

Moving Beyond Beef

Jeremy Rifkin has declared war against the beef industry with his latest book and subsequent movement calling for Americans to eat 50 percent less beef. However, many experts refute much of what both the book and the movement are based upon.

BY JULIE GRIMES ALBERTSON

The anti-beef movement has expanded its scope with the publication of the book, "Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture." The work is intended to convince consumers to cut beef out of their diet for a variety of health and moral reasons. However, the "proof" given by Rifkin to make his anti-beef claims has come under intense scrutiny by credible experts.

Producers and consumers alike have the task of studying not only claims that are made, but also the source of those claims. Because while it may not be the intention of authors to mislead the public, often personal bias gets in the way of accurate reporting of the facts.

One central theme to Rifkin's book is that beef is fundamentally unhealthy:

"Living atop the protein ladder has turned out to be very precarious. The affluent populations of the northern hemisphere are dying by the millions from grain-fed beef and other grain-fed red meat. . . Americans and Europeans are literally eating themselves to death, gorging on marbled beef and other grain-fed animal products, taking into their bodies massive amounts of saturated fats and cholesterol. The fatty substances are building up in the bloodstream, clogging arteries, lining cell walls, blocking passages, triggering metabolic and hormonal changes, stimulating cell growth, and rupturing organs."

These statements are an example of how Rifkin equates eating meat with coronary heart disease, breast cancer, colon

cancer and other diseases. But the demonstrated possible link is between consumption of fat and disease, not between consumption of meat and disease . . . "a significant distinction," says the Food Facts Coalition. The Coalition is an alliance of agricultural related associations who work to ensure that the public receives accurate information about the food they eat.

Dr. Wayne Callaway, a clinical professor of medicine at George Washington University, points out that a variety of respected health organizations, such as the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society and the National Academy of Science, also all recognize that lean beef can be an important part of a balanced diet and remains a good source of protein, vitamins and minerals.



Medical studies have also shown there to be little or no clear correlation between beef consumption and coronary heart disease among "Americans and Europeans."

"During the years of declining Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) incidence in the United States, there has been little change in meat consumption . . . and the direct use of beef fat and its indirect use in shortenings and in margarines increased.

"In comparing the consumption of meat and red meat in European Community countries against CHD incidence, no relation is discernible. The United Kingdom had the second lowest meat consumption and the second highest CHD incidence; Greece, with the highest red meat consumption, had one of the lowest rates of CHD."¹

"Beyond Beef" also addresses the issue of world hunger and how it relates to beef production. Rifkin asserts that world hunger could be eliminated if livestock no longer consumed grain:

"Food economist Frances Moore Lappe' notes that 145 million tons of grain and soybeans were fed to livestock in 1979 — cattle, poultry and hogs. Of that feed only 21 million tons were available to human beings after the energy conversion, in the form of meat, poultry and eggs. The rest, about 124 million tons of grain and soybeans, became inaccessible to human consumption.' Lappe' c calculated that if the 124 million tons of wasted grain and soy were converted to cash it would be worth approximately \$20 billion and if converted to human use could provide 'the equivalent of one cup of grain for every single human being on earth every day for a year.'"

However, as grain and cattle producers both know, if there are no cattle to consume the grain, then there is no market for it. Grain producers wouldn't grow a crop they couldn't sell. Thus "converting" feed grain to money and food for the hungry is a deceptive argument.

Rifkin stresses feeding people instead of livestock:

"If worldwide agricultural production were shifted from livestock feed to grains for direct human consumption, more than a billion people on the planet could be fed," states Rifkin.

However, while most people would not dispute the importance of feeding the hungry of the world, excess grain has not been the answer historically. For much of the last three decades, the United States and several other countries of the world have had a grain surplus. Yet that increase has

Steps the Beyond Beef Campaign Recommends

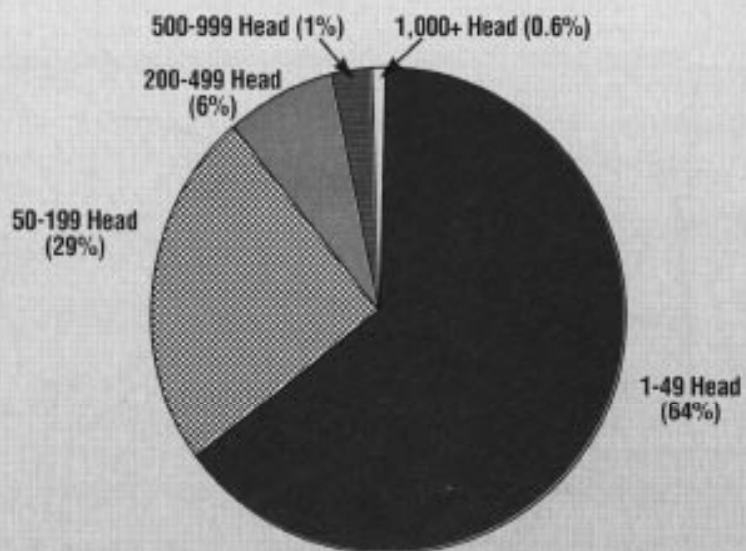
1. Eat less beef. Cut your beef consumption by at least 50 percent.
2. Educate and involve your family and friends.
3. Help students pledge to cut their beef consumption; and press for a 50 percent reduction in beef served in our schools.
4. Encourage local restaurants to remove half the beef offerings from their menus,
5. Lobby local supermarkets to carry only beef from humanely and organically-raised animals.

Proactive Steps Producers Can Take

1. Talk to people not directly involved in agriculture.
2. Be informed of the issues.
3. Write letters to the editor when you see inaccurate claims about beef.
4. When responding to questions about beef, be unemotional and objective.
5. The key word to remember is pro-active, be positive about beef and active in educating the consumer about the positive attributes of red meat.

This information was provided by Sheri Spader, president of the Missouri Cattlemen's Association. Spader also serves as a spokesperson for the National Cattlemen's Association.

SMALL CATTLE PRODUCERS ARE THE LARGEST SEGMENT OF THE AMERICAN CATTLE INDUSTRY



Source: Census of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1987 (latest data)

The Beyond Beef Campaign will ultimately hurt the very producers it claims to defend — family farmers. According to USDA, more than 99.8 percent of all small and mid-size single-family cattle producers own and manage about 93.5 percent of all beef cows, hardly "agribusiness corporations and beef industry giants" by any definition. Reducing beef production will largely impact those small and mid-size family-owned operations.

not meant the end of world hunger.

"The globe could feed another two billion people right now, mainly on the good land diverted from crops by government policies in the United States and Argentina," says Dennis Avery, director of global food issues with the Hudson Institute.

Shifting grain production for cattle to producing food for people will not feed the hungry of the world. Relief programs and economic development in poor countries, providing the ability to produce or purchase and distribute more food, are needed to help solve hunger problems, according to the Coalition.

An environmental issue addressed in "Beyond Beef" is the destruction of the rain forests of Central and South America. Rifkin asserts that cattle are the main factor in rainforest destruction. But in fact peasant agriculture (subsistence farming) is responsible for 10 times the level of deforestation.

"Several authors have singled out cattle ranching as the primary factor responsible for deforestation in Latin America. In much of Latin America, cattle ranching was often the residual use for forest which was cleared for other primary objectives."²

The loss of topsoil from the world's croplands is a serious environmental problem. However, agriculturalists are increasingly aware of the problem as conservation technologies and programs have been developed to address the issue of erosion.

Jeremy Rifkin states that a great deal of erosion is directly attributable to cattle. But the opposite is true: "increased production of forage and use of grazing animals to produce food is one of the best ways to conserve the soil," says Dr. James Russell, Iowa State University.

"... The most extensive erosion occurs with crops grown for direct use by man, such as cotton, (a crop not grown for livestock), which is the world's major crop that is associated with the largest erosion losses, averaging over twofold greater than corn," said Professor M. Milford, Department of Soil and Crop Science, Texas A&M University, 1990.

Another environmental claim made in "Beyond Beef" is that cattle and other livestock pollute the earth worse than U.S. industry:

"Food geographer Georg Borgstrom estimates that cattle and other livestock account for twice the amount of pollutants as comes from all U.S. industrial sources."

A Cattleman's View of Beyond Beef

Missouri cattleman Glen Klippenstein loves cattle, and he loves cattle people. He believes Jeremy Rifkin is questioning the value of both, and he's disturbed by it.

"For the Jeremy Rifkins of the world who spew out mis- and disinformation it's a great, great disservice, not only to the American farmer and rancher but to all of our fellow citizens that we call consumers," says Klippenstein.

He questions what would happen to almost half the land surface of the United States that can't be utilized for anything else but beef cattle production.

"We would put that much more pressure on all the other foods such as cereal grains, fruit and vegetables that need a lot more hydrocarbons (such as herbicides, pesticides and fungicides) to be produced than beef."

However, Klippenstein has confidence in the consumer to see through misinformation. "Fortunately we've got an American population that by and large has a lot of common sense, and many of them are being turned off by what their common sense tells them is bull," that beef is responsible for many of the world's problems.

Producers joining forces to combat the negative publicity given beef are affecting change, says Klippenstein.

We'll be more like teammates than we've ever been. If you take a million producers and you lock their arms, when they walk together their voice will be heard.

"I think we have a tremendous story to tell, a tremendous group of people to tell it, and we have a great audience. I would not be too proud if we allowed ourselves to be ambushed by a vocal minority."

Klippenstein says that producers need to stay on the cutting edge of what it takes to increase the quality of beef. That means taking even better care of our land, water and animals.

"Quality, pride and confidence all go hand in hand. When people like Jeremy Rifkin are barking down our necks we lose pride." However, research shows us that a vast majority of American citizens have a great deal of confidence in the people who are raising their food, more confidence than they have in doctors, lawyers and certainly politicians, Klippenstein says.

If people conform to Mr. Rifkin's ideas and eliminate half the red meat in their diet, not only will our rural communities die off and the majority of family ranchers die off, but some of the "great pride and work ethic that historically comes from the and will also die; and those are some of the attributes that have made our country great."



Dr. John Sweeten of Texas A&M University responded to Borgstrom's claim in 1990 saying that it was absurd by any standard of measurement or comparison. For example, the water quality impairment due to all types of agriculture, including sediment from cropland, affects less than 10 percent of the U.S. total stream miles. Municipal and industrial sources combined are affecting 50 to 80 percent.

Rifkin concludes his book with a challenge to readers:

"By eliminating beef from the human diet, our species takes a significant step toward a new species consciousness, reaching out in a spirit of shared partnership with the bovine and, by extension, other sentient creatures with whom we share the earth."

The environment suffers from actions taken by many people. While no one can remain blameless, the beef industry cannot be held responsible for all the ills of our planet.

Jeremy Rifkin does not understand that cattle people have a vested interest in protecting and nurturing the land and the health and well-being of their cattle. They also have just as great an interest in protecting the health and well-being of the consumer — their livelihood and way of life depend on it.

1. T.L.V. Ulbricht, D.A.T. Southgate, "Coronary Heart Disease: Seven Dietary Factors," *The Lancet*, October 19, 1991.

2. Belk, Huerta-Leidenz, and Cross, "Factors involved in the Deforestation of Tropical Forests," Texas A&M University 1990.

