

Meat industry's worst nightmare could become a reality

By Roberto A. Ferdman, Washington Post

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is preparing to release the latest version of the government's influential dietary guidelines this year, and there could be a major change that accelerates the trend of Americans eating less meat.

The guidelines, which are updated every five years, have traditionally advised Americans about healthy eating choices, eating choices which, until now, have only reflected what the government views as a diet that is healthy for humans. But the panel that advises the government is pushing for the recommendations to reflect what is healthy for the environment, too. Given the huge carbon footprint of meat production, making this change would almost certainly entail lowering the official, government-recommended intake of meat.

Americans, though they are eating less meat than they have in the past, are still fond of steaks, hamburgers, and chicken wings. And the environmental impact of that diet is significant. Carnivores contribute far more to environmental decay than do vegetarians. The livestock industry is responsible for an estimated 15 percent of total global carbon emissions, roughly two-thirds of which is the result of beef production. On a per kilogram basis, the carbon footprint of lamb and beef production is unparalleled.

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