

# Feedstuffs

## EWG report goes after 'feeding the world' rhetoric

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U.S. agricultural and agribusiness interests have been making the case that America's farmers will have to double their production of grain and meat to "feed the world" as the global population is expected to exceed 9 billion by 2050. However, a new report from the Environmental Working Group (EWG) looks to establish a more "accurate understanding of who exactly U.S. farmers are feeding," report author Craig Cox said.

The report challenges the notion that U.S. farmers and agribusinesses have a "moral imperative" to increase production domestically to address those growing world food needs. "I do think there are certain farmers that are motivated by the notion that they're feeding the world," said Cox, EWG senior vice president of agricultural and natural resources.

Cox said EWG's goal was to see whether U.S. farmers really do feed the world and if the "hungry world" really does depend on U.S. exports. EWG examined current agricultural export data in detail to determine who gets fed by U.S. agriculture and with what products. The group analyzed agricultural trade and production data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the international Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development and the U.N. Food & Agricultural Organization (FAO).

"The argument that we should accept the collateral damage from doubling U.S. production of grain and meat to satisfy a demand of this type hardly holds water," Cox wrote in the report. He said the rhetoric shouldn't stand in the way of making changes to the production system that are more environmentally friendly.

Most agricultural exports from the U.S. go to countries whose citizens can afford to pay for them. Meat and dairy products, along with animal feed, accounted for 50% of all U.S. agricultural exports to the top 20 destinations in 2015. Most of the top importers of U.S. exports had very high or high human development scores and low levels of hunger. Agricultural exports from the U.S. chiefly meet the demand for more meat and more diverse diets from already affluent countries or those with growing personal wealth, the report noted. Less than 1% of America's agricultural exports go to the 19 countries with the greatest levels of undernourishment.

"There is nothing wrong with what U.S. farmers are doing as they're responding to growing demand. However, the 'feeding the world' rhetoric seems to be more of a communications tool for political portions of agriculture engaged in shaping policy," the EWG report said.

The report cites the “agribusiness narrative” of promoting the “necessity of greatly increasing food production by American farmers by 2050” and lists quotations from Monsanto, American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Crop Insurance Services.

Dr. Margaret Zeigler, executive director of the Global Harvest Initiative, which is a private-sector voice for productivity growth throughout the agricultural value chain to sustainably meet the demands of a growing world, said assistance provided by American farmers and agribusinesses, in collaboration with U.S. development agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and USDA and humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations, has taken many forms over the past 70 years and continually evolves to meet the needs of a changing challenges in a more interconnected, market-based world.

She also noted how the reliable supply of affordable commodity grains helps America’s livestock farmers manage their costs and pass along the savings to lower prices of dairy, poultry and other high-protein products for the 300 million domestic consumers, “thereby relieving pressure on the global agriculture system to supply our own needs.”

The report recognized that U.S. agricultural production does affect food prices and cited how the 2012 drought caused food prices to increase 6%, which hit the hungriest nations the hardest. “U.S. production does help hungry populations by keeping food prices relatively low, but the United States cannot rely solely on its impact on prices to help feed the hungry,” the EWG report stated.

Zeigler noted, “U.S. farmers export a steady, high-quality supply of grains that help smooth out prices in Asia — a large importing region with a rising demand for protein and the feed required to raise livestock — and the production of these grains in the U.S. is accomplished with very low environmental impact compared with the production models of the 1970s and 1980s due to high-yielding seeds, precision agriculture systems and conservation practices that conserve soil, water and energy.”

The EWG report criticizes shipping grain overseas to feed to livestock in countries that are not necessarily undernourished. Elanco, which is focused on improving animal health and animal production worldwide, has worked with many undernourished countries to build up its own production systems.

Elanco spokeswoman Colleen Park Dekker stated, “While we believe every country can improve its production, not every one can or should be self-sufficient. From an environmental standpoint, many shouldn’t be. Growing food in highly productive areas where the resources exist, then moving it to areas of need, offers far more efficient use of resources.”

Park Dekker said transportation accounts for less than 4% of the environmental impact of food production. Most of the footprint is in the production itself. Plus, it’s cost effective. Refrigerated freight for a pound of meat to Asia adds just 15 cents, on average, to the cost.