

### Meat industry calls ‘bull’ on climate-influenced diet guidelines, as scientist axed ‘over ideology’

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Australia’s red meat industry is demanding the Albanese government intervene to head off “ideological” manipulation of official dietary guidelines to curtail meat consumption on climate grounds, as a top food scientist is “purged” from a key role for not being sufficiently activist.

Industry bodies have been urging the National Health and Medical Research Council to abandon plans to revise its official Australian Dietary Guidelines to factor in sustainability.

Cattle Australia and the Red Meat Advisory Council say the NHMRC should focus on health and nutrition and leave sustainability to other forums, arguing the complexities of food production are beyond NHMRC’s ken and remit.

Those calls have been ignored and suspicions of an “ideological stitch-up” heightened by the secret dumping of a leading food sustainability expert, CSIRO principal research scientist Brad Ridoutt, from NHMRC’s sustainability working group.

Current NHMRC guidelines, dating from 2013, encourage Australians to consume a “wide variety of nutritious foods from the five groups every day, including lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans”.

They recommend men eat 2½ to three serves of such foods each day and women two to 3½, depending on age and pregnancy or breastfeeding status.

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However, this approach appears to be under threat from a global anti-meat campaign, which has successfully – and controversially – influenced dietary guidelines, such as the EAT-Lancet diet.

Fifth-generation graziers Erica and Stuart Halliday, of Ben Nevis Angus in Walcha, NSW, expressed concern about the NHMRC push, believing there were misconceptions about the sustainability of beef and methane emissions.

“Over time, the amount cows emit is balanced by the amount that is sequestered back into the soil via good cow grazing management and photosynthesis,” Ms Halliday said.

Factoring this in, cattle should be “no longer classed as a climate enemy of state – but as a hero”.

“At the same time she takes the most abundant plant on Earth – grass, which humans can't eat – and upgrades it into one of the most nutrient-dense forms of protein on the planet, not to mention the richest source of haem iron: the one that is bio-available for humans,” Ms Halliday said.

“So why on Earth are we telling people to reduce red meat consumption when cattle can be part of the solution to both climate change as well as feeding the world?”

Industry believes claims of a potential perceived conflict of interest levelled at Dr Ridoutt are trumped up, and that he has been dumped for being a perceived barrier to revised guidelines, due in 2026, that could curb meat consumption.

Peak groups are calling on Health Minister Mark Butler to direct the NHMRC to scrap its sustainability campaign and answer questions about Dr Ridoutt's treatment.

“We are confused about why Dr Ridoutt has been asked to step down. He is arguably the leading expert on Australian food production systems and associated dietary considerations,” Cattle Australia vice-president Adam Coffey said.

“The potential conflicts of all members of the committee are clearly listed for all to see, so I’d be very concerned if Brad has been removed, given his qualifications, over nothing more than a perceived conflict.

“I call on the NHMRC to detail exactly what that perceived conflict is. This smells like someone being driven out by ideology and for not toeing the common line.”

Dr Ridoutt, who declared and detailed industry-funded research on the NHMRC’s website, declined to comment. He is understood not to have been provided with details of the alleged perceived conflict of interest and to be unsure of what it is.

The NHMRC refused to answer questions about why Dr Ridoutt had been removed, what alleged perceived conflict of interest was involved, and whether it had extended procedural fairness to him.

“NHMRC has established policies and processes to address actual and perceived conflicts of interest,” a spokeswoman said. “This includes the Dietary Guidelines Governance Committee.”

Dr Ridoutt’s research has concluded that dietary choices can have only a “very modest” impact in reducing environmental impacts, and that foods often score well on one environmental metric but badly on another.

He has warned of perverse outcomes by focusing solely on farming, rather than processed food and its use of water and energy.

“If you ignore that, you can easily end up with an analysis that might favour foods made from highly refined ingredients and (that) makes wholefoods look unsustainable, when in actual fact it’s the other way round,” he said recently.

Dr Ridoutt has praised lamb as “the most sustainable food in the Australian food system”, and urged a focus on reducing intake of highly processed discretionary food.

“In Australia, you simply can’t eat a climate-neutral diet – the required variety of climate-neutral foods is not available,” he said recently.

The industry suspects such views may not have gone down well with NHMRC figures favouring cutting recommended meat consumption to improve sustainability.

Peak red meat groups want Mr Butler to intervene and head off new NHMRC guidelines that curb suggested meat consumption.

“Some of this is quite dangerous when you think of iron deficiencies among women, babies and older people,” Mr Coffey said. “Proponents of so-called sustainable diets want you to eat a nutritionally deficient diet under the guise of saving the planet.”

The red meat sector globally is fighting claims that emissions of [methane from livestock](#) are a significant cause of global warming, arguing current methodologies are flawed and estimates “overblown”.

An NHMRC spokeswoman said the revised guidelines would “first and foremost consider the health impact of dietary patterns”, but would “also consider ... is it sustainable?”.

She said one in three respondents to a 2021 survey had nominated sustainability when quizzed about what “new topics should be included”. As well, a National Health and Climate Strategy had backed the concept. Mr Butler did not respond by deadline to requests for comment.

Red Meat Advisory Council chair John McKillop backed calls for ministerial intervention. “We are concerned the NHMRC doesn’t have the skills to come out with a position – they are nutritional guidelines, not sustainability guidelines,” Mr McKillop said. “It’s well and truly outside their remit.

“If they have a bent towards a vegan diet, then that’s where their bias will go. They haven’t engaged with industry.

“We are concerned they are sitting around in some academic bubble deciding on policies around sustainability without seeking to understand the metrics.”

The anti-meat push was based on false assumptions about land use, with much of Australia's grazing land simply not suitable for growing crops, he said.

"Basically, if you can crop the land you do crop it because per hectare it's a greater return, and by and large you only run livestock on areas that can't be growing crops – steep land, dry land, etc," Mr McKillop said.

Stuart Halliday said Australians' health would suffer from any reduction in meat consumption. "The quality of meat as a nutrient-dense, rich source of food is beyond compare – vastly superior to any other form of food, from a protein and iron perspective," he said.

The NHMRC spokeswoman said "agricultural industries will have the opportunity to comment" once draft new guidelines were released.