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Round Table on Sustainable Development

LIVESTOCK AND CLIMATE POLICY: LESS MEAT OR LESS CARBON?

Annotated Agenda for the 25th meeting of the Round Table on Sustainable Development

Paris
24 February 2010

English - Or. English

25TH ROUND TABLE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

LIVESTOCK AND CLIMATE POLICY: LESS MEAT OR LESS CARBON?

OECD Headquarters
Paris
24 February 2010
13:00-18:00

SCHEDULE

13:00 Round Table Luncheon (Marshall Room, Château de la Muette)

14.30 Meeting commences (Room C, Château de la Muette)

16:30 Coffee break

16:45 Meeting resumes

18:00 Meeting concludes

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Estimates suggest livestock agriculture contributes between 8% and 18% of global GHG emissions. The world needs to reduce overall emissions by at least 40% by 2050, compared to 2000 levels. While many countries have employed systematic emissions reduction policies, agriculture has largely been excluded. Excluding a source as significant as this from mitigation efforts would raise the cost of preventing dangerous climate change and could compromise efforts altogether.

At the same time, food production needs to increase significantly in a world where the population is expected to rise to 9 billion by 2050. This creates a tension between expanding production and reducing greenhouse gas emissions and minimising adverse environmental impacts. This tension grows more intense the larger the growth in demand for livestock products.

1. Should climate policies in OECD countries seek to alter or constrain demand for animal products or should the focus be on reducing the emissions intensity of livestock production?

On the face of it, meeting growing demand for meat while also reducing the emissions intensity of livestock production suggests further intensification of livestock agriculture and increased pork and poultry

production. However, given the amount of human-edible crops used in intensive systems, this does not necessarily maximise food production given current land resources. The most food for the least emissions might be achieved by using prime arable land for crops for human consumption and marginal land for extensive livestock systems.

2. How far should policy makers go to ensure that different qualities of land are used in such a way as to produce the most food for the least emissions?

Retailers in a number of countries are already considering using labelling schemes to provide consumers with information about the greenhouse gas footprint of the foods they buy. Without this kind of information concerned consumers cannot make informed choices about reducing the footprint from the food they buy. But, such schemes are likely to be costly and potentially discriminatory due to difficulties in measuring the emissions footprint of food products.

3. To what extent do governments have a responsibility to validate and possibly standardise greenhouse gas footprint information in food products? Would providing accurate information of this kind help mobilise social change, thus reducing consumption of animal products and the greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector?

Climate policy in the agricultural sector is hampered by difficulties measuring emissions and monitoring on-farm practices. In theory, the more accurately emissions can be measured the more effective policies can be in encouraging farmers to reduce emissions and consumers to buy low emission products. There is a trade off, however, between accuracy and increasing compliance costs on the farm.

4. To what extent do on-farm operations need greater monitoring and scrutiny?

Most economists would agree that the best way to provide a balance between reducing emissions and maintaining production would be to put a price on emissions in the agricultural sector. This could be done through a tax on emissions or including agriculture in emissions trading schemes.

5. What priority should be given to putting a price on emissions from livestock agriculture?

Whatever policies are put in place, there is scope for these to further distort world trade in food products. Any distortions would compromise the agricultural sector's ability to innovate and grow production to meet rapidly growing food demand.

6. What is the best way to minimise negative impacts on trade while maximising emission reduction opportunities? How can we ensure coherence, internationally, between climate policies seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and agricultural policies seeking to maintain social values and increase food production?