

Friends of the Earth
Food Chain Speaker Tour - October 9th 2009

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me here this evening to help explore why our current diet has a grave negative environmental and social impact at every level of the food chain. I want to focus on some of the drivers of these problems and what the alternatives are. But first let me just remind you of the extent of the challenge posed specifically by the meat and dairy industry when it comes to climate change.

The Problem

18% - that is the contribution made by livestock to global greenhouse gas emissions, according to the United Nation's report Livestock's Long Shadow, As a share, that is larger than contributions from transport, for example. Other estimates, such as from the EU and the UK, put the figure at 13% and 8% respectively but they don't include hidden costs like fertilizer and grain production or transporting livestock from farm to slaughterhouse and so on.

To put that 18% into context, the production of a kg of beef generates approximately the same GHG emissions as driving 250 km in a car.

We often focus on CO2 but it the livestock industry accounts for 37% of global methane emissions, and 65% of global nitrous oxides emissions, mostly from manure. Interestingly it was the German car industry that discovered cows were very bad for the climate. It compared the exhaust gases from a small car and their contribution to the greenhouse effect with the methane produced by a cow. The cow was the worse polluter.

These emissions sit alongside a range of other problems associated with our meat and dairy diet. Deforestation, for example, with the Amazon and other forests cleared at an alarming rate for cattle ranching and for feed crop production. (I am sure Sergio will say much more about this later.)

Livestock production consumes large quantities of water too. For every litre of milk produced, we use 990 litres of water in the production process. This rises to over 15,000 litres for a kg of beef. In a world where water supplies are under increasing pressure this is simply not sustainable.

And of course, modern agriculture is dependent on oil every step of the way - from fertilisers right through to packaging. In an age of peak oil, it is surely no longer justifiable to use a dwindling resource so intensively and inefficiently?

In fact, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation the livestock sector 'emerges as one of the top two or three most serious contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale for local to global.

And things look set to get worse.

The World Bank estimates demand for meat and dairy products will grow by 85% by 2030. Nicholas Stern agrees and notes:

Some technological progress in the livestock sector can be expected over this period but major increases in GHG emissions are likely unless there is a substantial expansion of biogas using livestock wastes.

This expansion has a clear social cost as well as an ecological one. Rather than adding to our capacity to feed the world's population, putting animal products at the centre of food chain diminishes the possibility of doing so. Intensive livestock rearing requires a growth in cereals; therefore animals start competing with human beings for food.

The EU

So where exactly does the EU fit into all this?

More than 250,000 jobs are presently lost each year in European Agriculture - a statistic that has particular significance for the thousands of EU dairy farmers currently on strike and protesting en masse in Brussels. So, it is worth trying to understand why a Common Agriculture Policy that is regularly criticised for expensively propping up EU farmers seems in fact to be letting down so many of them.

CAP

CAP review and reform is an ongoing part of life in the EU institutions. Yet the most recent 'health check' of 2008 missed an important opportunity to respond to pressing environmental and food security problems.

Crucially it failed to support farmers in shifting to sustainable practices in order to respond to these challenges. Instead a very small number of large land owners, not all of them farms, and food companies still profit most from the CAP budget. Even multinational companies like Nestle and energy corporations such as RWE in Germany are CAP beneficiaries.

This is because the EU's subsidy system is based on landownership and historic yields rather than individual needs, environmental performance and regional disadvantages. In other words, CAP rewards intensive farming rather than small scale, local, low intensity farming.

As a result, it is a significant contributor to the high environmental cost of today's food production. The nature of CAP subsidies also actively prevents steps being taken to minimise environmental impact. For example, livestock can consume waste, make use of unproductive land and contribute to soil sequestration. Yet this can only be done through small-scale production and not the currently favoured intensive methods.

Peak oil

The impacts of the EU's policies are not just felt within its own borders. Take, for example, its targets for how much member states needs to draw on agrofuels as a so called 'renewable' energy source. Friends of the Earth worked with Greens in the European Parliament to get these targets minimised and one of the key arguments was around food security. This is high on the political agenda at present - because of high oil prices and increased demand for food from countries like China and India, as well as the impacts of agrofuel cultivation.

Many are assuming that high oil prices are just a blip. That if Gordon Brown can just persuade Saudi Arabia to produce a bit more, and if he can have a word with North Sea producers about increasing capacity there too, we'll be able to resume business as usual very shortly.

But what if we can't? What if Saudi Arabia is already very near Peak production? What if demand will continue to outstrip supply? What if high oil prices are here to stay?

Some of the facts are startling. World oil and gas production is declining at an average of 4-6% a year, while demand is growing at 2-3% a year.

Of the 100 or so giant oil fields that supply about half of current world production, almost all are more than 25 years old. The

world's biggest oil fields - the giants of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait - were discovered in the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps most ominously, the last time more oil was discovered in a year than was used, was a quarter of a century ago.

Peak Oil is not “just a theory”. Its timing might be theoretical - it might happen in 2 years, 10 years, or even 20 or 30 years - but the geological non-negotiability of the fact that fossil fuel resources are finite really ought to be on someone's political horizons - and it is truly shocking that - at European level, at least - it's not.

Oil Security and Food Security

The implications of this, for every aspect of our lives today, are overwhelming. We have allowed oil to become vital to virtually everything we do.

And, as oil security deteriorates, so too will food security.

British farming - and indeed Western industrialised farming as a whole - has evolved into a system for “turning oil into food”, reliant as it is, on energy-intensive manufacture of synthetic fertilizers, heavy use of oil-based plastics, and centralised, oil-dependent, just-in-time distribution systems.

This has been exacerbated by:

- The major shift to highly processed and packaged food;
- The globalisation of the food industry, with a huge increase in imports and exports;
- Supermarkets emerging as sales leaders, leading to the loss of small shops, markets and wholesalers. And at the same time, the concentration of the supply base into the hands of fewer, larger suppliers, particularly to meet supermarket demands for bulk, year-round, supply of uniform produce;
- Major changes in delivery patterns, with most goods now routed through supermarket regional distribution centres (we're all familiar with stories of the local lamb chop which came from a farm a few miles from where it's sold, but which has done a 300 mile round trip for packaging and distribution;

And the livestock industry is amongst the worst.

Consider too that we currently rely on imports to provide almost one third of food consumed in this country, and have one of the lowest self-sufficiency rates in the EU. Although we've been a net importer of food for a long time, imports are currently growing at a significant rate - with an increase in tonnes imported of around one third between 1988 and 2002.

Although demand for exotic or out of season foods is one of the drivers for increasing imports, it's crucial, I think, to note that over half of the food imported in 2002 was indigenous produce - in other words, at the time when it was imported, it could have been grown in the UK's temperate climate, and therefore could have potentially been sourced in this country. Again, the EU's system of subsidies plays a huge role in enabling this ludicrousness to prevail - encouraging us all to think that our diet can ignore any kind of constraints.

But this kind of food system can't possibly survive in an oil scarce world. It's clear that as oil prices rise, so food prices will rise too - and access will be harder, particularly for the poor. The implications are very grave, since we're already facing a world of potential grain shortages. And, if, because of our meat and dairy heavy diet, the livestock industry hoovers up whatever grain the world produces can you imagine the consequences?

Opening up markets

If we are looking at the drivers behind our current food chain, we must consider too the EU's aggressive pursuit of opening up agricultural markets worldwide. This policy has brought increasing imports of farm products from third countries, especially in the meat sector.

Throw export subsidies into the mix and you get an increasing number of smaller European producers put out of business. Moreover, because imports often do not meet the same legally

binding conditions European farmers have to respect they are usually cheaper.

The EU's cross - compliance principle, which obliges farmers to meet environmental and animal welfare standards is, therefore, looked upon by many influential farmer's organisations as competitive disadvantage, yet to date no CAP review has looked seriously at the link with the trade liberalisation agenda and increased feed and food imports.

Greens in the European Parliament have consistently argued that market access should be qualified by a requirement for imported products to demonstrate the same workers rights, environmental protection and animal welfare standards as products produced within the EU.

Limited exceptions could be made for products from developing countries, if they are supported to reach these standards. We also want the immediate withdrawal of agricultural export subsidies.

With the financial crisis and highly volatile agricultural prices, the European Commission's decade long devotion to the mantra of opening up markets is starting to pale. The assertion that development in the South would only take place if agricultural goods could flow freely across national borders has been undermined on the ground.

Fair trade standards have been developed from the bottom-up by farmers and consumer organisations, now making their way into larger markets. EU agricultural policy should be focussed on supporting this kind of farming rather than subsidising the kind of food production that is responsible for rainforest destruction or dangerous levels of greenhouse gas emissions.

But what might this kind of support look like?

A good starting point is the commitments that Friends of the Earth has asked all the political parties to include in their manifestos:

- A new law to measure and reduce the global environmental impacts of the UK's meat and dairy consumption;
- making sure that European Farming subsidies support planet-friendly meat and dairy farming, and don't prop up intensive factory farms;
- introducing a new watchdog to protect farmers from supermarket bullying. This is essential to make planet-friendly farming profitable ad possible.

This last point is something I have already taken up at EU level with a highly successful written declaration, similar to an early day motion. More than half the parliament's MEPs backed my calls for a full investigation into the impact that

supermarkets are having on small businesses, consumers, suppliers and workers.

This should inform future policy making at EU level and help protect farmers and others from supermarkets abusing their powers. We also need new competition laws to restrict the concentration and market power of the major food corporations and retailers, and to guarantee fair prices to farmers

And there are other ways we can ensure our food chain is sustainable:

- **Internalising the environmental costs of our current food system**, ensuring - in the words of Lester Brown - that “prices tell the ecological truth”. Nowhere is this more important than in internalising the **environmental costs of transport**, since it is artificially cheap fuel which enables so much unnecessary international trade in food;
- An end to export subsidies which leads to dumping cheap food in developing country markets;
- An immediate ban on the export of live animals;
- We need to **rebuild the infrastructure necessary for local food systems**, including in Europe for example a **review of EU regulations on abattoirs**, to ensure that they don't

have the perverse effect of driving smaller, more local abattoirs out of business;

- A policy to **encourage people to eat less meat**. The FAO has calculated that **world livestock production creates more GHG than all the world's motor vehicles**. And we already know that feeding grain to animals and then eating meat is an incredibly inefficient way of feeding ourselves;
- A complete **ban on GM crops**, in order to protect and preserve conventional non-GM and organic agriculture;
- A commitment to make **healthy food accessible for all**. If we are saying that people on low incomes cannot afford healthy food, the answer is not that food needs to be cheaper, but that **political action is necessary to ensure they can afford it** - for example, through changes to the minimum wage, and the benefits system;
- **Changes to the rules of the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU's Single Market, and to the World Trade Organisation**, so that governments can make **increased self-reliance** - rather than **free-market reliance** - a central aim of national and local food economies.

And so my vision for the future of agriculture is one of food sovereignty - in other words, of all regions and nations being able

to make their own decisions about the kind of food economies they want, and about what they want to import or export.

Perhaps this might include some meat or dairy products but the climate and biodiversity impacts of the UK's intensive livestock sector would be reduced. This would happen in part because of natural constraints - there is only room for so many cows on the British Isles - and in part because it would be easier to put in place regulatory mechanisms, including ensuring that the price of products reflect their true environmental costs including all externalities.

For Europe, my vision is one where far more of Europe's food is produced within Europe.

But crucially, this isn't a fortress Europe approach. It recognises that all regions around the world have the right to food sovereignty, and that many developing countries currently depend on access to our markets in order to earn the foreign exchange needed to pay off debts, which themselves should be cancelled or renegotiated.

But over the medium term, we need a new strategy, involving more aid and development co-operation, which will support the rebuilding of stronger national and regional economies in the South, rather than skewing their economic priorities to provide ever more exports to the North - increasingly in cut-throat competition with each other.

It's a vision of healthier citizens, where everyone has access to a good diet, of thriving local farmers, reinvigorated rural economies and communities, a cleaner, safer environment, and a reconnection between urban areas and their rural hinterlands.

It's an ambitious agenda - but as the unsustainability of our current food system becomes ever clearer by the day, it's one that I believe we must urgently grasp.