

Vets must support meat reduction for the benefit of people, the planet and animals

Steven McCulloch argues that national veterinary associations must advocate for a 50 per cent meat reduction target by 2050 to meet their duties to public health, animal welfare and the environment.

OUR world faces converging crises of planetary health. Without urgent action, global heating is projected to exceed 2–3°C this century, bringing cascading threats to ecosystems, food security and human health. Animal agriculture is a leading driver of greenhouse gases, deforestation and freshwater use, and the global food system is the primary cause of biodiversity loss, threatening around 86 per cent of species at risk of extinction.¹

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) poses one of the greatest challenges to modern medicine. Around 70 per cent of antimicrobials globally are used in food-producing animals, with intensive systems recognised as a key driver.²

Large, dense animal populations amplify the risks of zoonotic pandemics. Alongside this is the moral catastrophe of billions of sentient farmed animals suffering short, restricted lives within intensive production systems.

The veterinary profession is science based, with duties to protect animal welfare, public health and the environment. Our responsibility is not only to ensure safe, nutritious food, but to safeguard animal welfare, public health and planetary stability. But across the world, are national veterinary associations meeting these duties?

Independent expert bodies are clear that substantial reductions in meat consumption are essential to remain within safe planetary boundaries.^{3,4} The EAT-Lancet 2.0 report calls for a 50 per cent global reduction in red and processed meat by 2050 to safeguard human and planetary health.³ In the UK, the Climate Change Committee (CCC) recommends a 35 per cent

reduction in total meat consumption and a 40 per cent reduction in beef and lamb by 2050.⁴ These recommendations are not anti-farming but pragmatic, anthropocentric measures to protect public health, promote food justice and safeguard the environment for future generations. The global human population has grown from 1.5 billion in 1900 to over 8 billion today, and per capita meat consumption has risen dramatically. Meat is historically cheap, but that affordability carries immense public health, ecological and moral costs.

To mitigate and reverse climate change and species extinction, and to ensure food justice, substantial demand-side change is required. Reduced meat consumption is also critical for higher welfare farming, lower antimicrobial use, reduced zoonotic risk and less deforestation pressure. Meat reduction simultaneously addresses all major crises – planetary, human and animal.

Despite this, across the world no national veterinary association has adopted a quantified meat-reduction target. Given the role of the veterinary profession, the converging crises we face, and the importance of quantified targets in policy, there is a danger our profession is seen to have a conflict of interests, or even be outright captured by the farming industry.

In the UK, BVA's reference to 'less and better'⁵ at least recognises the meat consumption problem. Despite this, its position is not quantified and falls short of scientific recommendations. The BVA policy further qualifies its position by describing it as some citizens reducing consumption, 'while maintaining proportional spend' on higher animal health and welfare products.⁵ In effect, the BVA's position supports meat reduction only if industry profits remain stable. The policy appears to prioritise industry economic interests above others.

Worldwide, veterinary bodies cite growing global demand for meat as justification for increased production. But policies that encourage cheap meat increase consumption, intensify farming and worsen welfare and environmental outcomes. We are a profession of scientists, not economists, and our policies have neglected to account for cheap meat stimulating higher consumption through price elasticity of demand. Promoting low-cost intensive systems is perpetuating the very human, animal and planetary crises on which we should be speaking with professional and scientific authority.

The EAT-Lancet Commission, the UK CCC and the UN Environment Programme all call for transformational, science-based change. Rather than accepting demand as fixed, our profession should be leading the public conversation on dietary change. By failing to adopt quantified targets and continuing to support cheap meat, the veterinary profession is exacerbating the very crises we have a fundamental duty to prevent: climate change, AMR, zoonotic diseases, biodiversity loss and the suffering of billions of animals.

Veterinary associations globally must adopt an approximate 50 per cent meat-reduction target as core policy and, where relevant, anchor it in national models (eg, CCC). They should integrate food system change and sustainability into curricula, demand transparency in industry ties, and push for procurement reform, fiscal measures and cross-sector collaboration.

If we fail, the public, governments and future generations will rightly question whether the veterinary profession upholds its duties to animal welfare, public health and the environment, or whether our independence has been compromised by livestock industry interests. ●

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References

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- 5 BVA. Position on UK sustainable animal agriculture. 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/2s46aarm> (accessed 29 December 2025)