

Subject: The veterinary profession's role in sustainability

Thank you for serving on the AVMA House of Delegates. I was excited to hear that the Veterinary Information Forum would be discussing the topic of sustainability, specifically the greening of veterinary workplaces. I also wanted to discuss the more significant role the veterinary profession can play by addressing animal agriculture and other forms of animal exploitation. As experts in animal welfare, and whom legislators turn to set policy related to animals, we can play a vital role in addressing public health and the environment by advocating for the interests of all the species we serve.

The veterinary support group, Our Honor, just released an executive summary to the AVMA House of Delegates that we hope you will consider. (Visit <http://avmahod.ourhonor.org>)

Feeding 10 billion people by 2050 without destroying our planet requires a shift in our food system. Innovation revolutionized how we raise animals for food, allowing us to produce more meat, milk, and eggs than nature ever intended. At the same time, publicly funded marketing campaigns led to a drastic increase in the public's consumption of animal products. In 1961, we consumed 50.6 lbs of meat per person per year, growing to 264 lbs per person per year in the United States in 2020.

According to the UN FAO, global livestock production accounts for 14.5% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Currently, we feed 36% of crops grown to livestock. Ultimately, only 12% of those calories contribute to the human diet. Growing food directly for human consumption requires only one-quarter of the agricultural land used today and would cut food emissions and water pollution in half.

Most recently, the New York Times revealed that the Colorado River, supplying 40 million Americans, is running low, and 56% of its flow goes to produce livestock feed. Feed, alfalfa, and grass hay irrigation accounts for 23% of all water usage nationally.

A February 2022 review in Science, out of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, points out, "High-density livestock operations can serve as an opportune environment for spillover from wild animals into livestock or as incubators for pandemic influenza strains ... Large pig and poultry farms are where the genetic re-assortment needed to source pandemic influenza strains may most likely occur." They estimate that the cost of taking action to prevent pandemics is 1/20th of the cost of the lives lost due to the disease, and prevention starts with addressing our relationship with animals and the natural world.

While ruminants can use non-arable land for protein production, this requires the grazing of habitats, threatening native flora and fauna, contributing to the spread of highly flammable grasses such as cheatgrass and red brome—ultimately increasing wildfires. During the 2020 wildfires in Washington, more than 50% of the state's pygmy rabbits and 30-70% of the greater sage grouse and sharp-tailed grouse perished. Yet despite the environmental toll, livestock grazed exclusively produce barely 1% of our global protein supply. If the United States replaced milk and beef with plant-based alternatives, this would free around 700 million acres of land.

In a July 2023 Viewpoint article in JAVMA, Jacey Cerda and Dr. Tracy Webb point out the loss of 69% of our mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish between 1970 and 2018, as well as the loss of 83% of wild animal biomass due to ecosystem degradation, saying "Seventy-five percent of marine fish stocks are fully exploited, overexploited, or depleted." Over 85% of wetlands have disappeared, and extreme weather conditions due to climate change will worsen these losses.

The veterinary profession has embraced technology and innovation, such as new medications, genetic selection, feed additives, automation, and robotics, to increase animal agriculture's production efficiency drastically. Technology now allows us to remove animal slaughter from protein production altogether. The veterinary profession has the expertise and, thus, the obligation to raise awareness about the harms of animal agriculture and facilitate a shift in our food production by supporting policies that protect animals while facilitating the accessibility and affordability of plant-based and animal-free food. Everyone deserves the choice to feed themselves and their families delicious, affordable meals without having to harm animals or the environment.

I would love to hear your thoughts on how the AVMA can take a leadership position in this area. Thank you for everything you do for the animals.