

What will it take to downsize the American meat habit?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I was a strict vegetarian for 10 years. Now I'm a sort of sometimes-meat-avoider: my wife and I keep a meatless kitchen but eat whatever when someone serves it to us and sometimes when we're out. As I've [written before](#), the virtuous identity marker "vegetarian" is less important to me than it used to be. But I still think eating way less meat is the single biggest bit of lifestyle "greening" most Americans could do.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's dietary guidelines restrict their official purview to nutrition; they don't address the other considerations that go into food choices. But last week, [AP reported that this year's update to the USDA guidelines might include a focus on environmental sustainability](#)—specifically, as a reason to eat less meat.

Well, not if the beef industry's lobbyists have anything to say about it. And in Washington, [they have a lot to say and powerful contacts to say it to](#). Last month, lawmakers [attached a "congressional directive" to the Cromnibus spending bill](#), expressing "concern" that "agriculture production practices and environmental factors" might figure into nutritional guidelines (put out by *the federal department in charge of agriculture*). This wasn't legally binding on the USDA, but some combination of pressure from legislators and directly from lobbyists appears to have made the feds stand down. The new guidelines will be, as usual, [just about nutrition](#).

Is eating less meat more nutritious? For a given individual, it's hard to say. It depends (just for starters) how much meat you're eating now, what kind, and what you'd be likely to replace it with. But for Americans collectively, there's little question. [We just eat tons of the stuff](#), despite what we know about the health risks.

What's more, arguing that nutrition has nothing to do with environmental sustainability requires a pretty narrow lens on food. When we harm the earth, we harm farmland. We harm biodiversity. We jeopardize our own future; that's why they call it *sustainability*. It is shortsighted and dangerous to imagine that human and planetary health are separate categories. And large-scale meat production—especially of cattle and other ruminants—[wreaks serious havoc on the land](#).

The good news is that [American meat consumption is slowly declining](#), even without much help from the USDA guidelines. Yes, we're still averaging the better part of a pound a day each. But one reason the beef industry's on the defensive is that the American diet is already headed in a more sustainable direction.

One particularly hopeful sign: apparently the newest generation of fake meat products actually taste like meat. As a vegetarian, I never got into the stuff much, aside from the occasional soysage (or [seitanage](#)) gravy; I'd rather eat actual beans. But [a company called Beyond Meat is raising the bar](#), as Rowan Jacobsen reported last month. While as an eater I can live without burgers, real or fake, as a citizen I think this is really exciting:

As vegetarianism goes mainstream, factory meat's one advantage—that it's cheap—disappears. "There aren't any obstacles to us underpricing beef as we scale up," [Beyond Meat CEO Ethan] Brown says. "The industry is large and established, yet it's facing huge cost challenges. The price slope for beef since 2010 has been pretty steep. We're already competitive with certain grades."

There's no reason that Beyond Meat can't have extruders all over the world churning out affordable protein patties and even a plant-based "raw" ground beef that's red, pliable, and designed for cooking. Once that happens, Brown won't let U.S. supermarkets slot him into the hippie aisle anymore. "As soon as we have our ground beef ready, they need to put it next to the animal protein."

That is: Brown isn't trying to convince me (or my former vegetarian self) to choose his product over a Boca burger (or, again, a pile of beans). He's trying to compete directly with actual meat—and he has both nutrition and environmental sustainability on his side. And Jacobsen's article makes me think he might just do it. This is American capitalism, after all. A powerful industry may be able to buy its federal regulators off, but innovative competitors are another story.