

## **BEEF PRODUCTION IS GOOD FOR MOTHER NATURE**

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Many of us have read news articles or heard reports about the environmental issues that are caused by livestock. It is everything from greenhouse gases from cattle to they are using food that could be used to feed people. All of this seems followed by a push to stop eating meat and consume a diet made up primarily of vegetables. Is our industry really damaging the environment? Would the world be better off if livestock production was reduced or eliminated? Do we have any information to defend and support beef production? Let's look at a few of the issues.

**Beef production requires food and land that could be used to feed people.** Think about the cattle you have on your farm. What are they eating? Forage makes up the overwhelming of cattle diets. This forage is inedible by humans, since we cannot digest it. But cattle, thanks to their ruminant digestive system, can digest this material and use it to produce a high quality protein that humans can use for food. Cattle are not taking food out of people's mouths, but taking food we can't eat and making something we can eat.

What about the land? As you take your next drive across our state, look at the topography of most of our pastures? Why are they planted to pasture instead of corn or soybeans? Most of the times it is because the land is too steep to plant to crops, or the yield potential is too low for it to be profitable. But it will work perfectly for growing grass and grazing cattle. In other words, beef production allows us to use land for food production that otherwise would be of little value.

**Beef production is contributing to global warming.** This is a topic that is often more difficult for us to deal with. It comes with a lot of abstract terms and vague definitions that we don't know how to handle. First, understand that there is no doubt that the atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is definitely going up. The real question is if this is a man-made issue or not. I'm not going to attempt to deal with this. But if someone assumes the carbon dioxide level is going up because of man, is beef a significant contributor? Look at the figure below. It is from the 2018 EPA publication "Inventory of U.S Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks, 1990-2016". Less than 10% of the greenhouse gases emitted come from agriculture. And remember, some of this is from segments of agriculture other than beef production.

While we are thinking of carbon dioxide, we need to remember that a perennial grass pasture can take some of the CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere and store it in the ground as roots and organic matter. In fact, one of the best ways to improve environmental sustainability of land is to plant a perennial grass, like tall fescue.

The next time you hear someone say beef production is bad for the world, keep these points in mind. My response would be that we are improving the environment while still providing a valuable protein source made from a low-quality feed. That's a big deal.

**Figure 2-4: U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks by Chapter/IPCC Sector (MMT CO<sub>2</sub> Eq.)**

