

# An open letter to Bill Gates



**BY KAREN WILLIAMS**

ICA Natural Resources  
Policy Director

**D**ear Mr. Gates,  
You do not know me. Our paths have never crossed, and it is highly unlikely that they ever will. Yet the power of your words has the potential to deeply affect not only me, but those I care about. In your recent interview with MIT's Technology Review, you called for the elimination of an entire American industry when you said, "I do think all rich countries should move to 100% synthetic beef." Not only do you seek to abolish ranchers, but you also have the nerve to dictate an entire country's food and diet choices. In what is perhaps the most galling part of your statement, you said, "Eventually, that green premium is modest enough that you can sort of change the [behavior of] people or use regulation to totally shift the demand."

How dare you? It is beyond belief and utterly appalling that you would use your oversized platform to call upon government to regulate away an entire industry's existence. But maybe you had taken note that this is currently happening, quite successfully, and you hope to pile on the government's fast-moving train of regulatory overreach which has already had such a negative effect on our ability to do business.

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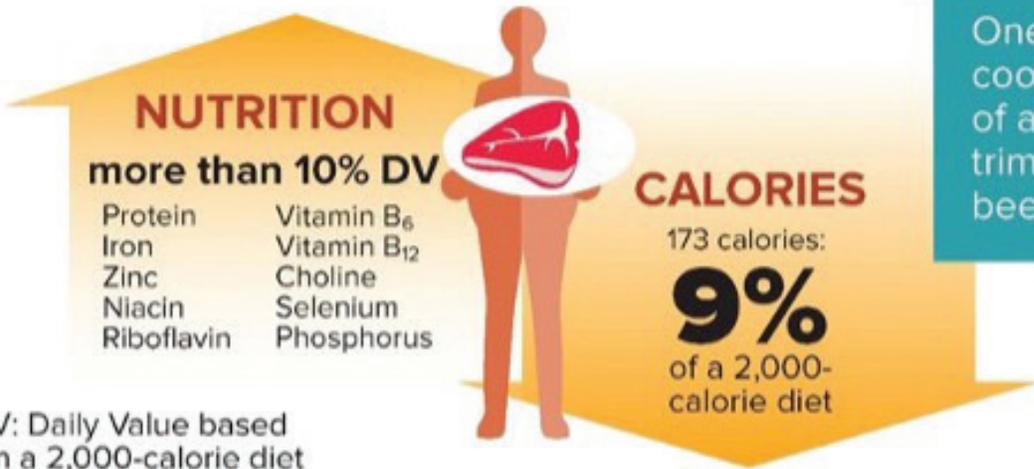
Americans love beef. In hamburgers alone, we eat 50 billion each year – or 137 million per day.

Every aspect of a cattle producer's livelihood is under heavy regulation—from the way we manage the land to the way we market our livestock to our ability to put food on the table. You are, no doubt, a highly intelligent human being and you have clearly observed just how easy it would be to completely squeeze us out of business. I can only hope to assume that what you are motivated by is good intentions to protect our planet for future generations. But as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

I will readily admit that I have not walked in your shoes. I cannot begin to fathom what life must be like to be the world's third richest person, to have \$129 billion dollars at my disposal, or to live in a 66,000 square foot mansion. Similarly, you have not walked in my boots, nor those of the 720,000 American cattle producers, the majority of whom live hand to mouth struggling to put food on their own tables all the while providing food and fiber for the world's hungry population and growing appetite. There is no possible way that you can imagine what life is like for the American rancher so I will give you the benefit of a doubt, albeit extremely slight, that you miscalculated the true potential impact of your words. So, let me tell you a little about why your recent statement is not only offensive and absurd, but also unrealistic and detrimental to both human health and the natural environment. What exactly would happen if you were successful in your quest to rid beef from American's diets? There would be significant environmental, social, and economic repercussions that would deplete and diminish this country.

Let's start with the obvious. Americans love beef. In hamburgers alone, we eat 50 billion each year— or 137 million per day. Not only does it bring great enjoyment and satisfaction when consumed, but beef is one of the most nutrient dense foods

**Beef is a Nutrient-rich Food**



USDA-ARS Nutrient Database, SR28, NDB#13364, available at: <https://www.ars.usda.gov/nea/bhnrc/ndl>

available, providing protein and essential nutrients that are necessary for healthy living. In speaking of fake beef, you said, “You can get used to the taste difference, and the claim is they’re going to make it taste even better over time.” No. Just no. Aside from the taste difference of which you speak, synthetic meat—whether plant based or lab-grown—is highly processed with dozens of ingredients and chemical additives. Real beef has just one ingredient: beef. It is nonsensical to deprive the populations of “rich countries” of this important diet staple. Though as a whole, our country is considered wealthy, there are plenty of hungry kids within its borders who need the protein and nutrients that beef provides.

The entire premise upon which your thoughts are based is that synthetic beef would be more beneficial to the environment. Where do I start here? There is a whole host of reasons that prove you wrong, not the least of which is the overstated falsehood that cattle are a leading source of greenhouse gas emissions. Can we please just stop perpetuating this

myth? According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, methane from beef cattle accounts for only 2% of the United States’ greenhouse gas emissions. Compare that with the 29% generated by the transportation sector and 28% by electricity production. Even if you were able to accomplish your stated goal of eliminating U.S. beef production, it would have minimal impact on greenhouse gas emissions and completely defeat your purpose. According to research published in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences, if all livestock in the U.S. were eliminated and every American followed a vegan diet, greenhouse gas emissions would only be reduced by 2.6%, or 0.36% globally. Beef production is but a drop in a very, very big bucket. Further, its impact is offset by the host of benefits it provides.

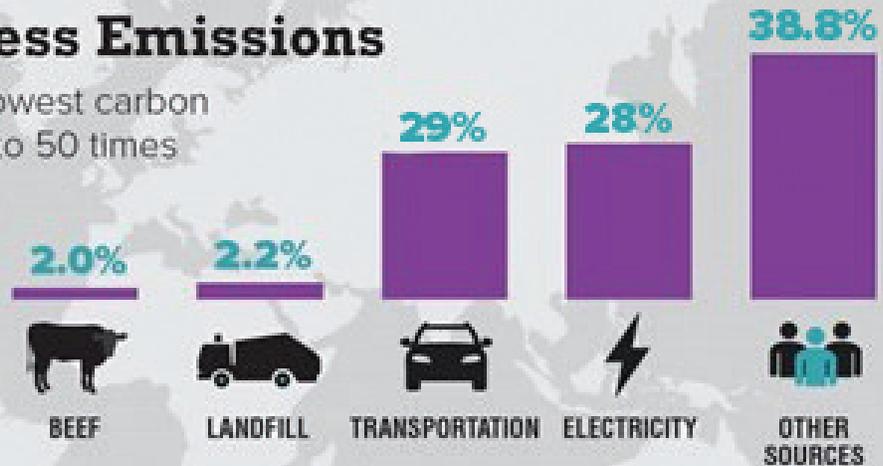
Do you want to know what actually does put a lot of carbon emissions into the air? Wildfires. In 2020, U.S. wildfires burned 10.27 million acres, the highest yearly total on record. The amount of carbon dioxide emitted from these fires is staggering—111.7 million metric tons from California fires

alone which is a figure comparable to the estimated 128 million metric tons contributed by beef cattle annually. To put that into proper perspective, the emissions from one state’s wildfires in one year are similar to those from an entire nationwide industry and yet you would seek to dissolve that industry forever. And do you want to know what is the only tool available to help limit and control those wildfires across the 770 million acres of rangelands within the U.S., particularly in the arid and inaccessible west? Cattle. That’s right. Livestock grazing is one of the only tools, and certainly the most cost-effective, available to reduce fuel loads on rangelands. However, concurrent to increasing wildfire prevalence, restrictive land use policies adopted over the past few decades have significantly reduced the ability to employ this tool—and now you want to completely eliminate it. When livestock grazing is reduced or eliminated, the grass grows and dries and becomes ideal fuel for fire, leading to greater likelihood of uncontrollable

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## Fewer Cattle, Less Emissions

U.S. beef has one of the lowest carbon footprints in the world, 10 to 50 times lower than some nations. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from cattle only account for 2% of U.S. GHG emissions.



Herrero et al., 2013. Proc. Natl. Aca. Sci. 110:20888-20893.

US EPA Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2014. Available at:

<https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-04/documents/us-ghg-inventory-2016-main-text.pdf>

wildfires. Admittedly, there are many factors at play when it comes to the increasing prevalence of catastrophic fire, but it is nonsensical to eradicate a key tool in fighting against it.

Not only do cattle NOT present a significant threat in the climate change dialogue, but they actually provide a host of opportunities for improved carbon storage in landscapes across the country. Grassland ecosystems are dependent upon grazing to spur the lifecycle of perennial grasses, and modern managed grazing is the most efficient means of replicating this natural process. Livestock grazing captures carbon and increases the rate of sequestration. Carbon sequestration is the process of transferring carbon dioxide from the atmosphere into the soil. Once carbon is transferred to the soil, carbon can be stored for decades or longer, thus preventing it from entering the atmosphere. According to Project Drawdown, a group of international scientists focused on climate research, “about 40 percent of ice-free land on earth is considered grazing

land. If managed grazing could be amped up worldwide, it could sequester over 16 gigatons of carbon by 2050.” Why would you ever seek to abolish one of the very best tools at your disposal in managing the world’s voracious appetite for carbon?

It is important for you to understand that a stable cattle industry ensures that these important range and pasturelands will remain intact to be able to continue their important role in sequestering carbon. If forced out of the livestock business, what recourse will ranchers—the landowners of America—have other than to sell to the highest bidder for alternative uses. Either that land will become cropland, which can release the soil’s carbon rather than store it, or more likely as recent history shows, that land will be subdivided and paved. The land which once provided the much beloved open spaces and abundant habitat for wildlife is then lost, the landscape is fragmented, and the entire ecosystem suffers. Where conversion to cropland or development does not occur, invasive weeds are like-

ly to take over in the absence of grazing animals. The continued presence of livestock grazing enhances habitats and native biological diversity. The continued presence of our industry is critical to our environment.

Beyond the environmental benefit, you cannot overlook the obvious effect of eradicating an entire segment of food production on our food security. Why don’t you ask some of the people affected by the recent extreme cold weather and power outages in our country how they felt when they went to the grocery store to get sustenance for their families only to find empty shelves instead of the food supplies necessary to survive? As has been demonstrated repeatedly over this past year, between panic buying and food distribution issues brought on by the pandemic and weather-related shortages, managing and maintaining our food supply is an extremely tenuous situation. In the instant that our power supply is threatened, synthetic food will simply not be able to be manufactured. Whereas meat that is produced

from animals will always be available as long as there are people willing to do the work to raise and process it. The slightest disruption to our food supply has serious implications not only on our health, but on our national security. The success of this country is wholly dependent upon American agriculture and our ability to feed ourselves. How quickly we would fall if we could not feed ourselves.

Beyond the importance of U.S. beef to our own food security is the important role it plays in feeding the world. American cattle ranchers produce over 26 billion pounds of beef annually. Of that, 3.2 billion pounds are exported to help feed other countries' populations. You cannot simply wipe out an entire food commodity without it having serious implications across the globe. Those populations not living in the "rich" countries, as you put it, are starving. They do not have the capability to produce the food they need, nor can they do it with any comparable degree of efficiency to which American cattle ranchers produce beef. Why would you seek to further cripple the potential of those already struggling countries by limiting the global food supply? Additionally, why would you want to put at risk the diversity of food available to the world's population meanwhile limiting options that the public has for consuming a complete diet?

As a successful businessman, you obviously have a great understanding of economics. So, let's talk a little dollars and cents. Maybe I can get through to you that way. In America, there are more than 720,000 farms and ranches that produce beef. This equates to 35% of all U.S. farm operations. The beef industry is the largest single sector in agriculture. In addition to the nutrient-rich beef, it also provides raw materials that support the production of finished products in various economic sectors, including pharmaceutical, retail, health care, automotive,



PHOTO BY KAREN WILLIAMS

Cattle at work sequestering carbon on Idaho rangelands.

and a variety of household products. A 2014 economic analysis found that, beef cattle production contributed approximately \$165 billion to the U.S. economy through direct and indirect economic and employment opportunities. In addition, the value of U.S. beef exports continues to grow, eclipsing \$8 billion in total value. To put it mildly, the economic contribution of cattle producers is significant and could not be simply erased without a major ripple effect across the U.S. economy.

Given the heartless way in which you so easily brushed off an entire industry, you probably will not care about this last issue, but it is worth mentioning that the cattle industry provides tremendous societal benefit. In addition to the reverberating effects of the cattleman's dollar in a community, even more resounding is the social contributions made by the people that make up our industry. Though not easily quantifiable, these contribu-

tions come in the form of volunteer efforts in school boards, school gyms, county fairs, fire protection districts, PTAs, wildlife stewardship groups, water boards, and in countless other avenues. These are the things that make our country hum. The number of man-hours, almost entirely unpaid, that makes rural areas survive and thrive is staggering. When their land is sold to outside investors and absentee landowners, who will be left to do their work? The void will be immeasurable. Do not underestimate the force for good, the positive influence, the ingenuity, and the hard work that is the American cattle industry.

Mr. Gates, your words put on full display the hypocrisy of the over-indulged. You speak to the masses of the need for massive societal change in the name of climate change while you travel the globe in your private jet. The

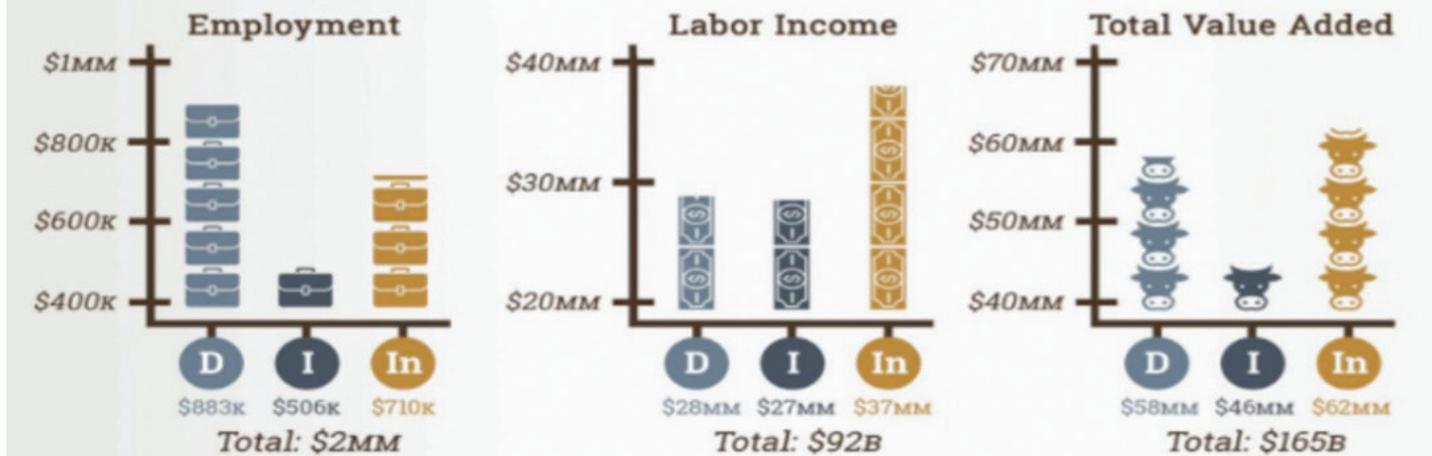
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# ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BEEF INDUSTRY

**D** **DIRECT EFFECT:** SPENDING BY CATTLE SECTOR ENTERPRISES

**In** **INDUCED EFFECT:** SPENDING BY WAGE-EARNING EMPLOYEES IN THE CATTLE SECTOR

**I** **INDIRECT EFFECT:** NON-CATTLE SECTOR SPENDING FROM ENTERPRISES PRIMARILY SUPPORTING CATTLE PRODUCTION



companies you create and invest in, borne on the backs of the American worker and burgeoned through the system of American capitalism, create more than their share of greenhouse gas emissions and yet you expect others to sacrifice their livelihoods to do what? Clear your conscience?

You have personally realized the American dream to its ultimate extent, yet you preach of socialistic causes that would prevent others from seeing even a fraction of your success. And if that's not bad enough, you want to extirpate an entire industry—one that provides a tremendous amount of good, and certainly a net benefit, to the world.

I know that I have hit you with a lot of tough talk and facts and figures in this letter, but I wanted it to be abundantly clear that your suggestion is not only intellectually ludicrous but also scientifically invalid. No doubt, you have done a lot of philanthropic work with your money and have changed lives for the better for those who have benefitted from your generous donations to worldwide health initiatives. However, your vast financial resources do not qualify you to establish public policy nor do they enable you to dictate how Americans earn a living or what food they can eat. You are way off the mark with this one.

Please reconsider your remarks, reverse course, and set the record straight on the incomparable, irreplaceable value that is America's cattle industry.

Sincerely,

Karen M. Williams, on behalf of all American cattle producers

SOURCE: AGAMERICA.COM AND 2017 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

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**10,500+-Ac. Ranch:** Idaho's best historic cattle ranch, 600 +- cow-calf or 1000 head summer yearlings. Known for low winter feeding area, homes, cabins, feedlot, trout ponds, live stream, world class hunting.

**Three Creek - \$10,750,000**

**541+- Ac. Farm-Cattle:** 1887 priority date water right source from Camas Creek. Includes 7 tower pivot, 264 +- acres are cultivated.

125+- head for 4 +- months. Includes 2 homes, shop & barn

**Fairfield- \$1,895,000**

**308+- Ac. Dairy:** With 1168 head AU, double-12 hearing bone, 724 lock ups and 7 bay commodity barn. Water cost is \$16/ acre per season.

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**530+-Ac. Organic Farm-Cattle:** With approx. 268 +- acres irrigated under seven pivots wheel lines and solid set. 100+- head operation, Self sufficient year round ranch.

**Bliss - \$3,950,000**

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