

Cows have smaller 'footprint' than believed

In April of this year, we reported that recent scientific studies cleared cows from erupting more greenhouse gasses (GHG) than all of the trucks, planes, trains and automobiles combined; well it's true, the cows are cleared!

That's good news for everybody because it just didn't make any sense in the first place, or should I say no AgSense? A group of experts at the University of Arkansas who study these so-called Life Cycle Assessments (LCA), looked at what the true footprint is of a product such as a gallon of milk, or a light bulb for that matter, determined that the footprint of fluid milk is only 2 percent of the total GHG emissions in the United States, not 18 percent as had been reported erroneously elsewhere. It's amazing though that this good news never hit the mainstream media as did the other report!

So anybody who, based on this "quack shack" science, decided to reduce their daily intake of milk or meat in order to save the planet can breathe again. I mean literally! No need for milk-less Mondays! As a matter of fact another study just released in Food & Nutrition Research compares the nutrient density of milk to several other beverages and their impacts on the environment (footprint), and concluded that milk is twice as good as any other beverage (including juices, beer, wine or soda's) in providing nutrients while protecting the environment. I guess mom was right after all; it makes sense!

What is really interesting to see in some of these LCA's is that across the board, the transportation and distribution part of the product is usually the smallest piece of the pie. In other words, from "cradle to grave" as it's called, the smallest contribution or impact to the environment results from transportation and distribution of the product.

This fact completely kills the argu-

ment of "save the planet, buy local."

Granted there may be different valid reasons to buy local, but not that of saving the environment. Now, if you think about that for a minute, this too makes a lot of sense, AgSense if you will: to grow a certain product in your backyard may take you many more resources, because of the scale at which you produce it, or because it is not the proper place (as in climate or soil type) to grow it in, or you may not have the proper expertise or tools to do so and waste much energy growing it, or many more reasons with the same bottom-line; your backyard may not be the most efficient place to convert these resources to that product.

Ultimately it all does come down to efficiency; how many resources did it take to produce a certain product? What is the product's footprint in terms of water, energy, carbon, land, etc.? Efficient production is sustainable production regardless of the scale because efficient production produces a product with the least amount of environmental impact at a price at which the producer also can be sustained economically.

In June, Stanford Scientists reported in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, that without the improved yields obtained in agriculture in the last 150 years, it is estimated that additional greenhouse-gas emissions from clearing land for farming would have been equal to as much as one-third of the world's total output of greenhouse gases since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in 1850. In other

words: the total amount of greenhouse gas sent into the atmosphere in the past 155 years would have been between 18 and 34 percent greater than it has been.

In response, many will refer to organic production as the panacea and criticizing organic agriculture often suggests antipathy for organic agriculture. The facts however are irrefutable and serve as a roadmap to put this production method in its legitimate scientific place. Because of lower efficiencies, organic production methods will utilize additional resources and have a larger environmental impact or footprint. Cornell scientists in 2008 calculated that in order to reach current levels of production in the U.S. utilizing organic production practices, the U.S. dairy herd would have to grow an additional 25 percent, while 30 percent additional land resources would be needed. This is not to say that organic production doesn't have a place at the table, and that the production methods don't hold any merit.

In conclusion, what does all this mean? Well, to put it plain and simple: in 1800, one family farm could only supply food for one other family on average, while in the U.S. today, with its highly efficient agriculture, farmers make up only 2 percent of our population, but each farmer can feed, on average, 125 other people. And the bottom line? These folks have just confirmed what many of our producers have been saying for years — that science and technology provide the efficiencies needed to feed a hungry world while minimizing the impact on our environment! Now that makes sense ... AgSense!

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AG SENSE



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