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Shopping for More Sustainable Meat



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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[foodprint](#), [meat](#)



You have already heard the reasons for going vegetarian: animal welfare, personal health, financial savings, and cutting your carbon footprint. So if you haven't already quit meat, you probably have compelling reasons. Even if your reasons run no deeper than those of [Dennis Leary](#). (warning: this video may offend), who eats meat because "murder tastes good," you can still care about the planet. So how can you maintain your preferred diet while minimizing the ecological footprint of the beasts you eat?

Critical Factors

What Do You Think?



Would you give or accept a lab-grown diamond as an engagement ring?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No
- No opinion

NEXT

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According to the UN's FAO, feed production and processing, and enteric fermentation (that's a polite term for cow farts) from ruminants are the [two main sources of emissions](#) from meat. Changes to cattle feed (such as adding a certain [seaweed](#)) may reduce animals' direct greenhouse gas emissions. But there's not much consumers can do to reduce enteric fermentation except to shift [which species we eat](#) to non-ruminants that release less methane.

But consumers can make a difference with their choices. [Most meat](#) in America comes from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). CAFOs are also commonly called factory farms because they follow an industrial model of production. CAFO animals are confined to small spaces and fed mostly grain until they are big enough to be eaten. Like most industrial processes, CAFOs are extremely efficient at maximizing production and minimizing expenses. But they [externalize](#) a lot of costs, not least of which is their environmental impact.

CAFO Problem

CAFOs contribute to [a lot of issues](#) that concern environmentalists, including greenhouse gas emissions, lost biodiversity, [GMO foods](#), proliferation of antibiotics, animal cruelty, and pollution. Runoff from CAFOs contributes to [water pollution](#) with excessive nutrients, microbial pathogens, and pharmaceuticals. Animal waste produces ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, and particulate matter that creates a public health risk that [disproportionately affects communities of color](#) . A [recent study](#) estimates that air pollution from animal agriculture leads to nearly 13,000 deaths in the United States annually.



Concentrated animal feeding operations present a variety of concerns, including greenhouse gases, pollution, and animal cruelty.

Bedding

Land Use

FAO's statistics include land use impacts under "feed production," and CAFOs are relevant here, too. As the [global population](#) grows and climate change impacts agricultural productivity, more land is converted to agriculture. The conversion releases carbon from storage in natural landscapes into the atmosphere. [Deforestation](#) in many parts of the world is driven not by development or the need to grow more human food crops, but to [produce silage](#) for animals. Deforestation deprives about [250 million people](#), mostly the rural poor, of subsistence and income. Industrial farming methods used on the converted land also [degrade soil](#), releasing even more carbon and contributing to erosion and water pollution.

[Grazing](#) has its own land use and soil impacts, especially in the American West. But managed grazing can [preserve soil carbon](#) so it does have a place in [regenerative agriculture](#) while CAFOs do not. [Pasture-raised](#) meat is also less energy-intensive, results in less pollution, and is healthier and more humane for the animals.

A Tangle of Labels

A lot of [greenwashing](#) gets thrown around the meat market. Many of the USDA's [legally defined terms](#) for meat labels relate to food safety and quality rather than animal welfare standards or environmental impact. Meat labeled "natural" is minimally processed and contains no artificial ingredients or added color. Most claims related to hormone usage simply confirm that the product conforms to law.

Unfortunately, no single certification guarantees an animal was raised primarily outdoors in a manner that protects the soil and prevents overgrazing. That doesn't mean that labels are completely useless. [USDA organic](#) and some [humane certifications](#) (such as Animal Welfare Approved) at least require animals to have been raised in conditions that permit their natural grazing behaviors. The Environmental Working Group has [decoded](#) several meat labels and certifications in detail.



Pasture-raised meat requires less energy, creates less pollution, and is more humane for the animals than meat from concentrated animal feeding operations.

The Meat You Eat

Even if you buy certified organic meat, most grass-fed beef is [imported](#) from the southern hemisphere. But it can be labeled as a product of the U.S. because it passes through a USDA-inspected plant upon arrival. If you want to avoid the emissions generated by shipping refrigerated food halfway across the world, you'll need to find out exactly who grew your beef.

The best way to do that is to buy directly from the farmer. If you can't find one at your local farmers' market, the website [eatWild](#) maintains a state-by-state directory of local farmers who sell their pastured farm and ranch products directly to consumers.

If you don't have direct access to a farmer, some [CSA programs](#) offer a meat subscription sourced directly from the farmer. A local butcher is also more likely to sell local meat than the supermarket. Just be sure to ask for details — not all small farms are sustainably managed.

Organic, pasture-raised meat is more expensive, and Americans eat [nearly twice as much protein](#) as a healthy diet requires. So consider [cutting down](#) on the amount of meat you eat. Eat meat less often (think Meatless Mondays). Use meat for flavor instead of calories (soups flavored with ham hock, pasta with bits of meat in the sauce). The money you save on plant-based meals can help balance the extra cost of the meat you do eat.

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[Guide to Plant-Based Milk Alternatives](#)



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).