# Dairy Industry Says Its Greenhouse Gas Emissions Lower Than Previously Reported: 2% of US Total

by Matthew McDermott, New York, NY on 09.24.10
**FOOD & HEALTH**

Let's take it as given that considering the flack dairy gets from segments of the green community for its environmental problems that this result is probably what the Innovation Center for US Dairy wanted, and move on: According to a new calculation of the carbon footprint of a gallon of milk in the United States, the emissions of the dairy industry are 2% of the nation's total, lower than previous studies have shown, Environmental Leader reports.

Part of that is overall improvement is ongoing reductions in carbon intensity of dairy production occurring over the past 75 years: From 1944 to 2007 the dairy industry's carbon footprint has been reduced 41% (MyPlainView)--and most recently the US dairy industry has committed to cutting back annual greenhouse gas emission related to fluid milk production 25% by 2020.

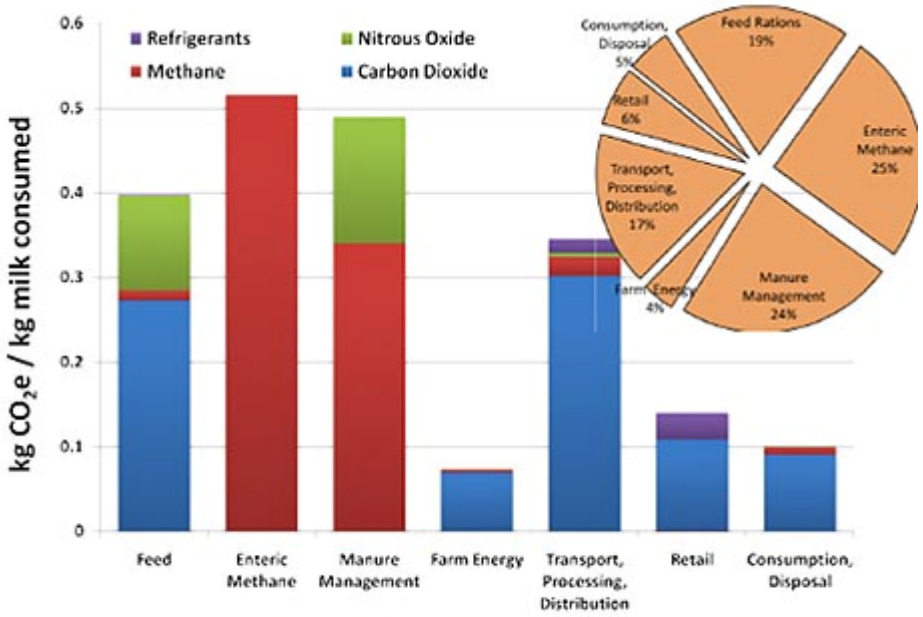


**Figure 1-3. Supply chain contribution to carbon footprint of 'generic' milk. Generic milk refers to regional-production-weighted (raw milk input) and purchase-volume-weighted (milk fat content) average milk consumed in the U.S. during 2007.**

The big thing the study found in cutting back on carbon from dairy, greater than where dairies are located, specific model or size of operation, is management of farms, processing plants and transportation--which a quick glance at the chart above tells you, with enteric methane and manure management being the greatest portion of milk's overall carbon footprint.

An example from the report:

> ...Prairieland Dairy, in Firth, Neb., which practices a zero-waste philosophy, makes fertilizer from cow manure and local organic material that is used on the farm and by local gardeners. In addition, byproducts from local food processors contribute to cow diets, including distiller's grain, leftover cereal mix and spent brewers grain from a nearby microbrewery.

Perhaps that's the exception rather than the current rule in dairy, but it is certainly the future, as is more farms installing biogas processors to turn methane gas into electricity.

**Dairy Has Lower Carbon Footprint That Red Meat, Fish - More Than Fruit & Veg, Grains, Poultry**
If nationwide stats are too broad for you and you want some guidance on making more low-carbon dietary choices, a study done by Brighter Planet earlier this year, broke down the greenhouse gas intensity per calorie from various food groups.

Red meat topped the list and between 11-12 grams CO2-equivalent per calorie, fish came in second at about 7.5 grams, dairy was slightly above 6 grams, vegetables came in at 6 grams and poultry/eggs marginally under that. At the bottom end of the scale, grains and nuts were both slightly under 3 grams per calorie, with fruits being about 4.5 grams.

*photo: a j via flickr*

**Carbon Footprint Only Part of The Picture**

As with any report on carbon footprint, that's only part of the environmental-ethical picture. Even if efficiency and management improvements reduced the carbon footprint of the dairy industry to nought that doesn't balance out the scale if there are still animal welfare issues to be resolved--something obviously beyond the field of view of this report, and for some people the trump card in assessing whether or not dairy is an ethical food, period.

Which is all to say, cheer or jeer the carbon footprint of dairy (or other foods) on its merits first--reductions here being a good thing unto themselves--then weigh against other issues, including health concerns, on your ethical balance.