Policy Brief: An Urgent Call to Action to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions From Food and Agriculture

The recently released IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land affirmed what a growing body of evidence-based research has concluded: Food and agriculture must be addressed as a key driver of land-use change and the climate crisis.[1] Within weeks of the report's release, the international community witnessed tens of thousands of fires destroy more than 2 million acres of irreplaceable Amazon rainforest for livestock and feed production, worsening the climate and extinction emergencies.[2,3]

The urgency of these issues and the future of life on this planet demand international action to transform destructive, industrial and unsustainable food systems. Yet the need to address overconsumption and overproduction of animal-based foods remains largely absent from international climate negotiations and commitments.

The livestock sector alone accounts for at least 14.5% of global GHG emissions.[4] At the same time, with population growth, urbanization, and increasing per-capita consumption of animal products (associated with rising incomes), it is projected that demand for livestock products will increase 70% by 2050.[5]

Several studies indicate that we cannot meet the ultimate Paris Agreement goal of keeping warming to 2 degrees Celsius, much less to 1.5 degrees, unless we rein in agricultural emissions.[6,7,8] Reducing

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[1] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2019).IPCC Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse gas fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems. Retrieved from: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/srccl/

[2] Mackintosh, Eliza. "The Amazon is burning because the world eats so much meat." CNN. August 23, 2019. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/08/23/americas/brazil-beef-amazon-rainforest-fire-intl/index.html

[3] "Brazil's Bolsonaro says he will accept aid to fight Amazon fires." CBS News. August 27, 2019. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/amazon-wildfires-brazil-spurns-20-million-aid-offer-from-g-7-nations-today-2019-08-27/

[4] Gerber, P. J., Steinfeld, H., Henderson, B., Mottet, A., Opio, C., Dijkman, J., ... & Tempio, G. (2013). Tackling climate change through livestock: a global assessment of emissions and mitigation opportunities. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

[5] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). "World livestock 2011–Livestock in food security." (2011): 40.

[6] Brent Kim et al. (2015): The Importance of Reducing Animal Product Consumption and Wasted Food in Mitigating Catastrophic Climate Change. John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future.

[7] Springmann, M., Clark, M., Mason-D'Croz, D., Weibe, K., Bodirsky, B., Lassaletta, L., … Willet, W. (2018) Options for keeping the food system within environmental limits. Nature. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-018-0594-0

[8] Hedenus, F., S. Wirsenius & D. J. A. Johansson (2014): The importance of reduced meat and dairy consumption for meeting stringent climate change targets. Climatic Change. 124, p.79–91.

consumption of food from animal sources, compared to current global trends, is crucial for meeting this goal while also allowing for emissions from other sectors.[9]

A multi-pronged approach by governments, cooperating with researchers, civil society organizations, educational institutions and other stakeholders is necessary to reduce food and agriculture emissions in order to meet international climate targets.

We call on COP delegates to support the following actions:

- **The UNFCCC must acknowledge the largest contributors to climate change in food and agriculture and provide technical assistance** for parties to integrate food and agriculture into NDCs. This should be guided by the stark realities and opportunities for large-scale action laid out in the IPCC 1.5 degrees C report with a focus on addressing meat and dairy consumption and production. UNFCCC conference food service should reflect these priorities and minimize its own contribution to the climate crisis with plant-forward menus and a commitment to zero food waste.

- **Global climate and development policies must work together to promote sustainable diets and systems of food production** to achieve accelerated emissions reductions and the SDGs, specifically Goals 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and wellbeing), 12 (responsible production and consumption), 13 (combat climate change and its impacts), and 15 (life on land). This should include creating national guidelines for sustainable and healthful diets that recognize the links among dietary patterns, environmental impact and food security and encourage individuals and institutions to shift toward diets higher in plant-based foods and lower in animal-based foods.

- **Government must take bold steps to internalize the costs of livestock production**, including to the global climate, and end tax and other incentives for growing feed crops. Governments should identify and remove or redirect subsidies and fiscal policies for practices that threaten the Paris Agreement and that have negative impacts on forests, other ecosystems, soils, water and overall resilience to the effects of global warming. Shifting financial incentives from livestock production to more sustainable agriculture also means investment in development of alternatives to animal-based protein, including plant-based proteins and cellular meat and creating a regulatory environment to support such innovation.

[9] Bajželj, B., Richards, K. S., Allwood, J. M., Smith, P., Dennis, J. S., Curmi, E., & Gilligan, C. A. (2014). Importance of fooddemand management for climate mitigation. Nature Climate Change, 4(10), 924-929.

- **Governments and international meetings must host dialogues between different governmental departments** (including Agriculture, Environment, Climate, Forests and Health/Nutrition) to ensure policies are aligned and not being jeopardized by measures or regulations taken in other departments. In addition, departments should be aligned on public education campaigns to raise awareness of the climate consequences of meat and other animal-based foods production and consumption and inform people about the health and other co-benefits of plant-centered diets.

- **Governments must shift procurement to encourage and demonstrate low GHG pathways**. Governments are often the largest buyers of food products, for example for schools, state institutions like hospitals and government ministries, and militaries. They should put priority on purchasing low GHG foods (mainly vegetables, fruits, legumes, and grains) and by doing so help transform national and global food-supply chains and priorities.

Policies working across the food system — including shifting dietary choices and reducing food loss and waste — improve land-use management, food security and the ability to reduce emissions. Sustainable food policies can also increase climate resilience, help eradicate poverty, improve public health and protect biodiversity.

This brief was prepared by Brighter Green and Center for Biological Diversity in partnership with the Food and Climate Alliance.

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