

EUROPEAN LIVESTOCK VOICE DEBATES

“Is livestock really destroying the planet?”



Michael Scannell

Deputy DG, DG Agri,
European Commission

Andrea Bertaglio

Environmental journalist,
author of "In defense of meat"

Event report

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During a lively debate on a hotly contested topic, the Deputy Director General of DG AGRI, Michael Scannell outlined the need to avoid sweeping generalisations about livestock. He said that whilst there is still room for improvement, the European livestock sector has made a lot of progress in terms of environmental impacts and sustainability.

Pointing to the successes of Europe's agri-food sector, he said that this must not be overlooked, especially in terms of carbon sequestration and the contribution to rural communities in general, while expressing a hope that there would not be a call for Europe to end livestock farming completely. Scannell explained that livestock is both impacted by and has an impact on the climate, but he believes that EU livestock farming can meet the challenges outlined in the Farm to Fork strategy.

An environmental journalist turned author, Andrea Bertaglio informed participants that while investigating the environmental impacts of livestock farming and food, he felt compelled to share many of the facts he uncovered in a book entitled 'In difesa della carne' (In defense of meat). Encountering a large amount of bias against meat consumption and livestock through his work, he realised that often information or opinion put forward was often not supported by factual references.

Having spoken with many farmers during his research, he felt a growing desire to communicate on behalf of the sector, to explain impacts in a factual and clear way, as well as its key role in food production. He also highlighted that the huge disconnect experienced today between urban and rural life has led to negative opinions filling the void the livestock sector left by not telling its own story for so long.

Looking at the consumers' angle, Scannell pointed out that demands for higher environmental and sustainability aspects of the food we eat, may mean a higher price, even though the affordability of good high-quality foods remains a challenge for low-income families in Europe. He highlighted that true sustainability lies in the fine balance between the environmental, the economic and the social aspects. This is the approach the EU is taking, in particular in linking its policies and strategies of the Common Agricultural Policy, the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy.

Moving on to meat consumption, Bertaglio said that blanket statements that '*meat is bad for health*' are distorted and not based on fact. Like everything else, meat can be eaten as part of a varied and balanced diet. He highlighted that education on healthy diets and nutrition is key in this regard. Addressing the topic of lab or in-vitro meat, he highlighted that we don't yet know enough about the impacts of such production. If in general people are calling for healthy, natural and sustainably produced foods, it is difficult to understand why people would want a highly-processed lab-based concoction.

In a conclusion the speakers agreed that such debates around livestock and impacts on the planet really need to be based on facts, not on emotions, in order to ensure both balanced discussions and solutions. Scannell stressed that the livestock sector cannot turn a blind eye on changes needed and continue 'business as usual', but he added that the improvements made so far and ongoing innovation were a solid basis for further progress.

