media release

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Australian red meat uses less carbon

A study undertaken by the University of New South Wales, to be published in the Environmental Science &Technology Journal, has revealed that Australian red meat production is much more efficient than often reported.

The three year Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) study across three production systems in Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia has shown that the carbon emissions from sheep and cattle meat production were amongst the lowest in the world.

Based on figures from the research, eating red meat three times a week results in between 164kg(1) to 258kg(2) of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions a year– vastly different to figures quoted that claim up to 1.5 tonnes.

Meat & Livestock Australia's (MLA) Managing Director, David Palmer said that this credible and reliable data gave an accurate reflection of carbon emissions for Australia's unique production systems.

"Most Australian cattle and sheep are raised in a natural environment feeding on pastures with little or no use of fertilizers and it is unfortunate that until now inaccurate and exaggerated figures have been used".

"These Australian figures enable us to start having a more meaningful discussion about the industry's environmental impact".

The LCA process is a form of cradle-to-grave analysis that attempts to quantify the important environmental impacts of all processes involved in a production system; however it does not take into consideration the ability of soil and trees on farms to absorb carbon. A recent report released by the Queensland Government looked at the total carbon balance on grazing lands in Queensland (47% of Australia's cattle production) and found they were close to carbon neutral and may in the near future be a net carbon sink.

1 Based on lower figure from UNSW LCA (7kg per kg for sheep meat) and a 150g serve

2 Based on highest figure from UNSW LCA (11kg for beef) and a 150g serve

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The United Nations, Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) also released a report earlier this month that found grazing lands have the potential to help minimise net greenhouse gas emissions through specific practices, especially those that build soil and biomass carbon.

David Palmer said that the LCA figures were useful to provide a benchmark.

“Importantly the figures give us a baseline from which to continue to improve the industry's performance in regards to emissions, however they do not paint a complete picture and should never be looked at in isolation of other environmental factors such as water and biodiversity".

“Most people are not aware that livestock is the only production industry in Australia to have reduced greenhouse emissions since 1990. According to the Australian Greenhouse office we have reduced our emissions by 7.5%, compared to increases in other industries such as transport and electricity, up 26.9% and 54.1% respectively; we now have a better basis to track improvement in the future”.

“The study shows that when you look across the supply chain from paddock to processing, more than 80% of the carbon emissions come from the natural process of digestion of feed by the animal, which is why MLA has co-invested with the Federal government and other partners in a $28 million program with 18 research projects that are looking at how to reduce emissions from livestock”.

About the Life Cycle Assessment

Life cycle assessment (LCA) is a form of cradle-to-grave or cradle-to-gate systems analysis that attempts to quantify the important environmental impacts of all processes involved in a production system using detailed input data for that system.

The University of NSW LCA showed that sheep meat was estimated to be 7 to 8 kg CO_2-e per kg HSCW (unit of product used for red meat) while for beef values ranged from 8 to 11 kg CO_2-e per kg HSCW.

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