

Blindspot

How lack of action on
livestock methane undermines climate targets



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Executive summary

Our planet’s precious climate system is on the verge of irreversible disruption. Climate scientists have confirmed that a focus on methane (CH₄) emissions – in addition to measures designed to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions – will be crucial in determining whether global heating can be kept below 1.5°C (as per the 2015 Paris Agreement) and whether reaching climate tipping points can be avoided.¹ Although the livestock sector is by far the largest contributor of human-induced methane emissions,² our report reveals that both the biggest meat- and dairy-producing countries – with some of the highest methane emissions – and the largest meat and dairy corporations are oblivious to the problem. They are failing to set ambitious targets and implement measures to reduce methane emissions in the livestock sector. Without prompt and radical commitments from key methane emitters, emissions from livestock will put pledges to keep temperature rises below 1.5°C by 2030 in jeopardy.

1.1. The ‘methane emergency’

The climate emergency is palpable: we are witnessing increasingly severe extreme weather events such as heatwaves, heavy precipitation, droughts and tropical cyclones which carry heavy costs for human lives and the environment.

Even though methane is not the most abundant greenhouse gas (GHG), it is one of the most powerful,³ with a global warming potential that is 86 times greater per mass unit than carbon dioxide on a 20-year timescale. Unlike CO₂, however, which stays in the atmosphere for centuries or even millennia,⁴ methane has a climate response time of only 12 years. **These unique properties of methane provide an opportunity to use methane emission reductions as a crucial stopgap measure during the longer-term transition to zero emission societies.**

The climate emergency has therefore become the ‘methane emergency’.⁵ The agriculture sector (which includes agricultural waste) is the largest contributor to global methane emissions,⁶ and within the sector, livestock-related emissions linked to the global meat and dairy industries make up the lion’s share. Enteric fermentation (where micro-organisms create methane in the stomachs of animals such as cows and sheep) and manure management are believed to be responsible for over 30% of all anthropogenic methane emissions.⁷ For this reason, it is vital that governments and companies that are responsible for many of the methane emissions from livestock take urgent and meaningful action to reduce them.

1.2. Methane: climate policy’s blind spot

Ahead of the next UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021, our report takes stock of the current state of play when it comes to tackling methane emissions. It reveals that both countries and companies that are among the biggest methane emitters ignore the potential of rapidly reducing methane emissions to stay below 1.5°C of global heating. Our analysis looked at the biggest players in the livestock sector and reveals that this is a critical blind spot in climate policies and commitments.

1.2.1. Governments reporting, but not addressing methane emissions

We have analysed the reported methane emissions and related policies in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of 18 countries that have the biggest meat and dairy industries, and where action to cut emissions is critical, including the USA, Brazil and countries in Western Europe. The results of the analysis are sobering and demonstrate that governments have yet to grasp the importance of radical methane reduction measures in general and in the meat and dairy industries in particular. Our key findings include:

- In most countries, methane emissions from the livestock sector are relatively stable or even increasing. Even though eight countries reported a decrease in emissions linked to enteric fermentation and manure management in the last five years, none of these reductions was higher than 5%. Over the same five-year period, the Netherlands has reported an increase of 6.5% in livestock-related methane emissions.
- None of the countries assessed has established overall methane reduction targets that are consistent with the 45% reduction in emissions of the gas required by 2030 to keep global warming below 1.5°C. Methane emissions targets for the livestock sector are particularly scarce. Only New Zealand and Uruguay have set methane reduction targets for this sector, but these are weak, with a target of only a 10% reduction in New Zealand, and limited to emission intensity reduction targets in Uruguay. Recently announced schemes, like the Global Methane Pledge and the EU Methane Strategy, also ignore the potential to reduce methane emissions by addressing people’s overconsumption of meat and dairy – where some of the biggest cuts in emissions can be achieved.
- Finally, although the vast majority of countries cover agriculture in their NDCs, they lack concrete measures and action plans to transform the way they produce and consume food, which could include shifts to healthier and more sustainable diets incorporating less and better meat and dairy.

Box E.S.1: Addressing the gap in the Global Methane Pledge

COP26 in November 2021 offers a real opportunity to establish strong commitments to reduce methane emissions. Ahead of the conference, the EU and the US released the Global Methane Pledge, with the goal of ‘reducing global methane emissions by at least 30% from 2020 levels by 2030 and moving towards using best available inventory methodologies to quantify methane emissions’.⁸ Although the pledge does mention agriculture and livestock, disappointingly it focuses only on technical measures and incentives to encourage individual farmers to reduce their methane emissions, instead of aiming for the much more significant reductions that could be achieved by reducing livestock numbers through a systemic transition to healthier diets with less and better meat and dairy.

Nor is the pledge aligned with the *Global methane assessment*⁹ report, which calls for a 45% reduction in methane emissions from all sectors by 2030. The report concluded that targeted technical measures, which are already available, could reduce methane emissions in the ruminant livestock sector by around 30 million tons per year by 2030. However, behavioural and policy measures to reduce food loss and waste, improve livestock management and implement a shift to healthier diets could reduce emissions by a further 65–80 million tons over the next few decades. This is almost half of the 180 million tons of annual reductions required to avoid 0.3°C of global heating by the 2040s, contributing significantly to global efforts to limit any temperature rise to 1.5°C.¹⁰

Implementing policies that drive reductions in demand for meat and dairy products through the adoption of healthier diets is therefore critical in bridging the gap in the Global Methane Pledge and bringing emissions into line with scientific recommendations for keeping any global temperature rise below 1.5°C.

1.2.2. Meat and dairy giants ignoring the methane issue

Most of the largest corporate emitters of methane are also oblivious to the problem and their responsibility to address it. To measure the extent to which industry is committed to reducing GHG emissions in general and methane emissions in particular, we focused on ten of the largest global meat companies and ten of their largest dairy counterparts. We analysed and scored their climate policies and actions against 11 indicators, with a particular focus on methane. The overall analysis showed a clear lack of leadership and commitment when it comes to reducing methane emissions and contributing to global efforts to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. Our key findings include:

- All the companies scored poorly. Of those we assessed, Nestlé was the highest-scoring company, with a mediocre score of 34.6%. Danone came second, scoring slightly over 30%, while all other firms scored less than 20%. Groupe Bigard, the largest European beef processor, came bottom with a total score of 0%.
- None of the 20 companies report methane emissions separately, and none of them have meaningful and concrete targets or action plans to specifically reduce methane emissions in their operations and value chains.
- Only seven of the 20 companies have set science-based targets (i.e. in line with what the latest climate science deems necessary to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement) to reduce their overall GHG emissions.
- Only three companies (Nestlé, Danone and Dairy Farmers of America) set targets that include

scope 3 emissions. Crucially, these include emissions from supply chains, for example farms that are owned by suppliers but from which companies buy milk or meat for processing.

- Although 18 of the 20 companies were found to have made at least some investment in plant-based and cultured meat alternatives, only Danone reports sales of its combined portfolio of such alternatives.
- Just over half of the companies assessed are meaningfully investing in methane abatement research, but none of them disclose the level of funding they are providing to such research efforts.

1.3. The way forward

Livestock, which is by far the largest contributor to human-induced methane emissions, should be at the heart of action plans designed to reduce such emissions. Our report reveals that, in spite of the livestock sector’s major contribution to global methane emissions, neither governments nor the industry itself are taking the sector’s methane emissions seriously. While the Global Methane Pledge (see Box E.S.1) is a step in the right direction and sets a framework for the introduction of both supply and demand side measures, it should be made legally binding, and foreground methane reductions that can be made by decreasing demand for animal products. In particular, countries where the average consumption of meat and dairy is above recommended intake should rapidly develop national action plans with binding policies for consumption reduction. These should focus on a shift to a diet containing less and better meat and dairy, with the promotion of alternative and plant-based protein. On the industry side, there should be specific regulations requiring companies to set science-based targets to cut their carbon and methane emissions, both by using technical measures and reducing livestock production.

Further recommendations for governments, companies and consumers can be found at the end of this report.

PERFORMANCE OF THE BIGGEST MEAT AND DAIRY COMPANIES (IN %)

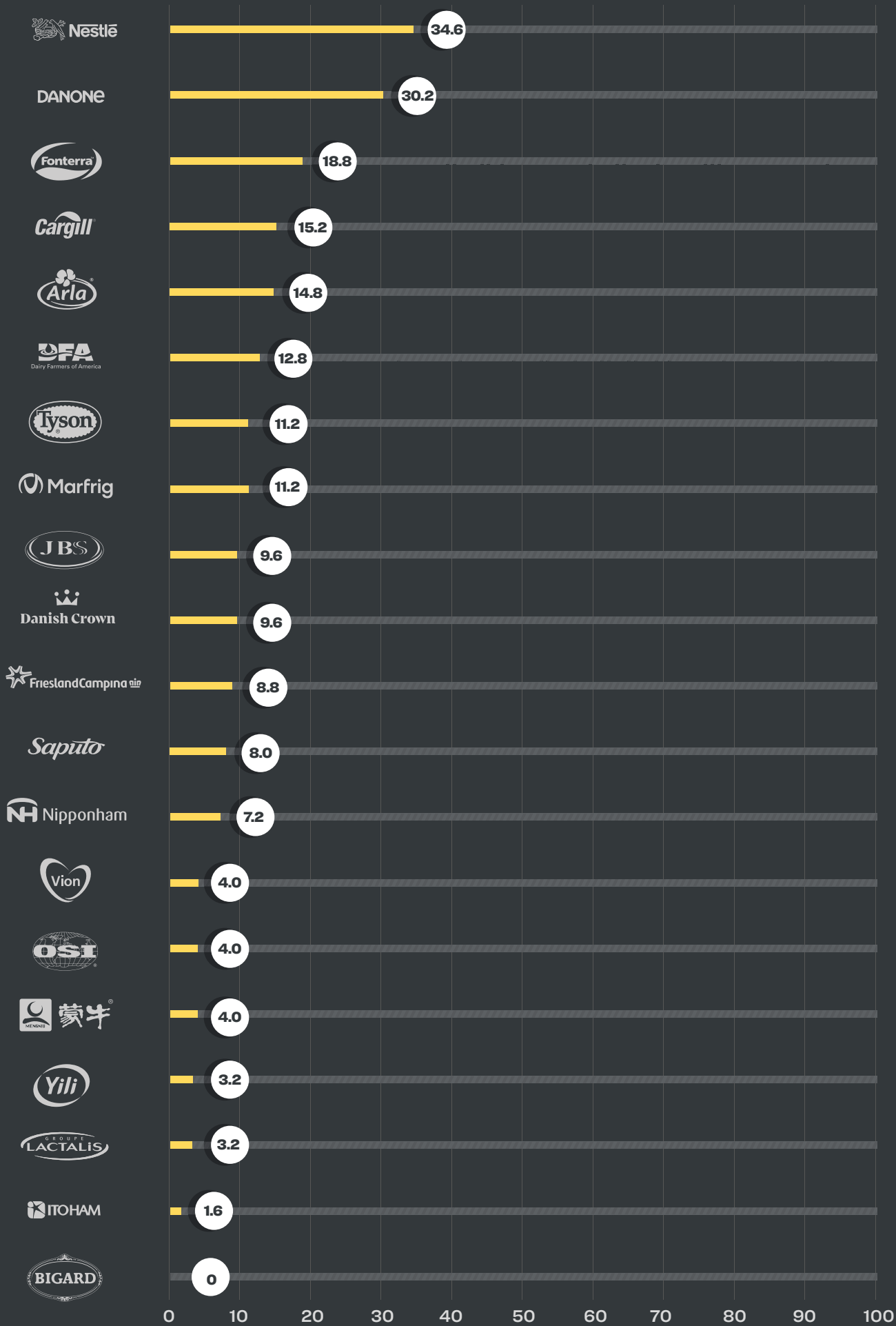


Figure E.S.1: Summary of scoring (%) for the 20 largest meat and dairy companies assessed on their commitments to reducing GHG and methane emissions

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