



STUDENTS
ORGANISING FOR
SUSTAINABILITY
UNITED KINGDOM

WHY BANNING BEEF IS NOT THE ANSWER

A RESPONSE TO UNIVERSITIES CALLING FOR A BAN OF BEEF ON UK CAMPUSES

This statement has been written by Student Eats (part of [SOS-UK](#)), with support from the [Eating Better](#) alliance, in response to the increasing number of universities considering whether or not to ban beef. We aim to explain why we do not support ‘no beef’ campaigns, what we advocate for instead, and some suggestions of how universities and colleges can lead the way in procuring and selling food that is good for the climate, good for wildlife and also good for the health and wellbeing of students.

The problem with banning beef

The global food system accounts for 20-30% of greenhouse gas emissions with meat and dairy being significant contributors¹. All animal proteins have a higher carbon impact than plant proteins and globally it is beef and lamb that contribute the most. It is easy to see why the natural conclusion could be to ban beef to achieve the biggest impact.

Whilst such campaigns may be well-intentioned, this is not the full picture. Food production methods, and their impact on climate and nature, vary from country to country and from farm to farm. There is just one thing that is consistent across the world: industrial agricultural farming (also called factory or intensive farming) has significant negative impacts on not only the climate but also on wildlife, animal welfare, farm workers, local communities and our health².

What we need to do is create a food environment where people are able to eat less and better meat and dairy; we would like to see people who are not vegetarian or vegan eating 50% less meat by 2030 and shifting to better produced meat for the remainder. Eating less meat shouldn't mean singling out beef. How meat and dairy, or any food for that matter, is produced is the critical information upon which to base dietary choices to avoid unintended consequences.

For example, most beef and lamb bred in the UK is not intensively farmed or grain fed and buying beef or dairy that has been grass fed on a mixed farm can reduce the use of inorganic nitrogen fertiliser; reduce the use of carbon fuels through mechanical cultivations; and improve soil health².

UK chickens on the other hand, which are often seen as a more environmentally friendly and healthier meat choice than beef, are predominantly factory farmed. Poultry overtook red meat sales for the first time in 2017 and now accounts for over 50% of meat consumption.



Eight hundred and fifty million chickens are reared for meat in the UK each year, 95% of these are reared in intensive indoor units. These chickens experience low animal welfare standards and consume vast amounts of grain contributing to deforestation with serious impacts on the climate, biodiversity and indigenous communities living on the land^{3,4}.

Less and better meat and dairy on campuses

It is critical that we move away from industrial animal farming, unsustainable fishing, plants grown in intensive monocultures and overly processed food towards a more sustainable and equitable food system that is not only good for the climate but also good for the soil, for farmers, for animals and for our health.

Rather than banning beef with no regard for where or how it was produced, we advocate buying and serving more seasonal and sustainably-produced vegetables, wholegrains and pulses whilst also following Eating Better's [Better by Half roadmap](#) by purchasing and serving 50% less meat by 2030 and shifting to [better produced meat](#) for the remainder.

A study of over 94,000 cafeteria meal choices has found that doubling the vegetarian options - from one in four to two in four - reduced the proportion of meat-rich purchases by between 40-80% without affecting overall food sales⁵.

We would like to see universities leading the way by committing to the following:

1. Offering more seasonal plant-based options, with this type of food being the default option
2. Sourcing all meat and dairy products from [better production](#) systems
3. Having meat and dairy reduction targets which are measured and reported on
4. Supporting professional training of chefs in healthy and sustainable food, including plant-based cooking and sourcing [better produced meat](#) and dairy
5. Checking for university investments in industrial livestock agriculture and, if they exist, supporting a campaign for [meat divestment](#) with reinvestment into regenerative agriculture that uses agroecological farming practices

“We believe students can, and should, lead the way on good food. Our research shows that many students want to choose diets that reduce their impact on the climate emergency and they need food that’s nutritious for their physical health and mental wellbeing. All students should have access to food that’s both good for them and good for the planet.”

Jamie Agombar, Executive Director at SOS-UK

How students and staff can help push for changes to the food sold and served on campus

- ✓ Get a progressive Good Food Policy adopted by your university or college, based on the [Eating Better roadmap](#) and the five commitments outlined above.
- ✓ Choose plant-based foods that are seasonal, local or Fairtrade and/or organic wherever possible. Consider using a local veg box scheme, buying from a zero-waste shop on campus if you have one, and if not try setting up a [buying group](#) with friends to bulk-buy more affordable wholefoods.
- ✓ Choose [better meat and dairy](#) (if you aren't vegetarian or vegan) that has been produced in the UK. If you do eat meat look out for organic and/or pasture-fed. Avoid processed meat products, only eat meat occasionally and change the proportion of meat-based meals to include a greater vegetable content. This applies whether you're cooking at home, eating out or buying food on the go.
- ✓ Choose fish (if you aren't vegetarian or vegan) that is sustainable by avoiding [red-rated fish](#) completely, and choosing [green-rated](#), [MSC](#), [ASC](#) or organic-certified fish wherever possible, and only eat it occasionally. This applies whether you're cooking at home, eating out or buying food on the go.
- ✓ Set up a loyalty scheme such as [Kale Yeah!](#) - trialed at Portsmouth University with support from Friends of the Earth - where the purchase of six vegan or vegetarian main meals earns a free meal which can be veggie, fish or meat.
- ✓ Choose to buy food from university or college caterers that have been awarded the [Food for Life Served Here](#) bronze award as a minimum.
- ✓ Avoid overly processed food, drinks and snacks that are commonly sold in single-use packaging and provide little nutritious value.
- ✓ Aim to only buy the food you need and if you have surplus freeze it or give it away to someone you know or share it via an app such as [OLIO](#).

FURTHER READING

1. Garnett, T., Smith, P., Nicholson, W., & Finch, J. (2016). Food systems and greenhouse gas emissions (Foodsource: chapters). Food Climate Research Network, University of Oxford. <https://foodsource.org.uk/book/export/html/4>
2. 'Field Guide For The Future' - report by RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, 2019. <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/rsa-field-guide-to-future.pdf>
3. 'We need to Talk About Chicken' - report by Eating Better, 2020. https://www.eating-better.org/uploads/Documents/2020/EB_WeNeedToTalkAboutChicken_Feb20_A4_Final.pdf
4. 'Winging It: How the UK's Chicken Habit is Fuelling the Climate and Nature Emergency - report by Greenpeace, 2020. https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Greenpeace_WingingIt.pdf
5. E Garnett, A Balmford, C Sandbrook, M Pilling, T Marteau. (2019). Impact of increasing vegetarian availability on meal selection and sales in cafeterias. <https://www.pnas.org/content/116/42/20923>

About Student Eats

[Student Eats](#) puts sustainable food at the heart of colleges and universities across the UK by empowering students to make changes towards a more sustainable and equitable food system. We do this by embedding sustainable food procurement, production, consumption, enterprise and education across campuses, curriculums and communities. Student Eats is a programme run by Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS-UK), a charity created from, and in partnership with, the National Union of Students. We are a member of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming; a member of Eating Better, the alliance accelerating action for less and better meat and dairy; and a member of the Nature Friendly Farmer Network.

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About Eating Better

[Eating Better](#) is an alliance of over 60 influential civil society organisations. The membership is comprised of organisations from sectors covering environmental sustainability, farming, animal welfare, social justice and health, all with a common interest in improving the way meat and dairy is produced and consumed.

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