



British cows could be given 'methane blockers' to cut climate emissions

Description

UK: UK's 9.4m cattle contribute to 14% of human-related emissions, mostly from belching, but green groups remain sceptical

Cows in the UK could be given "methane blockers" to reduce their emissions of the greenhouse gas as part of plans to achieve the country's climate goals.

Farmers welcomed the proposal, which follows a consultation that began in August on how new types of animal feed product can reduce digestive emissions from the animals.

However, green campaigners were sceptical, arguing that the move would not address the other major environmental harms resulting from the beef and dairy industries and showed a fixation on "techno fixes" rather than reducing consumption.

There are about 9.4m cows and calves in the UK. Methane from cattle burps and manure is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions; globally, cows and other farm animals are responsible for about 14% of human-induced climate emissions.

The government said in its net zero growth strategy published last week that it expected "high-efficacy methane-suppressing products" to enter the market from 2025 and could force farmers to use them if they prove effective.

It said: "We ... will explore the role of industry and government to maximise uptake of such products for suitable cattle farm systems at pace, through a phased approach.

"This will include the ambition to mandate the introduction of products with proven safety and efficacy in compound feeds for cattle as soon as practically possible in England."

Tom Bradshaw, deputy president of the National Farmers' Union (NFU), said most of the methane emitted by cows is released by belching, "the front end rather than the back end". "The evidence suggests these products could be useful," he said. "I don't think we know enough yet about the impact they will have on the efficiency of the diet ... but it's something that we have to investigate to try and reduce methane emissions."

Methane-suppressing products are being trialled in the UK, he said, but have yet to yield evidence as to what extent they work.

The government has been criticised for a reliance on unproven technologies to pursue its climate goals. One group of 700 scientists criticised last week's net zero strategy for its emphasis on carbon capture and storage, which they said was "yet to be proved at scale".

Vicki Hird, head of farming for Sustain, an alliance of organisations that promote better food and farming, was similarly sceptical of the methane blocker plan. "Governments and industry love their techno fixes like cattle feed methane suppressants and these may help a bit.

"But they won't fix the major harms associated with our huge livestock fixation, from rainforest clearance for feeds and pasture to UK river pollution and harm to wildlife, all of which inhibit action on climate, too. We need to produce and eat less and better meat using agro-ecological tools known for whole farm and nature benefits."

The Food Standards Agency is responsible for licensing all animal feeds and would have to carry out a robust risk assessments of the impacts of each additive on animal health and welfare, food safety risks, risk to workers, wider environmental risks, and of the efficacy of the products, before licensing them for use in feed to reduce methane, according to the NFU.

At the moment, there are no additives licensed and available for use in the UK that suppress methane. However, applications have been submitted while the trials are conducted.

Bradshaw also pointed to genetic advances, namely breeding cows and sheep that emit less methane. Some countries, such as New Zealand, say they have reduced methane emissions from cattle through genetics.

A government spokesperson said: "Well-managed livestock can provide various environmental benefits and we plan to encourage the uptake of high-efficacy methane-suppressing products once they reach the UK market."

The government is yet to publish its response to the consultation of the farming industry, scientists and the public on cattle feed.

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Category

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