Thomas Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave
SW Washington, DC 20250

January 4, 2024

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write with concern that the Department of Agriculture is disregarding the science on the climate cost of meat and dairy in high-consuming countries like the United States, and advancing the industries that are driving agricultural emissions.

At COP 28, you were quoted as saying you "don't hear much" about reducing meat consumption as a climate strategy.[1]

But the need to address consumption of high-emissions foods was featured at the conference, and the United States bears a responsibility to incorporate this into its climate strategy.

In addition to numerous panels discussing this topic at COP 28, the United States joined more than 150 nations in signing the Emirates Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action,[2] which includes a pledge to "work collaboratively and expeditiously" to:

> "*Maximize the climate and environmental benefits – while containing and reducing harmful impacts – associated with agriculture and food systems by conserving, protecting and restoring land and natural ecosystems, enhancing soil health, and biodiversity, and* ***shifting from higher greenhouse gas-emitting practices to more sustainable production and consumption approaches****…"*

Furthermore, during the first-ever Food, Agriculture and Water Day at COP, which you personally attended, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization launched a highly publicized roadmap[3] to align food systems with the Paris Agreement that states:

> "***High consumption of food products with high GHG footprints in some locations contribute unnecessarily to the emissions of agrifood systems****…The issue is to know not 'if' diets should change – for they absolutely must for human and planetary health – but how to obtain these results."*

The FAO roadmap specifically identifies the inclusion of environmental considerations in national dietary guidelines as well as the importance of improving school food and public procurement programs as effective government actions.

Meat and dairy have significantly higher GHG footprints than other foods across all production systems.[4, 5] According to the Environmental Protection Agency, animal agriculture via enteric fermentation and manure pollution, is the largest domestic source of methane, a greenhouse gas up to 86 times more potent than carbon in the short term.[6] The United States recognized the importance of rapidly reducing methane emissions when it co-launched the Global Methane Pledge in 2021.[7]

The leading authorities on climate science have highlighted reducing meat consumption as a climate strategy for years. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change not only identified dietary shifts, including meat reduction, as a vital climate mitigation strategy needed to meet the urgent emissions-

reduction targets but emphasized the urgency to act.[8] Research has shown that even if the energy sector immediately became climate-neutral, we still would not be able to achieve the reductions necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change without reducing meat and dairy consumption.[9]

Additionally, the Kuming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework for the Conference on Biodiversity reaffirms the need to reduce animal protein under Target 16.[10] Reducing animal protein is specifically named in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Global Species Action Plan to achieve the Kunming-Montreal goals.[11] Studies show that climate and biodiversity action must be aligned and failing to do so impedes our ability to address either crisis and further threatens food security.[12, 13]

Food and agriculture make up one-third of global greenhouse gases,[14] mostly from meat and dairy, even though these resource-intensive foods only make up 18% of calories[15, 16] These high-emissions foods are also the leading driver of deforestation and biodiversity loss[17] and a key source of water pollution and accelerated spread of disease,[18] posing a severe risk to public health, particularly in marginalized communities, and making it even harder for farmers to adapt to climate change.

The science shows sustainable dietary shifts are key in high-consuming nations like the United States.[19,20,21] Changes to production alone are not enough.[22,23, 24] According to the FAO, the United States is one of only a small handful of countries where consumption exceeds 220 pounds of meat per person per year.[25] Cutting 90% of U.S. beef consumption and replacing half our consumption of other meats with plant-based foods would save more than 2 billion tons of greenhouse gases from being released by 2030[26] — equivalent to taking nearly half the world's cars off the roads for a year.[27, 28]

The United States must take a leading role in reducing food system emissions with strategies that address both production *and* consumption of animal-based foods.

The USDA has repeatedly been urged by scientists (including its own scientific advisory committees), environmental experts, and public health advocates over the past decade to address excessive meat and dairy consumption in food and nutrition policy.[29,30] But the United States has fallen far behind other G20 nations[31] in even taking the first step of incorporating sustainability into the national dietary guidelines.[32] Under your leadership, the USDA has instead relied on false solutions such as feed additives, which have minimal impact in reducing emissions and aren't scalable, and biogas, which worsens the problem of pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.[33, 34, 35, 36] Improving agricultural production is only one piece of the puzzle, and ignoring dietary shifts in consumption creates an ineffective and weak climate response.[37,38]

We call on the USDA to take the following actions:

1. Immediately make meat and dairy reduction a key part of USDA's climate strategy by acknowledging the role of consumption in climate mitigation and identifying opportunities to support and incentivize dietary shifts.
2. Align food and climate goals in all USDA programs and policies, including by increasing access to healthy, plant-based foods in the school meal program.
3. Integrate sustainability into the Dietary Guidelines for Americans with an emphasis on plant-forward dietary patterns.

COP28 demonstrated that mitigating food system emissions is a critical part of meeting the goals set by the Paris Agreement. The USDA has the opportunity and responsibility to guide U.S consumers, institutions, food producers and providers toward reducing meat consumption to more sustainable levels.

The role of sustainable U.S. agriculture is crucial in the race to meet global climate targets and national preparedness.[39] The USDA must address meat and dairy consumption as part of its climate strategy.

Signed,

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