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**Link** to the website

## COWS AND CLIMATE: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP, TOO OFTEN OVERSIMPLIFIED

In In recent years, **the public debate around meat, milk and climate change** has become increasingly heated. On the one hand, livestock farming is portrayed as one of the main drivers of greenhouse gas emissions; on the other, some argue that **feeding the world without livestock would be impossible** and that the role of cows and cattle in the climate debate is widely misunderstood. The truth, as is often the case, is neither black nor white, but a complex relationship that requires data, context and a science-based approach.

### *Progress in reducing emissions through innovation*

Livestock farming indeed contributes to **greenhouse gas emissions**, particularly through methane, a very powerful gas produced during the digestion of ruminants such as cows, sheep and goats through a process known as **enteric fermentation**, and released mainly through belching.

However, **the simple equation "more cows = more warming" does not tell the whole story**. There are four main sources of emissions associated with livestock farming that need to be considered together: **feed production and transport, land-use change, enteric fermentation in animals, and manure management.** By addressing these areas through practices such as more efficient feeding, improved animal health management, and the use of precision technologies in production, **the European Union has achieved a significant reduction in methane emissions from the livestock sector** in recent years, even as production has remained stable or even increased.

**In the dairy sector alone, for example, total methane emissions from livestock have decreased by around 21% since 1990**, despite continued production. Milk and dairy products remain essential to the European diet, providing high-quality protein, calcium and vital micronutrients. This shows that **achieving climate progress does not require a drastic reduction in animal numbers**: efficiency can be improved and environmental impacts reduced through science-based, innovative strategies.

### *Reducing emissions through a transition towards more efficient models*

The key challenge today is **how to further reduce the climate impact of milk and meat production while maintaining farm competitiveness** and the sector's productive capacity. The aim is not to deny the existence of emissions, but to understand **how the livestock sector can contribute constructively to global**

**climate goals without undermining food security**, the livelihoods of rural communities and the biodiversity of grazing areas.

**Reducing emissions does not mean dismantling livestock production**, but rather supporting it through **a transition towards more efficient, sustainable and resilient models**. The goal is not to "produce less at all costs", but **to produce better**, by leveraging innovation, more accurate management of animals and resources, and agricultural practices grounded in scientific evidence.

**Well-managed livestock systems can also play a positive role from an environmental perspective**. In particular, pasture-based and extensive grazing systems contribute to soil health, the maintenance of permanent grasslands and, under certain conditions, to **carbon sequestration**, while supporting essential ecosystem functions such as biodiversity and the **prevention of fires, land degradation and hydrogeological instability**. At the same time, well-designed confined, protected or precision-based systems can also stand out for their sustainability and efficiency, as they are able to **produce more with fewer resources** by leveraging technology, improved feed efficiency, animal health management and precision farming tools, thereby reducing emissions per unit of product.

***Recognising the key role of farmers and incentivising investment***

For this transition to be truly effective, **farmers must be enabled to become active parts of the solution**. Public policies and incentive schemes must acknowledge their central role and support the adoption of technologies, practices, and investments that reduce climate impacts without undermining the **economic sustainability of farms** or the **social fabric of rural areas**.

**Institutions and the research community play a crucial role in this process, particularly in developing effective public policies and advancing agricultural innovation**. This includes introducing feed additives to reduce emissions, as well as implementing more efficient manure management systems and precision farming approaches. **Cows and climate are undoubtedly linked, but this relationship cannot be reduced to simplistic slogans**. Livestock farming is part of the climate challenge. Yet it can also be part of the solution, especially when guided by science-based strategies, innovation, and a sustainable, integrated approach that considers environmental, economic, and social dimensions together.

**The future of meat and milk production will increasingly depend on an informed, balanced and pragmatic narrative**, one that moves beyond polarisation and labels, and focuses on real-world solutions capable of delivering **tangible benefits** for the climate, food systems and society alike.

*If you want to deepen this subject, you can follow the **Sustainable Livestock Intergroup's next event on February 12th, 2026**. To follow online, you must **register here**.*


# HOW ARE COWS AND CLIMATE REALLY RELATED?

## FOCUS ON EU DAIRY PRODUCTION

**12 FEBRUARY 2026 | 10.00 TO 11.30 AM**

**STRASBOURG EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT - ROOM LOUISE WEISS S3.5**

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