



Animal gas count blows in the wind

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A LEADING agriculture analyst has denied that the **beef** and dairy industries are big greenhouse polluters due to animal emissions.

In fact, eating less **beef** and fewer dairy products would not necessarily cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, according to Mick Keogh, executive director of the Australian Farm Institute.

Mr Keogh, writing in the institute's newsletter, said calls to cut **beef** consumption, even to eat kangaroo meat instead, were based on the ruminant, or methane, output of livestock such as sheep and cattle. Animals' high emissions had led to slogans such as "less meat means less heat".

"This conclusion, however, ignores the complexity of greenhouse emission accounting rules, and the fact that what is counted as emissions may not necessarily reflect the realities of the carbon cycle," he said. Atmospheric methane emissions had also stabilised since the 1990s.

Mr Keogh said the Kyoto Protocol recognised that carbon dioxide and nitrogen fixed in pastures and soils could be included as carbon offsets. However, subsequent greenhouse accounting changes (the Marrakech Accords) made it difficult for Australia.

Mr Keogh said the problem was that 1990, the Kyoto base year, was a good season in Australia. There was great pasture growth, so a lot of carbon was removed from the atmosphere.

However, this meant any subsequent drier year would result in a big rise in GHGs because no distinction was made between natural (drought) and man-made (livestock) emissions in greenhouse accounting.

An added complication was that the Marrakech Accords had a "one in, all in" category where net emissions from all crop and grazing lands were included in the national inventory.

Because agriculture's natural GHG removals from the atmosphere are not counted, Mr Keogh said the GHG accounting rules meant that ruminant livestock were prominent in Australian and New Zealand greenhouse inventories.

However, livestock methane was produced because the animals ate pasture, fodder or concentrates that were all produced by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

"Only the methane emissions from the cattle (and nitrous oxide in animal wastes) are counted in national emission inventories," he said.

"The positive side of the ledger - carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide removed from the atmosphere by the growing pasture - is not counted."

Mr Keogh said the "less meat, less heat" argument did not take into account what would happen if meat production was reduced.

"In northern Australia, for example, most of the cattle are grazed on unimproved natural pastures," he said. Without grazing, the pastures would either be burnt by periodical bushfires or eaten by native animals or insects such as termites, or subject to natural decay.

"The normal cycling of greenhouse gases between soil, flora, fauna and the atmosphere would continue to occur," he said.

It was thus questionable whether there would be any real long-term difference in GHG emissions if **beef** production was cut back.

Mr Keogh said it would not necessarily be better if pigs or chicken, which produce less methane, were used, because cropping areas would have to be expanded to supply the grain for their stockfeed.

KEY POINTS

? Analyst claims **beef** and dairy methane emissions are overstated.

? Gas accounting methods are flawed as the baseline is unbalanced.