

The American Diet's Long Shadow

It's easy to forget while we're enjoying a nice meal that our diet reverberates both "downstream"—in our bodies—and "upstream"—on the environment and the livestock we raise. This issue's cover story, an interview with, ahem, me, explores some of those consequences.

As I was working on our new book, *Six Arguments for a Greener Diet*, it quickly became apparent that the average vegetarian is healthier than the average omnivore. Diets rich in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains cut the risk of obesity, heart disease, stroke, and other health problems. That's reason enough to eat a "greener" diet.

But, happily for our planet, growing plant foods requires less energy, less fertilizer, less pesticides, less water, and less land than producing animal foods. And that means less air and water pollution, less greenhouse gases, and less soil erosion. Also, cutting back on meat means that fewer animals suffer miserable lives on factory farms and in slaughterhouses.

The challenge is to move the whole country in that direction, which is where Washington comes in. The federal government should reshape its *farm* policies to reflect its *nutrition* policy, which makes fruits, vegetables, and whole grains the mainstay of diets.

A good place to start: increase the availability of healthier foods. One example: A highly successful, but tiny, federal program gives kids in a few hundred schools a free serving of fresh fruit or vegetable every day. That could be expanded nationally.

The feds could stop supporting ads that promote milk, beef, and eggs and instead mount large-scale media campaigns to encourage people to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Beyond that, the government could ensure that the price of meat reflect the costs of heart disease and the air and water pollution from

factory farms. In fact, the prices of beef, pork, and chicken are kept low by government subsidies to corn growers. And factory farming keeps the cost of pork, chicken, and eggs low. But the animals pay a steep price for our savings.

I think that most consumers would willingly pay a bit more for meat if they knew they were paying the true cost.

Other ideas for encouraging a greener diet and healthier animal foods include:

- Policymakers could restrict the amount of grain fed to cattle. Less grain and more grass would result in leaner meat and protect animals from illnesses caused by an unnatural, grain-laden diet.

- The current 30-percent-fat limit in hot dogs and ground beef should be cut to 20 percent.

- Instead of paying farmers more for fatter milk, as is done now, how about paying them more for milk that's *lower* in saturated fat?

- The government could require growers to give animals ample space, nesting materials, and traditional diets.

For the full story, get a copy of *Six Arguments for a Greener Diet* (see p. 7) and visit EatingGreen.org.



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Correction: In "How to Write a Diet Book" (Jul./Aug., p. 12), we incorrectly said that *The Zone* has readers answer a questionnaire to find the diet they need. We should have said that the Zone diet's Web site (zonediet.com) has people answer a questionnaire to get their Zone Health Profile.



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