talking about methane, which is the more potent greenhouse gas, especially when it comes to cows."

The analyses also included projections of these companies' future emissions based on existing

practices and compared them to the climate commitments of countries where those companies are based.

The researchers found that, with a continuation of existing practices, two companies will each make up over 100 percent of their headquarters country's emissions targets by 2030: Fonterra in New Zealand and Nestlé in Switzerland. In addition, Arla in Denmark would make up 60 percent of Denmark's total emissions. The authors acknowledge that extraterritorial emissions by multinational companies are not, under the Paris Agreement, applied to a headquarters country's commitments, but considered this analysis a useful exercise in considering the climate responsibilities of individual companies.

The researchers also scrutinized the Paris climate commitments of countries that are home to big meat and dairy companies. Only seven of the 16 countries where these companies are based make explicit reference to direct and indirect emissions of animal agriculture in their climate commitments.

The team also examined the political influence of the 10 largest meat and dairy companies in the U.S. Using a set of 20 questions to assess influence, they found that Tyson and National Beef engage on the issue of climate change more than any of the other 10 largest U.S. livestock companies. But each [company](#) has contributed to research that minimizes the link between animal agriculture and climate change and have influenced climate-related policies and discourse.

"The largest meat and dairy companies in the U.S. have spent a considerable amount of time, money, and effort into downplaying the link between animal agriculture and climate change, and into fighting climate policy more generally" says Lazarus.

"Documenting their influence in this area is critical to understanding the failure of the U.S. government to adequately address climate change."

The team's analysis also showed the following: JBS (Brazil) and Tyson and Cargill (both in the U.S.) are the three companies with the largest emissions in absolute terms.

Companies headquartered in New Zealand, Denmark, and Switzerland make up the largest proportion of future emissions as a portion of total country target emissions under the Paris Agreement.

Nine U.S.-headquartered companies combined currently represent 6 percent of U.S. total emissions, which would increase to 9 percent in 2025 if the U.S. complies with its commitments to the Paris Agreement (as of 2015). This small percentage is the result of high overall U.S. emissions as well as weak ambition in terms of emissions reductions.

Eight of the 10 companies have consistently lobbied Congress and the EPA on environmental and climate issues. Cargill has issued 173 quarterly lobbying reports on these issues since 2000, with a peak of 24 in 2010, when the cap-and-trade bill was up for debate. These companies have issued 545 quarterly lobbying reports since 2000 on environmental and climate issues.

U.S. meat and dairy companies act collectively to block climate legislation that might limit production. Six of these groups—the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Pork Producers Council, the North American Meat Institute, the National Chicken Council, the International Dairy Foods Association, and the American Farm Bureau Federation and its state groups—have collectively spent approximately \$200 million in lobbying since 2000, lobbying yearly on climate-related issues like cap-and-trade, the Clean Air Act, and greenhouse gas regulations.

"U.S. beef and dairy companies appear to act collectively in ways similar to the fossil fuel industry, which built an extensive climate change countermovement," the authors conclude. "Meat- and [dairy](#)-related trade associations have more traditionally been used to lobby for access to grazing lands and fees and manure management regulations, and to influence government regulation, but more recently they have been involved in blocking [climate](#) policy that would limit production."

More information: Oliver Lazarus et al, The

climate responsibilities of industrial meat and dairy producers, *Climatic Change* (2021). DOI: [10.1007/s10584-021-03047-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-021-03047-7)

Provided by New York University

APA citation: Meat and dairy companies slow to commit to net-zero emissions, new analysis finds (2021, March 29) retrieved 8 May 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-03-meat-dairy-companies-commit-net-zero.html>

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