

# The Saskatchewan Hay and Pasture Report

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## **Eat Meat Free One Day a Week?**

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According to what you read on some environmental group websites, eating meat free one day a week will save the world from a changing climate. However, simplistic solutions are easy to put on bumper stickers and fund raising letters, but rarely take all the factors into account.

Let's put some critical thinking skills to work.

Eating less meat (protein) likely means people will choose another protein source such as beans, lentils, or grains. Does that actually mean less greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are produced? World Wildlife Fund Canada thinks the answer is yes. They reference a 2006 study from the University of Chicago that takes a look at the energy footprints of different dietary choices.

This energy/carbon footprinting is complex and a relatively new technique for energy efficiency measurement of primary food production. There are many challenges such as having access to quality data and knowing how to set the boundaries of the work to name a couple. I confess to becoming a bit sceptical when the study authors started using broad statements such as 'per unit protein produced, meat production requires 6 to 17 times as much land as soy'. Do they really understand how livestock is raised and more importantly that all land is not created equal? Perhaps there is a grad student out there with interest and time to critically review this paper.



*Native prairie pasture  
Photo Credit: Sandra Knoss*

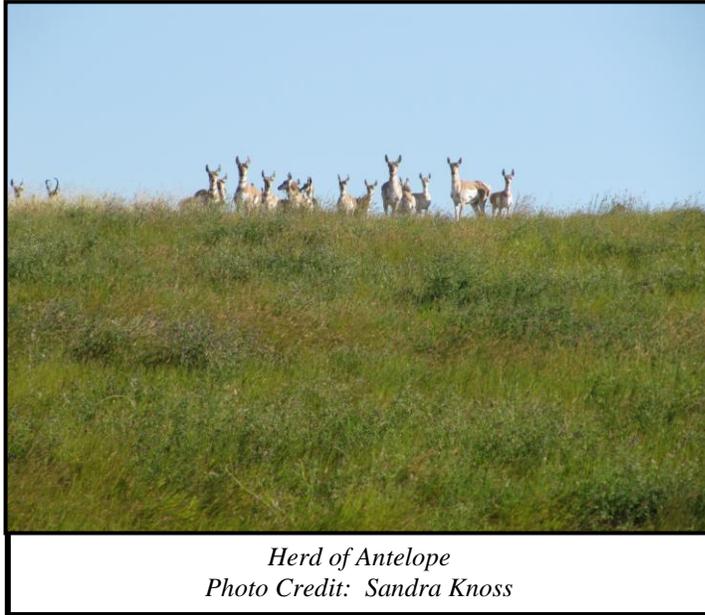
However, true or not, that comparison of land used for different foods does bring to light an important point. The major component in a bovine's diet is grass and forages. Beef cows will

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spend at least 90 per cent of their time on pastures which sequester carbon. The cattle that are grown for beef graze about 80 per cent of their time. They are eating some grain in feedlots for the last 20 per cent. No matter which way you think about it those Canadian cattle are living on native grasses or a domestic perennial grass which can't be digested by people. It is also important to note that all of that land which is generating an economic return and keeping rural communities viable is also valued wildlife habitat.



*Herd of Antelope  
Photo Credit: Sandra Knoss*

So if we take the advice of environmental groups like World Wildlife Fund Canada or the David Suzuki Foundation and decrease our meat consumption, what land use changes might we expect? It seems unlikely the answer is more conservation acreage. In all likelihood the demand for beans and lentils would cause native grassland to be converted to cultivated fields.

To keep a native prairie grass ecosystem healthy it needs a grazing animal. Research has shown that Canadian prairie grasses evolved under disturbances like fire and grazing animals. That ecosystem needs disturbance to maintain healthy

function. Knowledge from the scientific community and modern technology is helping cattle producers become more sophisticated in their pasture and range management. That management in turn supports ecosystem health.

Cattle are moved between pastures to keep them eating lush grasses. Those are easier to digest and so produce less GHG. Keeping those grassland ecosystems healthy means there is higher quality habitat for song bird populations and other wildlife.

So we are doing more with less. More wildlife habitat, more healthy functioning grasslands, more carbon sequestration, more efficient cattle so less GHG emissions.

Now tell me again how eating less meat will save the world?