

Back in January, I [blogged about the link between meat production and GHGs](#). Grist.org has taken up this issue recently, with an interesting [article by Tom Philpott](#) making the case that U.S. livestock production is a significant contributor to GHG emissions, and a [rebuttal from farmer Eliot Coleman](#).

As Philpott's article notes, a U.N. FAO report from a couple of years ago, [Livestock's Long Shadow](#), found that 18% of global GHG emissions are caused by meat production worldwide. Philpott's article quotes a livestock industry spokesman's estimate that U.S. livestock production is responsible for only 2.8% of U.S. GHGs (which still seems significant to me!), and notes that Ralph Loggisci of The Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins University has estimated the U.S. number at about 9%. Whichever number is correct, there's no question that livestock production is a significant GHG contributor.

The [rebuttal from Eliot Coleman](#), who Grist calls "one of the most revered and influential small-scale farmers in the United States, famous for growing delicious vegetables through the Maine winter with little use of fossil fuel," provides an interesting counterpoint. But Coleman's article is short on facts and long on name-calling. With no evidence, Coleman accuses those who believe meat to be a significant GHG contributor of being in a conspiracy with, or duped by, fossil-fuel interests. Coleman asserts, without any evidence and probably erroneously, that grass-fed cattle emit less methane than grain-fed cattle. (This is important, since methane contributes substantially more to global warming on a per-unit basis than carbon dioxide does.)

More fundamentally, Coleman simply fails to provide any evidence to counter the claims that livestock-raising is a major source of GHG emissions. (See the comments to his article for critiques and interesting discussion of the issue.)

Coleman does make the important point that livestock production – and agriculture for that matter – that is dependent on petrochemicals is far worse for the planet than agriculture that is based on sustainable methods. And I have no doubt he's correct that the world would be a better place, with fewer GHG emissions, if all our grain-fed, petrochemical-dependent livestock vanished and we ate only animals raised the way he raises them. (We also would eat far fewer animals, since they can't be raised that intensively with his methods.) But in all this, he misses the larger point that animal agriculture, as we practice it today and as it's likely to be practiced far into the future in this country, is a significant part of the problem. Demonizing critics of beef production or calling them naive won't change that fact.