

Food's climate footprint was once again MIA at global talks

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At the G7 summit and Bonn climate conference, world leaders failed to discuss "the cow in the room"



Antonio Masiello / Stringer / Getty Images

Last week, the leaders of the world's seven biggest economies convened in Italy to discuss several pressing global issues during the annual gathering known as the G7 summit. They [agreed to lend Russia's frozen assets to Ukraine](#), [pushed for a ceasefire in Gaza](#), and [pledged to launch a migration coalition](#).

Those discussions, which concluded Saturday, came right on the heels of the annual Bonn Climate Change Conference, which sets the foundation for the United Nations' yearly climate gathering. In Bonn, Germany, an enduring dispute over who should provide [trillions of dollars in climate aid](#) to poor nations once again ended with little progress toward a solution, dominating the agenda so much so that dialogues on other issues [often reverted back to financial debates](#).

Government heads at both conferences barely addressed what may be one of the most pressing questions the world faces: how to respond to the [immense role animal agriculture plays in driving climate change](#). This continues a pattern of evasion around this issue on the international stage, which [advocates and scientists](#) find increasingly frustrating, given that shrinking the emissions footprint of global livestock production and consumption is a needed step toward mitigating climate change.

"We're seeing, essentially, the cow in the room being ignored," said Stephanie Feldstein, population and sustainability director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "We're seeing these kinds of vague references to needing to shift diets, but still a refusal to call out animal agriculture as the leading cause, by far, of agricultural emissions, as well as other forms of environmental destruction in food and agriculture systems."

Although estimates vary, [peer-reviewed studies](#) have found that the global food system is responsible for roughly one-third of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. Animals raised for consumption generate [32 percent of the world's methane emissions](#), and agriculture is the largest source of anthropogenic methane pollution. Methane is the [second most abundant greenhouse gas](#) after carbon, and

it's 80 to 90 times more powerful than carbon in its first 20 years in the atmosphere. This is why [many scientists believe](#) that aggressively curbing humanity's methane pollution would be the [fastest way to slow planetary warming](#). And methane isn't the only environmental problem associated with meat and dairy. Even though animal agriculture provides 17 percent of the world's calories, it accounts for [80 percent of global agricultural land use](#) and [41 percent of global agricultural water use](#), which translates into [an outsize impact on biodiversity](#).

Despite the mountain of evidence establishing a connection between the food we eat and climate change, the subject has only recently begun to pop up at international conferences. The big breakthrough came at last December's U.N. climate conference, COP28, where more than two-thirds of countries in attendance, including the U.S. and the European Union, [pledged to take steps to reduce the colossal climate footprint of food systems](#). Around the same time, the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization, or FAO, unveiled its first-ever installment of [a roadmap for transforming the global food system](#) to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

However, the FAO roadmap [came under criticism](#) because its slate of proposed solutions almost entirely omitted the need to reduce human consumption of meat and dairy. [Some researchers later asked the FAO to retract its report](#), alleging that it [misrepresented their work](#) by minimizing reduced meat intake as a way to cut agricultural emissions.

The failure of delegates at COP28 to directly address the causal relationship between meat consumption and climate change was just repeated by G7 nations and the Bonn climate conference attendees. These failures show how “incredibly politically charged” this issue is in multinational gatherings dominated by [countries with very high rates of meat and dairy consumption](#), said Martin Frick, who heads up the World Food Programme's Berlin office.

“We are moving in the right direction, but we are not moving fast enough,” said Frick. “Unless we are really serious about food, and look at it from a systems approach, ask ourselves the hard questions and give ourselves the hard answers, I don't see how we can fix climate change.”

Still, some do see progress.

“Only six months ago, 159 governments at world-leader level made a commitment to incorporate food into their climate plans,” said Edward Davey, senior advisor of the Food and Land Use Coalition based at the World Resources Institute. The COP28 pledge includes incorporating the climate footprint of food into each country's “nationally determined contribution,” or [NDC](#) — a specific emissions target required by the [Paris Agreement](#).

Countries are expected to submit new NDCs by [next February](#), and Davey said those updates will indicate whether those countries are taking the pledge seriously.

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Until then, how the topic surfaces in international gatherings is the next best benchmark. “I wanted to see that food was genuinely getting its moment in the sun in the climate talks,” said Davey. “And I think what we saw was that the Bonn talks were largely focused on finance, and less on particular sectors.”

Food was not entirely absent from the G7 summit agenda. At the gathering in southern Italy, Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni announced the launch of the Apulia Food Systems Initiative, a climate and food policy aimed at investing in resilient food systems for poorer countries. It commits an undisclosed amount

of funding to strengthen agricultural climate adaptation, with [most aid allocated across the African continent](#), where [climate change is intensifying](#) food insecurity. The initiative will back a U.S. State Department-led crop research effort, a project to create more resilient coffee supply chains, and technical support for implementing the COP28 food and agriculture pledge into countries' NDCs.

Unsurprisingly, it does not include any projects to decarbonize animal agriculture. “Livestock is clearly a very good example of what wasn’t tackled directly, in the sense that there is no mention of livestock, *per se*,” said Francesco Rampa, head of the think tank European Centre for Development Policy Management’s sustainable food systems team, who assisted the Italian G7 presidency in developing the initiative. Rampa is quick to add that this is because the Apulia plan is structured to help poor nations that have negligible [emissions from animal agriculture](#), and not higher-income countries with sizable contributions — like the G7 countries themselves.

Past G7 food initiatives have [faced criticism](#) for limited clarity and accountability around finance pledges, for not reaching small farmers, and for failing to facilitate a transition to more sustainable and equitable food systems in the places they aim to aid. Multiple experts told Grist they don’t expect the new Apulia pledge to buck that trend.

“I’m skeptical of the ability of the international community to act in a way, with the urgency, that this whole issue requires,” said William Dietz, director of research and policy at the Global Food Institute at George Washington University. “We’ve got a generation of leaders like Nero who are fiddling while the world is burning.”