

# The Letter for LESS and BETTER for livestock farming in the Grand Est

Rédaction  
Anne Vonesch

**We are writing to you again on issues relating to livestock farming, as there will be a vote on this subject on 16 November.** We believe that it is essential for the Region's programme to be truly coherent in terms of climate, nature, animals and health. Focusing on competitiveness and energy is not enough. Sustainability must be built on a much broader horizon.

The approach of the Chambers of Agriculture and the government is guided by the observation that **the share of imports in total consumption is too high** (in brackets the variation 2022/2021), i.e.: for pork 29% (+ 7.9%), for beef 21% (+ 22.9%), for sheep 54% (+ 7.9%), and for chicken 50% (+ 11.3%)<sup>1</sup>. The paradigm being promoted is that we need to win back the domestic market (which is logical) and to do this we need to maintain and develop livestock farming (including the bottom-of-the-range, low-cost factory farming). And export, export! Is this vision consistent with the issues at stake?

We don't think so. Compare it to fossil fuels. They are very convenient to use, and they are largely imported. But is it sustainable to replace them with domestic energy sources without at the same time reducing global energy consumption? No. **Sobriety is unavoidable. The same is true for animal proteins.**

Let's look at the impact of livestock farming using the concept of **externalities**. An externality refers to the fact that an economic agent creates external effects, useful or harmful to others, without being compensated for them, i.e. without paying the price for the impacts caused.

They would have us believe that livestock farming generates many **positive externalities**, in short, that livestock farming is not the problem but the solution. They talk about "packages of services", economic, environmental and social. *"If livestock farming stops, the grasslands will be turned over"* is the threat we hear. Yet grasslands protect water quality and landscapes, and have biodiversity potential. Even if the Grand Est is not Brittany, the challenges of nitrates, biodiversity, water and pesticides are all present.

**If we want to keep the positive externalities and reduce or even eliminate the negative externalities of livestock farming, the solution is clear: LESS and BETTER.**

The assumption that supply should follow demand, even if that demand increases, is a **serious mistake**. In the face of global warming, production AND demand MUST fall, just as it is the case for fossil fuels. The system, governance, advertising, agribusiness and the agri-food industry all need to take account of the urgent need for environmental protection, health and social justice. **Eating habits are constantly evolving**, adapting to fashion, plethora or scarcity. There's a lot of talk about innovation. So let's innovate, by bringing our knowledge of externalities closer to our knowledge of what's on the plate:

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<sup>1</sup> DRAAF Note de conjoncture

# Externalities or hidden costs of livestock farming

**The external costs of our food** can include human health, the environment including loss of biodiversity, the economy including imports and subsidies, job insecurity and working conditions, malnutrition and subjective well-being. It has been estimated that food would be three times more expensive if the costs were internalised<sup>2</sup>. The FAO estimates the hidden costs of the food system on a global scale at \$12,700 billion (2020), or an average of 10% of GDP, with the consequences for health coming first, followed by the environmental impact.

**Prices that are too low because they do not reflect the real costs** of food create **market distortions**. They encourage the consumption, and therefore the production, of more deceptively cheap products with their deleterious impacts, and discourage the purchase of products that generate fewer negative externalities but are sold at higher prices.

**The highest external environmental costs are those relating to animal products.** There is a consensus on this. Animal feed crops consume fertilisers and pesticides and have an impact on biodiversity. Imported soya is linked to deforestation. Ruminants emit methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. Ammonia emissions from livestock effluent are harmful to health. Excess nitrogen generates eutrophication and acidification. Industrial poultry and pig buildings are heated and ventilated. Animals, feed, inputs and products are transported, often long distances. The impact of processing and preserving animal products is greater than that of plant products.

**These external costs are calculated using a Life Cycle Assessment.** Each type of impact is quantified and multiplied by the chosen monetisation factor (e.g. between €25 and €500/tCO<sub>2</sub> emitted)<sup>3</sup>. This corresponds to the cost of repairing and/or preventing damage. These results are added together. A German study<sup>4</sup> calculates **an average greenhouse gas cost for animal products of €2.41/kg of product (excluding other impacts)**. Organic farming is always more favourable; the difference with conventional farming is particularly marked for crops. A Swiss thesis estimates that **the cost in terms of biodiversity** even exceeds that of the climate<sup>5</sup>. When we try to **put a monetary value on animal suffering**, the hidden costs explode, particularly for poultry because of the large number of animals suffering; one 'moderate'<sup>6</sup> study estimates it at around €4/kg live weight of chicken.

**A fundamental impact, often overlooked, is that of land use.** According to the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME)<sup>7</sup>, the amount of land used per person varies from > 5,200m<sup>2</sup> for a meat-rich diet (170g/day) to almost 1,200m<sup>2</sup> for a vegan diet. In the case of the meat-rich diet, 85% of the total area is devoted to meat production. Meat-free diets use slightly more land for cereals, vegetables and fruit, but the difference is very small compared with the land saved on meat and milk.

**In Europe, >60% of cereals used are for animal feed.** This figure alone shows that the number of livestock is unsustainable. If imported soya is replaced by protein crops grown in Europe, the area used for livestock farming will explode even further. To improve our trade balance AND our health, we need to produce our own fruit and vegetables! And how, with what land, can we feed a bio-economy and encourage biodiversity?

**What about the biodiversity of meadows? It requires extensive meadows and lots of grazing, with low stocking rates.** Intensification of grassland management impoverishes it. Each mowing kills the majority of arthropods; harvesting techniques need to be improved. Let's get away from zero grazing, which is normal for fattening calves and young cattle, and increasing for dairy cows!

**And public money spent for livestock farming?** "LESS and BETTER" proposals in the next Letter...

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<sup>2</sup> [United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021 : The True Cost and True Price of Food](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Environmental Prices Handbook EU28 version 2018](#)

<sup>4</sup> [M Pieper et al : Calculation of external climate costs for food highlights inadequate pricing of animal products](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Alessa Perotti: Moving towards a Sustainable Swiss Food System: An Estimation of the True Cost of Food in Switzerland ...](#)

<sup>6</sup> [L S M Vissers et al : A method for calculating the external costs of farm animal welfare based on the Welfare Quality Protocol](#)

<sup>7</sup> ADEME : Empreintes sol, énergie et carbone de l'alimentation