

Response to Senate Inquiry into the definitions of meat and other animal products

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In this submission to the senate, I would like to briefly address the history of meat replacements, whether consumers are actually confused by these food labels, the healthfulness of these food products, the environmental effects of meat products, and the motivations for this inquiry.

Mock meats have a long history, dating back as early as 965 when tofu was promoted in China as “mock lamb chops”. Buddhist monks were eating mock meats at banquets by the 1620s.¹ Mock meats continue to be enjoyed today, and yet you would be hard pressed to find someone confused by the labelling of these food items. A 2020 study investigating whether consumers are really confused by plant-based food labels found that “(1) consumers are no more likely to think that plant-based products come from an animal if the product’s name incorporates words traditionally associated with animal products than if it does not. (2) Omitting words that are traditionally associated with animal products from the names of plant-based products actually causes consumers to be significantly more confused about the taste and uses of these products.”

Anecdotaly, I would be more confused when shopping for a veggie burger, veggie sausage or similar if they did not use terms such as “burger”, “sausage” etc. These are descriptors of taste, texture and appearance of the product, not whether it contains animal products or not. Consider peanut butter, a product description that confuses few, but does not contain any animal-derived butter. Using terms that are already commonly accepted, and qualifying them by the primary makeup of the food item (e.g. veggie sausage, pork sausage) is less confusing to consumers than creating entirely new terms for plant-based food items (veggie tube, for example, is far less appealing and more confusing to me!).

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jan/12/mock-lamb-chops-vegan-steak-bakes-history-fake-meat>

The WHO has classed red meat in group 2A, probably carcinogenic to humans, and processed meat in group 1A, carcinogenic to humans.² It is disingenuous to imply that processed plant-based meat alternatives are unhealthy by virtue of them not containing animal flesh, given that there are already such health concerns associated with excess consumption of red and processed meat.

The inquiry seeks to consider the health implications of “unnatural additives” and “chemicals used in the production” of plant-based protein products. However, something being natural does not imply healthfulness – this is an appeal to nature fallacy. Many dangerous poisons are found in nature. Similarly, “chemical” is such a broad term that it does not actually mean anything useful in the context of food. Water is a chemical substance, for instance. The healthfulness of plant-based foods will vary from product to product, and this is why we have a health star food rating system to allow consumers to make healthy, informed choices.

This inquiry also seeks to ascertain any detrimental effects to Australian meat and livestock businesses, however it does not consider the impact of burgeoning (but still comparatively small) plant-based food sectors in Australia which use local ingredients, and can strengthen our economic output in this area.

Technology-focused investment in plant-based foods is a win-win for our economy and for the government’s own goal of reaching “net zero emissions as soon as possible, and preferably by 2050”.³ Globally, bodies such as the UN have called for the world to reduce its reliance on animal agriculture in order to address the immediate dangers of climate change,⁴ and animal-based foods as a whole are much more resource, land, emissions and water intensive than plant-based foods.^{5 6} Animal agriculture is also the primary reason for the large amounts of land clearing in Australia – the primary reason being grazing native vegetation, followed by grazing modified pastures.⁷ It would therefore seem a missed opportunity to not capitalise on local investment and government support in the plant-based food sector wherever possible. This will encourage local economic growth in this emerging industry, while also addressing one large source of climate change-inducing emissions.

The inquiry, driven by senator Susan McDonald, also appears to be attempting to subvert the plant-based food sector in a biased manner. I point to the fact that senator McDonald has been appointed to the board of Beef Australia in 2016,⁸ and has managed an online butcher. Her family company also appears to run numerous cattle stations across Queensland. Making plant-based foods more confusing and less appealing to the consumer could discourage people from buying these food items – this appears to be a key motivator for this inquiry.

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/cancer-carcinogenicity-of-the-consumption-of-red-meat-and-processed-meat>

³ <https://theconversation.com/view-from-the-hill-now-scott-morrison's-preference-is-for-net-zero-emissions-by-2050-154394>

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02409-7>

⁵ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/sustainability/plate-and-planet/>

⁶ <https://ourworldindata.org/land-use-diets>

⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2020-10-08/deforestation-land-clearing-australia-state-by-state/12535438>

⁸ <https://www.queenslandcountrylife.com.au/story/4209147/susan-mcdonald-joins-beef-australia-board/>

As such I would argue food labelling terms such as “sausage”, “burger”, “mince” etc are perfectly suited to plant-based food products, and there is no sensible rationale for restricting these terms to animal-derived products only. If anything, I would encourage higher uptake of health star rating labelling on all food products, and better country-of-origin labelling to benefit our local economy.