

There's a Bone to Pick With Meat Eaters

Growing grain for feed instead of food may be humanity's greatest evil yet.

By **JEREMY RIFKIN**

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Hundreds of millions of people are going hungry every day all over the world because much of the arable land now is being used to grow feed grain for animals rather than food grain for people. Grain-fed cattle, pigs, chicken and other livestock, in turn, are being consumed by the wealthiest people on the planet while the poor go hungry.

Unfortunately, when agricultural ministers from around the world gather at the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization's World Food Summit in Rome on June 10 to discuss how to feed a burgeoning human population, the issue of feed grain versus food grain will not be on the official agenda. It should be.

In the past half a century, we have erected an artificial, worldwide protein ladder, with grain-fed beef and other meats on the top rung. Affluent populations, especially in Europe, North America and Japan, devour the bounty of the planet. The transition of world agriculture from food grain to feed grain represents a new form of human evil, with consequences possibly far greater and longer lasting than any past wrongdoing inflicted by men against their fellow human beings. Today, more than 70% of the grain produced in the United States is fed to livestock, much of it to cattle. Unfortunately, cattle are energy guzzlers, considered by some to be the Cadillacs of farm animals. In the U.S., 157 million metric tons of cereal, legumes and vegetable protein suitable for human use are fed to livestock to produce 28 million metric tons of animal protein that humans consume annually.

Cattle and other livestock are devouring much of the grain produced on the planet. This is a new agricultural phenomenon, one that began in the U.S. at the start of the 20th century and spread to other countries after World War II. The transition from forage to feed has taken place with little debate despite the fact that it has had a more pronounced impact on the politics of land use and food distribution than any other single factor in modern times.

In the developing countries, land reform periodically has spawned populist political uprisings. Still, while ownership and control of land have been issues of great public debate, how the land is used has been of less interest. Yet the decision to use the land to create an artificial food chain has resulted in misery for hundreds of millions of people around the world. Bear in mind that an acre of cereal produces five times more protein than an acre devoted to meat production; legumes (beans, peas, lentils) can produce 10 times more protein; leafy vegetables 15 times more protein.

The global corporations that produce the seeds, farm chemicals and cattle and that control the slaughterhouses and the marketing and distribution channels for beef are eager to tout the advantage of grain-fed livestock.

In the 1970s, many nations followed the advice of the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization, which suggested switching to coarse grains that could be more easily consumed by livestock. World meat production has risen fivefold.

The shift from food to feed continues apace despite the growing hunger of an increasingly desperate humanity. The human consequences of the transition from food to feed were dramatically illustrated in 1984 in Ethiopia, when thousands were dying each day from famine. The public was unaware that, at

the same time, Ethiopia was using some of its agricultural land to produce linseed cake, cottonseed cake and rapeseed meal for export to Britain and other European nations to be used as feed for livestock.

Tragically, 80% of the world's hungry children live in countries with food surpluses, much of which is in the form of feed fed to animals that will be eaten by well-to-do consumers. Thirty-six percent of the world's grain is fed to livestock. In the developing world, the share of grain fed to livestock has tripled since 1950 and now exceeds 21% of the total grain produced. In China, the share of grain fed to livestock has gone from 8% to 26% since 1960. In Mexico, the share rose from 5% to 45%, in Egypt from 3% to 31% and in Thailand from 1% to 30% in the same period.

The irony of the food production system is that millions of wealthy consumers in developed countries increasingly are dying from diseases of affluence—heart attacks, strokes, diabetes and cancer—brought on by gorging on fatty grain-fed beef and other meats, while the poor in the Third World are dying of diseases of poverty brought on by being denied access to land to grow food grain for their families.

Consuming large quantities of grain-fed beef and other meats is viewed by many as a basic right and a way of life. The underside of the beef culture, in which displaced people search desperately for their next meal, is rarely considered. There is likely to be plenty of talk at the World Food Summit about how to increase food production. No doubt the biotech companies will be there, touting their genetically modified "wonder seeds." Developed countries and nongovernmental organizations will talk about extending food aid. Other countries will talk about more equitable global trade agreements and securing higher prices for their commodities. There may even be some discussion about the need for agricultural land reform in poor countries.

What is likely to be virtually absent from the debate is talk about the food preferences of the world's wealthier consumers, who favor eating at the highest point on the global food chain while their fellow human beings starve. We are long overdue for a global discussion on how best to promote a diversified, high-protein vegetarian diet for the human race.

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