

PO316 Final Op Ed

The Hidden Story Behind our Food

When we savor a juicy steak, unwrap a delicious burger, or take that first crispy bite of a chicken nugget, we rarely stop to ask ourselves: Where does our food actually come from? When thinking of the farms that produce our meat products, we might envision animals grazing freely on grassy green fields. The truth is far darker; most of our meat comes from factory farms, where animals are raised in overcrowded industrial facilities that prioritize profit over environmental sustainability.¹ Despite this, more than half of Canadians believe farming practices here are environmentally responsible—and that is exactly what large-scale factory farms want you to believe.² But as the environmental consequences of factory farming mount, it's time to face the truth behind our food. The time to demand change for the health of our planet is now.

The Environmental Toll of Factory Farming

Factory farming isn't just a system of food production; it's an environmental disaster. Growing animal feed crops releases carbon dioxide through the use of chemical fertilizers, while farm operations like heating and machinery add even more carbon emissions.³ Additionally, vast expanses of forests are cleared to grow feed crops, contributing to deforestation and biodiversity loss, while producing beef or cow milk consumes significantly more water than growing plant-based alternatives.⁴ Plus, methane emissions from animal agriculture account for almost half of the world's methane output. In fact, cutting the methane emissions from factory farming is identified as the quickest route to slowing global warming.⁵ Canada's agricultural sector has seen the steepest rise in emissions outside the oil and gas sector, making it impossible to meet our national climate goals.⁶

Why Change Has Stalled

This all raises the question: How have we allowed the factory farming industry to wreak such havoc on the environment? In part, it boils down to money—corporations prioritize profits while consumers prioritize affordability.⁷ The factory farming industry also benefits from government subsidies and a lack of policies enforcing environmental accountability in this sector.⁸ The political influence of the powerful agribusiness lobby also plays a part in the current inefficiencies in government policies, pushing the Canadian government to prioritize industry interests over environmental concerns.⁹ To make matters worse, the Canadian demand for retail beef is currently the highest it has been in over 30 years.¹⁰ Consumers remain largely unaware of

¹ World Animal Protection. "What Is Factory Farming?" *World Animal Protection*, 6 Aug. 2020.

² Government of Canada. *Complementary Actions to Reduce Emissions*, Government of Canada, 14 Dec. 2016.

³ Dalzell, Noa. "The Massive Impact of Factory Farming on Our Environment." *New Roots Institute*, 13 May 2021.

⁴ Dalzell, "The Massive Impact of Factory Farming on Our Environment."

⁵ Sherrington, Rachel, et al. "Big Meat and Dairy Lobbyists Turn out in Record Numbers at COP28." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 Dec. 2023.

⁶ Saravanamutto, Colin. "For Climate's Sake! Let's Fence in Factory Farming." *Canada's National Observer*, 5 June 2024.

⁷ Government of Canada, "Complementary Actions to Reduce Emissions."

⁸ Fortowsky, Alyson. "\$100 Million Financing for Plant-Based Protein? Let's Talk about Billions for Animal Agriculture." *Sentient*, 16 Sept. 2020.

⁹ Sherrington, Rachel, et al. "Big Meat and Dairy Lobbyists Turn out in Record Numbers at COP28."

¹⁰ Canadian Cattle Association. "Canadian Beef Economics." *Canadian Cattle Association*, 2024.

the true environmental costs of their food choices. As a matter of fact, no one truly knows the full environmental impact of factory farming; the Canadian government often misclassifies these emissions under other industrial sectors, revealing only the tip of the iceberg.¹¹

A Strategy for Change

So, what can we do about it? The answer lies in tackling the issue from multiple angles: economically, politically, and socially. First, let's talk money. Government subsidies funding an industry that is destroying our planet need to go. These funds, adding up to billions of dollars annually, can be redirected to support sustainable farms and the production of plant-based proteins.¹² These are the businesses that truly need financial support to compete with large and powerful factory farming corporations.

Next, the government needs to implement enforceable environmental regulations. Factory farms must be required to cap their greenhouse gas emissions and report transparently on their use of resources like water and fertilizer. These reports would highlight the comparative environmental benefits of sustainably produced meat and dairy products alongside plant-based proteins. Factory farms should be required to share these reports not only with the government, but also with the public. This will peel back the layers of greenwashed marketing that currently skew public perception, exposing how much environmental damage factory farming truly creates.

Finally, it's time to equip consumers with the tools to make informed choices. Currently, it's no surprise Canadians feel overwhelmed—who has the time to ponder the origins of a steak while rushing through a grocery store in their hectic day-to-day lives? A green label certification program for sustainable meat and dairy products would make it simple to spot eco-friendly food options on store shelves. Promoting plant-based alternatives in grocery stores through prominent placement and marketing can further encourage consumers to incorporate these foods into their diets. Canadians consume nearly double the global average of meat, placing immense strain on both the environment and the livestock sector (Moffatt, 2021). Encouraging plant-based alternatives reduces the environmental burden while facilitating a transition away from over-reliance on meat and dairy products. This, along with clear labelling of sustainably raised products, can alleviate confusion and make it easy for Canadians to opt for eco-friendly food options.

Why This Strategy Will Succeed

These changes aren't just wishful thinking—they're practical, achievable steps that address all the major economic, social, and political roadblocks. Redirecting subsidies will give sustainable farms a chance to compete with factory farms, reducing the financial edge that enables factory farms to keep their products priced so cheaply. Over time, this will level the playing field for sustainable farms and farms producing plant-based proteins, decreasing the cost discrepancy between factory-farmed products and their eco-friendly counterparts. Enforcing environmental regulations and transparency address political barriers, setting industry standards and limiting the power of the aggressive agribusiness political lobby. Meanwhile, green labels will make sustainable products easily accessible for everyday Canadians, inducing a shift in consumer demand which will further decrease the economic advantage of factory farms.

¹¹ World Animal Protection. “What Is Factory Farming?”

¹² Fortowsky, Alyson. “\$100 Million Financing for Plant-Based Protein? Let's Talk about Billions for Animal Agriculture.”

Some might argue that these measures could ramp up food prices or hurt the economy, and that's a fair concern. The livestock industry plays a key role in the Canadian economy, with the cattle and beef sector contributing around \$24 billion annually to Canada's GDP and generating around 347,000 jobs.¹³ On top of this, consumers are prioritizing affordability in their food choices, and who can blame them? Inflation has led to rising grocery prices, not to mention all other aspects of the rising cost of living.¹⁴ (Tahirali, 2024).

But here's the thing: we're already paying the price for factory farming, just not at the checkout counter. Climate change, air pollution, and biodiversity loss are all rapidly accelerating due to factory farming's unchecked emissions and resource use. Without regulation, this environmental degradation will only continue to worsen. Corporations aren't going to impose limits on themselves; environmental damage isn't factored into their annual earnings. For these powerful companies, profit margins take priority over the well-being of our planet.

Besides, transitioning to sustainable farming will create new job opportunities and economic growth in this sector. Support for new industry players outside of factory farms will diversify Canada's agriculture sector and reduce our economic dependency on resource-intensive food production methods. This transition is not only necessary from an environmental standpoint but also advantageous for our country; it will create new job opportunities and make sustainable food options more accessible and affordable for Canadians.

The path forward

The environmental consequences of factory farming are too urgent to ignore. The next time you savor a breakfast of eggs and bacon, take a second to think about the story behind what's on your plate—a story of forests torn down, greenhouse gases emitted, and ecosystems destroyed. It's time to rewrite this story, hold factory farms accountable, and demand a food system that prioritizes sustainability over profit—because the future of our planet depends on it.

¹³ Canadian Cattle Association. "Canadian Beef Economics."

¹⁴ Tahirali, J. (2024, October 15). *Food prices continue to outpace inflation in Canada*. CTV News.

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*AI was used to polish this essay.