

## Food Facts

# Eat Green: Our everyday food choices affect global warming and the environment

What we eat matters. The food choices we make every day have a big effect on the environment. The good news is

that even small changes in what we buy and eat can add up to real environmental benefits, including fewer toxic chemicals, reduced global warming emissions, and preservation of our ocean resources. Eating “green” can also mean eating fresher, healthier foods while reducing your grocery bill and supporting our farmers.



It's easy to overlook the environmental impacts of our food because they are spread across all stages of a long process. From farm to fork, food production, processing, and transportation can accumulate enormous amounts of energy, water, and chemicals. We offer the following suggestions to help you and your family make healthy, smart food choices:

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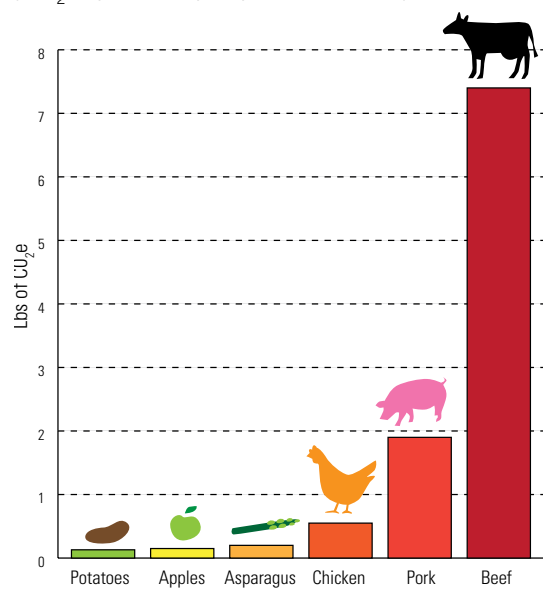
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### Global Warming Pollution Released by Producing Your Favorite Foods

(CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per pound of food)



### 1. Choose Climate-Friendly Food

Food that comes from high on the food chain or arrives to your plate after extensive processing tends to require more energy and release more global warming pollution into the air.

The “carbon footprint” of hamburger, for example, includes all of the fossil fuels that went into producing the fertilizer and pumping the irrigation water to grow the corn that fed the cow, and may also include emissions that result from converting forest land to grazing land. Meat from ruminant animals (cows, goats, and sheep) has a particularly large carbon footprint because of the methane (a potent global warming gas) released from the animals’ digestion and manure. NRDC estimates that if all Americans eliminated just one quarter-pound serving of beef per week, the reduction in global warming gas emissions would be equivalent to taking four to six million cars off the road.

Seafood can also contribute to significant global warming pollution. Open-ocean fishing fleets depend entirely on dirty fossil fuels, emitting an estimated 130 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> each year.<sup>1</sup> Highly sought-after large fish stocks like bluefin

Learn more! Check out the *OnEarth* magazine online feature story "Graze Anatomy" for a look at the future of the beef industry at <http://www.onearth.org/article/graze-anatomy>

tuna and imported swordfish are more likely to be overfished, resulting in additional sea travel and more global warming pollution. These fish are also high in mercury, which can be harmful to human health.

#### What you can do:

- Eat lower on the food chain by adding more fruits, vegetables, and grains to your diet and limiting your intake of red meat. This can reduce your risk of coronary disease and colorectal cancer, while reducing your grocery bill.<sup>2</sup>
- Choose locally caught, sustainably managed fish or herbivorous farmed stocks like tilapia, catfish, and carp.<sup>3</sup> Seafood lower on the food chain includes clams, mussels and squid. The Monterey Bay Aquarium website has a great guide to safe seafood, available at [www.seafoodwatch.org](http://www.seafoodwatch.org); Blue Ocean's "Fish Phone" can send instant recommendations to your cell phone (<http://www.blueocean.org/fishphone/index.html>).
- Look for fresh foods with the fewest process steps from farm to plate. Freezing, packaging, processing, cooking, and refrigerating food all increase energy use. One study reports that bringing home a frozen bag of carrots has nearly triple the associated global warming pollution relative to purchasing a fresh bunch.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Buy Organic and Other Sustainable Certifications

Eco-labels like USDA Organic and others give us a way to reward environmental performance in the marketplace. Organic agriculture, for example, is a safer choice for the environment and your family because organic growers don't use synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Pesticide use degrades air and water quality, while threatening the health of workers, farmers, and communities. Organic agriculture is also often better than conventional agriculture in reducing global warming pollution.

#### What you can do

- Buy organic and other certified foods when you can. Visit the Consumer Reports website at <http://www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/> for a review of what labels to look for.

## 3. Watch Your Waste

The USDA estimates that an astonishing 27 percent of all food (by weight) produced for people in the United States is either thrown away or is used for a lower-value purpose, like animal feed. A recent study estimated that the average household wastes 14 percent of its food purchases—a loss of significant value for most families.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the water, energy, pesticides, and global warming pollution that went into producing, packaging, and transporting this discarded food, nearly all of this waste ends up in landfills where it releases even more heat-trapping gas in the form of methane as it decomposes.<sup>6</sup>

#### What you can do:

- Purchase foods that you can consume before they expire to help minimize food waste and shrink your grocery bill.
- Compost your food waste, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the need for synthetic fertilizer.

## 4. Eat Locally

A typical American meal contains ingredients from five foreign countries, and even domestically grown produce travels an average of 1,500 miles before it is sold.<sup>7</sup> Buying locally can help reduce the pollution and energy use associated from transporting, storing and refrigerating this food—that's especially true for food that is imported by airplane, including perishables such as cherries, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, tomatoes, bell peppers, and asparagus. In California, which imports food distributed throughout the nation, NRDC estimates that the smog-forming emissions from importing fruits and vegetables are equivalent to the annual emissions from 1.5 million cars.

#### What you can do:

- Choose local food options whenever possible and avoid purchasing food imported by airplane. But keep in mind that the type of food and how it was produced may be of greater environmental significance.

<sup>1</sup> Bijal Trivedi, "What is Your Dinner Doing to the Climate?," *New Scientist*, Sept. 11, 2008, available at: <http://www.newscientist.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony J. McMichael, et. al., "Food, livestock production, energy, climate change, and health," 370 *Lancet* 1253, 1256 (2007), available at: [http://www.eurekalert.org/images/release\\_graphics/pdf/EH5.pdf](http://www.eurekalert.org/images/release_graphics/pdf/EH5.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See Trivedi, endnote 1

<sup>4</sup> [http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Document.aspx?Document=EV02007\\_4601\\_FRP.pdf](http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Document.aspx?Document=EV02007_4601_FRP.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Harrison, "Study: Nation Wastes Nearly Half Its Food," *Univ. of Ariz. News*, Nov. 18, 2004, available at: <http://uanews.org/node/10448>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Martin, "One Country's Table Scraps, Another Country's Meal," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2008 (citing a 1997 study by the USDA's Economic Research Service, available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/FoodReview/Jan1997/Jan97a.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> NRDC, "Eat Local: Does Your Food Travel More than You Do?," <http://www.nrdc.org/health/foodmiles/>