ENVIRONMENT

Beef producers say Obama is trying to kill their industry

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April 25, 2012: Strip steaks sit on the butchers table.

WASHINGTON – Lawmakers from cattle producing states are seeing red following a 571-page federal report that that encourages Americans to go green.

A panel of nutrition experts recruited by the Obama administration to craft the newest dietary guidelines suggested last week that the government should consider the environment when deciding what people should eat.

The report, which was presented to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, bills itself as a way to "transform the food system" and that's got a lot of people in the heartland and those elected to represent them in Washington fuming.

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"Generations of cattle farmers and ranchers have been and continue to be conscientious about conserving limited natural resources," Sen. Chuck Grassley R-Iowa, told FoxNews.com. "They rely on the land and the environment for their livelihood. Those facts get lost in Washington and in arguments that eating red meat hurts the environment."

The report, which is open for public comment for 45 days, will be used by the government not only to mold dietary guidelines but also used as the basis for government food assistance programs as well as school lunch programs, worth an estimated $16 billion annually.

The North American Meat Institute slammed the report, calling it "flawed" and "nonsensical." Members of the meat industry as well as those from soda makers, say the panel has gone "beyond its scope."

Dr. Richard Thorpe, a Texas physician and rancher, told FoxNews.com that he is disappointed in the panel's recommendations and said "it's absurd the committee would suggest the reduction of meat, or red meat, in the American diet."

Thorpe says nutritional science is "constantly evolving" and that reports like the one released last week "can absolutely kill an industry" and called the report an "insult."

The federal guidelines, which are updated every five years, have advised Americans about healthy eating choices. But critics say the newest report oversteps its boundaries and caters to a campaign aimed at driving out red meat producers.

Part of the problem, Thorpe says, is that the government is telling Americans they should also consider the sustainability of their food. That translates to eating less meat and loading up on vegetables and plants.

"Legumes should be a mainstay of an American diet?" Thorpe said, adding that it would take a wheelbarrow full of spinach to meet the same amount of iron in a serving of beef. He added that iron found in beef is not equal to iron in spinach, and that beef's iron is more absorbable.

According to a June 2014 study in the journal Climatic Change, the average meat-eater in the United States is responsible for almost twice as much global warming as the average vegetarian and almost tripled that of the average vegan.

The Oxford University study dissected the diets of 60,000 individuals – 2,000 vegans,

15,000 vegetarians, 8,000 fish-eaters and close to 30,000 meat-eaters – and found the difference in diet-driven carbon footprints was significant. The Oxford study found that cutting a person's meat intake could cut a person's carbon footprint by 35 percent. Go vegan and slash your carbon footprint by 60 percent.

But to Thorpe, that shouldn't matter. He adds that medically there are big benefits to eating beef.

"We feel the beef industry owns protein," he said, adding that the Obama administration is promoting a type of diet that could be harmful to some people. Thorpe says over the past three decades, the industry has "done nothing but reduce the amount of fat in our animals."

Still, the science of consumption seems conflicted.

Tufts University professor Miriam Nelson says the panel isn't telling all Americans to become vegan but adds, "We are saying that people need to eat less meat. We need to start thinking about what's sustainable. …Other countries have started doing this – including sustainability in their recommendations. We should be doing it, too."

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