Global Alert!

May 10 marks South Africa’s Meat Exhaustion Day 2024. South Africa already exhausted its yearly meat consumption allowance within planetary and health boundaries!

Four PAWS follows up on the year 2023’s Meat Exhaustion Report: When meat is eating up the planet, with a focus on consumption in individual countries. Four PAWS’ analysis shows that World Meat Exhaustion Day will be reached on the 24th of June this year. However, it is the countries of the Global North [high-income countries] that should primarily reduce their meat consumption.

Global meat production and consumption are unsustainable for the planet and human health.

The Planetary Health Diet guideline recommends eating a maximum of 301g of meat per week.

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a Meat weight was considered only, bones and ingredients such as water, egg, flour, and spices were excluded from the calculation.
b The Planetary Health Diet recommends a maximum consumption of 49 g of beef, 49 g of pork and 204 g of chicken per week. The average South African consumption in 2022 was 843 g of meat per week - 538 g of chicken 84 g of pork, and 222 g of beef.
South Africa needs to reduce its meat consumption by 64% to fit within planetary and health boundaries.

What is Meat Exhaustion Day?

Meat Exhaustion Day determines the day on which the maximum recommended meat consumption per year has been reached, with respect to the Earth’s limit (planetary boundaries) and considering human health requirements (health boundary)\(^1\). It is comparable to Earth Overshoot Day, also known as Ecological Debt Day. The date is calculated by comparing a country’s actual average consumption of meat per person per year with the recommendations of the Planetary Health Diet which provides a scientific framework for determining a diet that is both healthy for humans and the planet\(^1\). The diet recommended by the EAT-Lancet Commission can be adopted on the country level (e.g. Denmark) as well as on the retail level (e.g. LIDL Germany)\(^3\).4.

South Africa’s meat consumption needs to drastically decline to fit within planetary and health boundaries.

By the fifth month of the year, South Africans have already consumed 100% of the meat amount that they should ideally consume within twelve months. The average South African eats up to 43.86 kg of meat per year, according to 2022 data. Meat consumption is much higher than the average total global meat intake of 33 kg per person per year\(^5\).

Following the Planetary Health Diet recommendations not more than 301 g of meat should be consumed per week, equal to approximately half a boerewors.

- On average a person in South Africa consumes nearly 1 kg of meat per week, the equivalent of 5.6 pieces of fried chicken pieces per week.
- According to the Planetary Health Diet recommendation, no more than 2 pieces of fried chicken should be consumed per week. Meanwhile, poultry remains the most consumed meat in South Africa and has been increasing over time\(^6\). The poultry sector provided 65% of animal protein sources (excluding milk) in 2022, as poultry products consumed amounted to a total of 2.8 million tons. Poultry is twice as much consumed compared to beef and pork meat combined\(^6\).

\(^1\) Data for meat consumption in South Africa was retrieved from a report published by the South African Poultry Association (SAPA) in 2022 which uses primary data taken from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD). To calculate the actual consumption and enable comparison to the Planetary Health Diet, we calculated this from carcass weight to retail weight using a specific dressing percentage per animal species.
**Meat consumption has a high impact on human health.**

The ‘Western diet’ has replaced South Africa’s traditional and healthier foods over the years. Processed foods that include processed meats, such as fried chicken, burger and pizza takeaway, and fast foods increase the risk of non-communicable diseases. Shifting away from the currently common and affordable low-quality fast foods has been difficult for South Africa which faces the challenge of high rates of poverty and a big wealth gap that makes healthier food less accessible than fast food options.

The most recent dietary guidelines from the South African government were published in 2012. These guidelines promote the intake of animal-sourced protein that can amount to 595 g of meat per week, which is almost twice the amount recommended by the Planetary Health Diet.

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*Only meat weight was considered, bones or other ingredients were excluded from the calculation.*
Mass meat consumption causes immense suffering to animals and threatens human health.

- Over one billion chickens are killed every year in South Africa\(^{11}\).
- More than 5 million land animals were slaughtered in South Africa in 2023, these amount to 1 000 443 cattle, 6 578 calves, 1 445 610 pigs, 2 063 751 sheep, 9 848 crocodiles, 11 377 game, 38 795 ostriches, and 771 goats, as of 2023 data\(^{12}\).

Intensive farming has become a basis for our current food production system that harms animals and applies cruel practices\(^{13}\). Common practices include routine amputations and mutilations (including debeaking, dehorning, tail docking, castration and others), often without any anesthetic and analgesia, and cruel slaughter methods\(^{11}\). Many farm animals that end up being slaughtered live in intensive husbandry systems that subject them to stress and diseases that can affect human public health.

- South Africa regularly experiences outbreaks of zoonotic diseases which lead to animals being killed without being consumed\(^{14}\).
- In 2017 South Africa experienced the largest listeriosis outbreak in the world, its source being ready-to-eat processed meat products\(^{15}\).

South Africa has seen an increase in animals being farmed for food, this growing demand is the largest contributor to a shift away from traditional farming methods to industrialized methods requiring a drastic increase in the number of animals being farmed, in a shorter time span, with devastating impacts on the welfare of animals, humans and the planet\(^{12}\).
As long as animals are kept in factory farms, farming in South Africa will not be sustainable for the climate and the planet.

- About 82% of South Africa’s land is used for agriculture, with about 67% used for grazing, exerting substantial pressure on land and water resources.14,15
- Fodder crops used to feed animals use up to 62% of South Africa’s river waters causing the biggest river basins of Limpopo, Great Fish, Doring, and Great Kei to face severe water scarcity during dry periods.16
- Livestock emissions from enteric fermentation and manure make up 77% of total agricultural emissions (40775 Gg of CO₂ equivalent).17

With its multitude of impacts on land, water, and greenhouse gas emissions, factory farming exacerbates the climate change impacts that are affecting the drought-prone country of South Africa.18,19 Further industrialization of the animal farming sector in South Africa must be stopped:

The government of South Africa should shift away from intensive farming. In practice, projects such as the “Poultry Master Plan” will further harm the environment, meanwhile shifting towards sustainable production systems for the planet and human health would make healthy food more accessible.

For more information on South Africa’s Factory farming see the #LiveKinder report

The global picture from the 2023 report: Over-consumption of meat is a particular problem of the Global North.

Global meat production and consumption are unsustainable for the planet and human health.

Global Meat Exhaustion Day is reached this year in June. This date is close to Earth Overshoot Day 2023. To stay within health and planetary boundaries, global meat consumption should be reduced by at least 50%. However, since not everyone on the planet consumes the same amount of meat (because of cultural, societal or economic reasons or lack of just access), regional and country-specific data help better determine where meat reduction should occur.

In the Global North (high-income countries), meat intake needs to be reduced by more than 70%!

Our dietary options as well as our food system must change to counter the harmful effects of animal-based foods. The problem lies in the whole current food system that supplies immense quantities of cheap meat through factory farming, which treats animals as mere objects and a commodity, and carries hidden costs that exceed its contribution to global prosperity.20,21,22
FOUR PAWS recommendations

Governments should phase out factory farming and intensive production, and instead promote diverse production systems and plant-based food production systems. Set clear targets across the food chain to reduce meat and dairy production and consumption in line with the EAT-Lancet Diet within planetary boundaries (with indicators and monitoring).

Government-led policy change can increase the share of plant-based options in public procurement, while simultaneously reducing animal-sourced foods. Policymakers should define minimum standards that respect high animal welfare criteria and that specify the serving of a certain portion of plant-based protein per week.27

Retailers and other food system actors should be engaged to reduce, refine and replace meat options at the retail level. Check out the FOUR PAWS food industry rankings on animal protein reduction.

Consumers can reduce meat consumption, especially cheap and highly processed meat; replace animal-based food with legumes and other plant-based options. Consumers can also refine choice of retailers, restaurants and products and economically engage with cruelty-free suppliers.