

Case #2: Beef Tax

The meat industry produces more environmentally harmful greenhouse gases than all forms of transportation combined.¹ The emissions come from the animals' digestive systems as well as from the production of their feed. Cattle and sheep are the most environmentally destructive farm animals, though all types of animal agriculture have a negative impact on the environment. There is also evidence that eating too much meat, especially red meat, is unhealthy.² But should governments attempt to push their citizens to eat in a more environmentally friendly manner or is choosing whether to eat meat an individual choice that should be left up to consumers?³

Two European think tanks have recently proposed that meat be taxed in an effort to reduce meat consumption and lessen the meat industry's impact on the environment. Chatham House, based in the United Kingdom, urged the government to tax meat and use the proceeds to subsidize more environmentally friendly (as well as healthier) alternatives like vegetables, fruits, and tofu.⁴ The think tank argued that a tax would be the most effective way to reduce meat consumption, but also suggested that schools, hospitals, prisons, and the military should serve less meat and provide more vegetarian options. Ultimately, the group concluded that reducing meat consumption to healthy levels around the world could meet a full quarter of the emissions reductions necessary to avoid the worst effects of global warming. Similarly, the Danish Council on Ethics recently concluded that "climate change is an ethical problem" and that "it is necessary to both act quickly and involve food." The Council recommended a plan that would start with a tax on beef, later move to a tax on all red meat, and eventually tax all foods that have a negative impact on the climate.

But the Council's proposal was quickly opposed by the Danish Agriculture and Food Council, which argued that the tax would not have much of an effect on climate change. Indeed, here in the United States, the government subsidizes animal agriculture much more than it subsidizes fruits and vegetables grown for human consumption.⁵ And, as one commentator put it, "we should think twice before trying to engineer the personal behavior of millions of Americans. Sin taxes have a role to play. But it's not a big one."⁶

¹ Max Bearak, "Denmark says you are 'ethically obligated' to eat less beef," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/28/denmark-says-you-are-ethically-obligated-to-eat-less-beef/>.

² Adam Withnall, "Denmark ethics counsel calls for tax on red meat to fight 'ethical problem' of climate change," *The Independent*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/denmark-ethics-council-calls-for-tax-on-red-meat-to-fight-ethical-problem-of-climate-change-a7003061.html>; Nick Rose, "Would a Tax on Beef

Really Help the Environment (and Our Health)?" *Vice*, Feb. 7, 2016, <https://munchies.vice.com/en/articles/would-a-tax-on-beef-really-help-the-environment-and-our-health>.

³ "Could Danes face a 'red meat tax' to help climate?" *The Local*, April 25, 2016, <http://www.thelocal.dk/20160425/denmark-eyes-red-meat-tax-to-help-climate>.

⁴ Emily Gosden, "Meat should be taxed to help save the planet, think-tank suggests," *The Telegraph*, Nov. 24, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/greenpolitics/taxandtheenvironment/12012836/Tax-meat-global-warming-Chatham-House-report.html>.

⁵ Arthur Allen, "U.S. touts fruit and vegetables while subsidizing animals that become meat," *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/us-touts-fruit-and-vegetables-while-subsidizing-animals-that-become-meat/2011/08/22/gIQATFG5IL_story.html.

⁶ Joseph Thorndike, "A Meat Tax? Seriously?" *Forbes*, February 7, 2014,

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/taxanalysts/2014/02/07/a-meat-tax-seriously/#2b53af8d276e>.

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