

What's On Your Plate? Why Diet Change is Critical for Successful Climate, Health, and Social Policy

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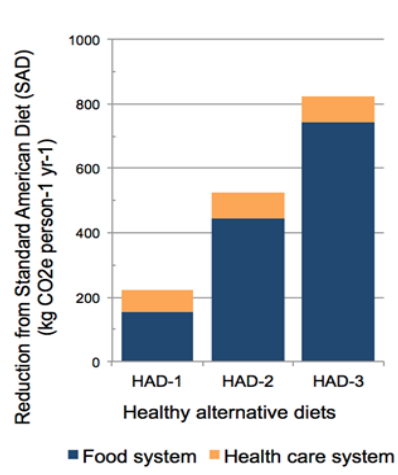
The United States' current food system contributes more than 25% of its total greenhouse gas emissions and fuels an epidemic of noncommunicable diseases like diabetes, heart disease and cancers. The costly health care needed to treat these diseases also generates greenhouse gases. At the same time, climate change itself impacts the food system and community health. Professor Cleveland argues that diet change is required to successfully tackle this climate and health justice problem. Diet change, he finds, could make a major contribution to climate change mitigation targets, improve health, and promote social justice. Professor Cleveland discusses obstacles to diet change, including the political power of the food industry and individual resistance to change. Meeting these challenges to diet change requires climate, health and social policies that include top down as well as bottom up strategies.

While the food system has successfully kept pace with increasing population and consumption, it also contributes more than 25% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, and consumes most of the increasingly scarce land and water resources. Diets are also driving a pandemic of noncommunicable diseases that are crippling productivity and driving a rapid increase in health care costs and associated greenhouse gas emissions. Professor Cleveland reviews current research on the connections between the food system, climate change and deteriorating public health, and demonstrates that implementing healthy alternative diets reduces greenhouse gas emissions caused by the food and health care system. Increasing public and policymaker awareness of the link between diet, climate, and health outcomes, along with pathways to effective and enjoyable diet change, is critical for overcoming environmental, health and social problems.

Key Findings:

- ◆ Healthier diets would greatly decrease greenhouse gas emissions from the food and health care systems.
- ◆ Reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through diet change would contribute to rapidly meeting California's climate change mitigation targets, without investment in new infrastructure.
- ◆ Healthier diets would greatly decrease the risk of noncommunicable diseases and death, and could support a more equitable society.

Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions Caused by Food System and Health Care System Through Diet Change



Implications for Policy

Diet change could mitigate environmental and health crises, but change requires countering the dominant “for-profit” paradigm. This approach has been successful in combating the harmful effects of tobacco and the advertising efforts of the tobacco industry. Effective solutions to change diets and positively impact the environment and health costs include: a) increasing information to the population to enable better food choices, b) make healthier food choices affordable, c) increase the availability of healthy food in communities, especially lower income and minority communities, and d) activate individual's sense of autonomy to counter food industry advertising. Professor Cleveland argues that diets are beginning to change for the better, but that policy initiatives can and should build from this momentum.