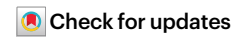


The Dublin Declaration on the Societal Role of Livestock



The practice of science in livestock-related disciplines is often confronted with paralyzing references to a scientific consensus that presents animal agriculture as a global problem that needs to be downsized rather than optimized – a claim amplified by some prominent voices in media, policy and academia. This is a regrettable situation because science generally does not advance by consolidation into consensus but by inquiry, dialogue and attempts at falsification. In the context of the role of animals in the twenty-first-century food system, we do not believe that any scientific consensus exists to begin with and certainly not with respect to considering certain foods such as red meat and dairy as inherently problematic. We cannot identify firm agreement among scientists, neither on the place of animal-sourced foods in human nutrition, the role of animal agriculture in achieving ecological balance, the contributions of livestock to livelihoods and societal prosperity, nor on the ethical aspects of animal production. In each of these fields, there are still huge benefits to be gained from sustained and vigorous discovery of more scientific evidence. Meat is

neither good nor bad; its societal impact is a net effect of praxis-dependent benefits and harms through mechanisms that need to be better understood. In current global food systems discussions, livestock and the multiple foods derived thereof are the constituents leading to contentious debates. This is likely not only due to the degree of both positive and negative effects imposed on individual health and the environment, but also because of their historical key role in human foodscapes, their symbolism, their cultural and economic capital, and the ethical reality that the animal needs to give its life in favour of the human species. Moreover, there is a widening gap between the often hyperbolic arguments displayed in contemporary discourse, including mass media and some high-level reports, and what the evidence is showing or not showing. Given the potential non-intended yet dramatic consequences a decimation of livestock and animal-source foods could have on society, in parallel with a shift towards an untested food system based on meat ‘alternatives’ and emerging high-tech options, a group of scientists – of which both authors were part – decided that

a comprehensive and interdisciplinary evaluation of the current state-of-the-art evidence on the matter was needed. To this end, the International Summit on The Societal Role of Meat was organized on 19 and 20 October 2022 in Dublin, Ireland, hosted by the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority (Teagasc). To create impact beyond the Summit, and “to give voice to the many scientists around the world who research diligently, honestly and successfully in the various disciplines in order to achieve a balanced view of the future of animal agriculture”, the organizing committee issued the Dublin Declaration of Scientists on the Societal Role of Livestock. Meanwhile, the declaration has been endorsed by almost a thousand scientists sharing our concerns – and is still open to receiving further signatures. In support of the declaration and as an outcome of the summit, a compilation of the evidence was published in a special issue ‘The societal role of meat’ on 15 April 2023 (compare with editorial²), dealing with the topics of nutrition and health^{3,4}, the environment^{5,6}, economics⁷, ethics⁸, alternatives⁹ and future outlooks¹⁰. Some of its key messages are listed in Fig. 1.

Role of meat and livestock in the food system

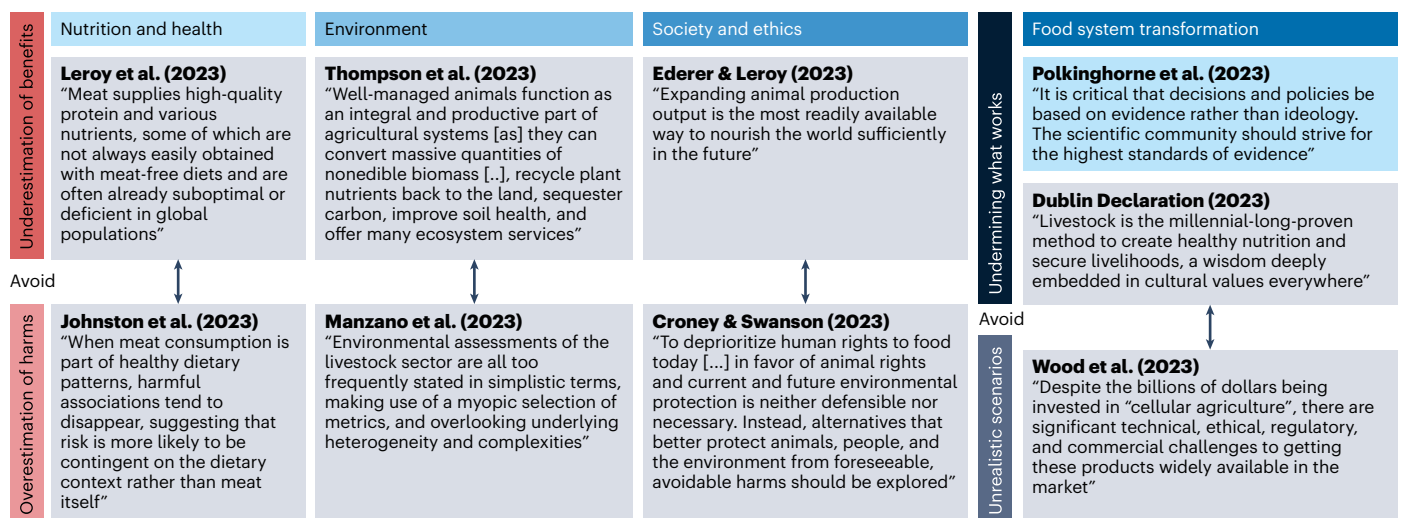


Fig. 1 | A non-exhaustive overview of key messages to rebalance contemporary debates on the role of meat and livestock in a context of food systems change. Key messages taken from refs. 1–6, 8–10.

Q1 Q2
Q3 Q4

Q5

Q6

Q7

Correspondence

The significance of the Dublin Declaration and the accompanying publications reaches far beyond the concerns of just livestock-related scientific experts. What members of future societies will eat, where they will live, and how they will spend their time, are all strongly impacted by the role animals will have within an evolving framework of human–animal interactions. A planet without livestock is a different planet. A planet with twice as many animals as today is a different planet. A planet with ten billion people each wanting healthy food, for which the global food system will need to double or maybe even triple today's output of bioavailable protein and other related micronutrients – a feat we argue is unachievable without animals – is most definitely a different planet. How the global commons and agricultural land will be used in the future has ramifications throughout society, from finance to urban planning, from industrial production to options for leisure and far beyond,

penetrating the furthest corners of our foodscapes, landscapes and thoughts.

We are not yet equipped with all the scientific evidence we need to answer all relevant questions. If the urgency for action is high, a view we share, then it is not the best option to do something actionistic with poorly understood consequences, but to step up the research and develop better solutions. The Dublin Declaration is a call to all scientists to keep up the discovery – and to have a sincere debate.




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Competing interests

F.L. is a non-remunerated board member of various academic non-profit organizations including the Belgian Association for Meat Science and Technology (president), the Belgian Society for Food Microbiology (president) and the Belgian Nutrition Society. On a non-remunerated basis, F.L. and P.E. serve on the Scientific Board of World Farmers' Organization (WFO); on a non-remunerated basis, F.L. serves on the Scientific Advisory Committee of the FAO/COAG Subcommittee on Livestock.