

BCVA response to BBC programme 'Meat: a Threat to our Planet?'

The BBC aired the above show on the 25th November which raised a number of important topical points. However, there are some areas of emphasis and lack of clarity which the British Cattle Veterinary Association (BCVA) believes to be misleading to the public and a misrepresentation of the farming systems and meat available in the United Kingdom.

It is absolutely essential that the public considers its intake and origin of all food sources, including meat and dairy produce, for the benefit of the environment and also for animal welfare. In this regard, highlighting the consequences of widescale deforestation of the Amazon rainforest amongst other ecologically important sites in the search of increased crop growth regions is important and devastating. However, it is worth considering that the majority of deforestation occurs for the purpose of soya growth. The UK imports 1.1 million tons of soya, of which 90% is fed to pigs and poultry. This equates to 458,000 hectares of soya beans. However, the UK imports 1.4 million tons of soya oil for human consumption equating to 2,360,000 hectares of soya beans. The animal feed portion is consequently a waste product from human consumption. This is not to say the use of soya is entirely justified, merely that the animal use in the UK is not responsible for deforestation.

Secondly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have recently released a report recategorizing methane from animal sources and downgrading the role it plays in global warming. Methane is only stable for a short time (around 10 years) in the environment before breaking down to carbon dioxide which, although more stable, has a lower warming effect. If cattle methane production levels stay stable, methane is merely replacing the methane produced 10 years ago, which similarly replaced methane produced 10 years prior to that. Therefore, it does not contribute to further warming beyond the level of carbon dioxide produced by degradation. In reality, methane levels from cattle farming have fallen since 1996, so the effect will be to reduce global warming. This reduces the contribution of cattle farming to UK outputs by a factor of 4. This does not mean that farming practises don't still need to consider their effects on the environment, but the amount it needs to reduce emissions by to achieve net zero production is much smaller.

Thirdly, the farming methods demonstrated, whilst commonplace in the Americas, are worlds apart from the beef production systems in the UK. We are a temperate country with a fantastic capacity to grow grass. This grass, together with hedgerows and trees, act as carbon sinks, pulling carbon out of the atmosphere and into the soil. The main dietary emphasis of grass, either grazed or conserved, in UK beef production means the images mainly portrayed in the programme, are not comparable with those seen in the UK. The IPCC report of 2018 recognised that grass-based systems can have a positive environmental effect.

Finally, the programme gave no fair comparative approach to differing farming systems, and guidance as to which are likely to have significant planetary environmental effects. It merely presented the extremes.

So in conclusion, the BCVA thinks a number of key messages were missed for the programme to maximise UK relevance:

- UK beef production is not responsible for deforestation.
- Methane from cattle is not responsible for significant changes in global warming potential.
- UK beef has a far lower environmental effect than those practices demonstrated.
- UK meat does not contain any growth or hormone promoters and from 2014-2018, sales of veterinary antibiotics for food producing animals has decreased by a massive 53%.

So, whilst we recognise that global farming has some steps to achieve full environmental sustainability, there should be a total emphasis on purchasing British reared beef, rather than imported beef.