

The Guardian

Do critics of UN meat report have a beef with transparency?

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Bloggers and sceptics leaping all over a UN report that 'exaggerated' the link between meat and climate change are not revealing that the scientist challenging the figures has been funded by the livestock industry



The 2006 UN report said global meat production was responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions. Photograph: Mikhail Mordasov/AFP/Getty Images

There's been lots of excitement in the blogosphere and beyond over the news that, following the recent furore over the IPCC reports, the United Nations has been forced into yet another embarrassing reinvestigation of its data.

This time it's the turn of the highly influential report called *Livestock's Long Shadow*, which was published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 2006. Its headline conclusion was that global meat production was responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions, which was slightly more than all of the world's cars, trains, and planes combined. This astonishing fact has been cited ever since by environmentalists and, in particular,

vegetarian advocacy groups as a good reason in itself to reduce meat consumption. I myself have mentioned the report when writing about this subject.

This is how the latest revelation has been reported over the past couple of days:

Boffin rubbishes Paul McCartney lentil-noshing plan - The Register.

Veggies are wrong and eating less meat will NOT save planet The Daily Mail.

Save the planet, eat less meat ... right? That's what the UN said, anyway, but one scientist has a grade A beef with that claim - Fox News.

Forget all that indecorous talk of animal flatulence, cow burps, vegetarianism and global warming. Welcome to Cowgate - The Washington Times.

The glee from the usual suspects is palpable, but not exactly surprising. The reinvestigation was triggered by the claims of Frank Mitloehner, the associate professor and cooperative extension specialist - air quality, at the department of animal science at the University of California, Davis. He presented a paper earlier this week at an American Chemical Society meeting in San Francisco arguing that the FAO's comparison with the transport sector was flawed.

The paper, called *Clearing the Air: Livestock's Contributions to Climate Change*, was first published last October in the journal *Advances in Agronomy*. In it, Mitloehner argued that while full lifecycle analysis was used to calculate the emissions for the meat sector, this wasn't the case for the transport sector, where only the fossil fuels burned by the vehicles was included, not the emissions resulting from manufacturing the vehicles.

"This lopsided 'analysis' is a classical apples-and-oranges analogy that truly confused the issue," Mitloehner told the meeting.

The BBC's Richard Black has since contacted the FAO's livestock policy officer, Pierre Gerber, and asked him for his reaction.

"I must say honestly that he [Mitloehner] has a point - we factored in everything for meat emissions, and we didn't do the same thing with transport," he told Black. "But on the rest of the report, I don't think it was really challenged."

Fair enough. On this evidence, it certainly seems worth examining this apparent mismatch between the methodologies used to calculate the emissions of each sector. I have no problem with that at all.

What does seem odd, though, is that none of the reports that I have seen so far have thought to mention who funded the original report. Just a cursory check online is all it takes to reveal the source of the funding. After all, it was mentioned in the original press release put out by the university last December:

Clearing the Air is a synthesis of research by the UC Davis authors and many other institutions,

including the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, US Environmental Protection Agency, US Department of Agriculture, California Environmental Protection Agency and the California Air Resources Board. Writing the synthesis was supported by a \$26,000 research grant from the Beef Checkoff Program, which funds research and other activities, including promotion and consumer education, through fees on beef producers in the US. Since 2002, Mitloehner has received \$5m in research funding, with 5% of the total from agricultural commodities groups, such as beef producers.

Well, that's a rather interesting paragraph, isn't it? It's funny how none of this information made it into those gleeful reports. First, let's learn some more about the Beef Checkoff Program. It appears to be an initiative of the Cattlemen's Beef Board, which, according to its website, "consists of 106 members, including domestic beef, dairy and veal producers, as well as importers of beef and beef products".

The checkoff is a producer-funded marketing and research program designed to increase domestic and/or international demand for beef. This can be done through promotion, research and new product development, and a variety of other marketing tools. The Cattlemen's Beef Board and USDA [US Department of Agriculture] oversee the collection and spending of checkoff funds.

And what about the "\$5m in research funding" that Mitloehner has received since 2002? As is right and proper, Mitloehner freely publishes all the details on his website as a pdf document. Here we learn that, over this period, he has received \$40,000 from the National Pork Board, as well as sizeable grants from the US Department of Agriculture and something called the Agriculture Air Research Council (AARC), which, according to the Pork Checkoff website, is "an independent, non-profit organisation ... formed to oversee and manage the air emissions research. The AARC board of directors has two representatives from each participating livestock sector, including one member from the National Pork Board and one from the National Pork Producers Council."

In other words, Mitloehner's research over the past eight years has been significantly funded by representatives of the US livestock industry and the government department charged with overseeing this multi-billion dollar industry.

Let me make this perfectly clear: I'm not saying that Mitloehner is a bought-off scientist in the pocket of Big Beef. As I said earlier, I actually think his claims are worthy of further investigation and I'm pleased this now appears to be taking place. It's not like he's trying to hide this information - it's just a click away on his website. My beef is that this funding information has not been deemed worthy of inclusion in the reports and blogs that have been so quick to leap on Mitloehner's findings as, in their eyes, further proof that environmentalists are just a bunch of unscientific cranks.

Spin it on its head for one moment: remember how climate sceptics were punching the air over the revelation that the so-called "HimalayaGate" error in the IPPC's fourth assessment report had resulted from a WWF document? For some sceptics, this fact alone immediately invalidated the whole report.

I think everyone agrees that transparency is a worthy goal so maybe in the future all sides of

this debate can aim to include information such as this as a basic principle? Just a thought.

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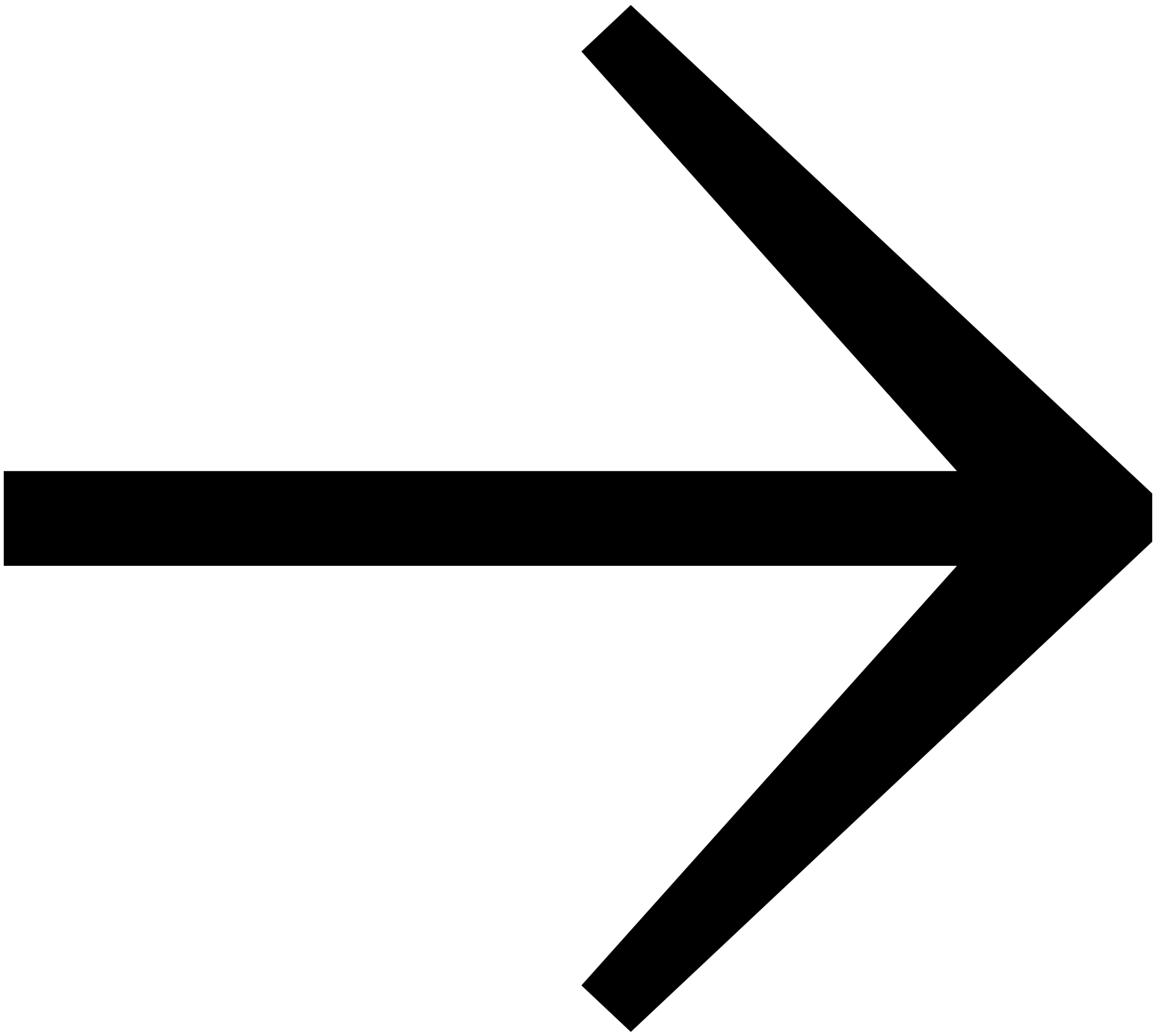
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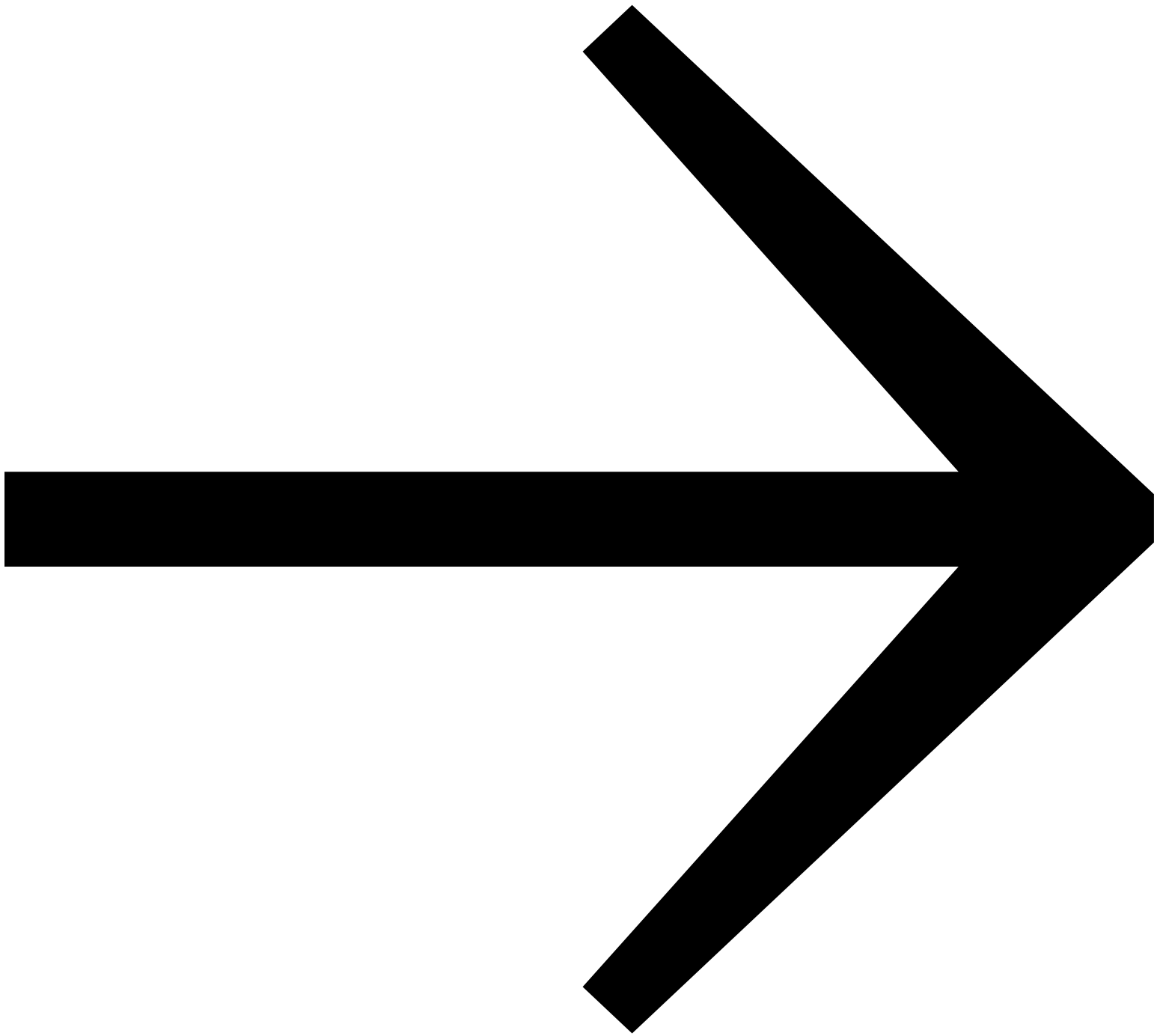
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