Rebalancing Protein Sales:
A call to action for ambitious food companies

Overview

The private sector has a crucial role in making positive contributions toward a societal shift to more healthy and sustainable diets. Key to this is rebalancing plant and animal protein food sales to ensure that consumption aligns with evidence-based health recommendations and planetary boundaries.

We therefore call for food companies to set clear targets to rebalance their protein sales, and thereby drive positive dietary change aligned with global and EU health and sustainability goals.

By tracking progress toward protein split targets, food companies can uncover opportunities, develop and evaluate interventions, comply with regulatory expectations, and contribute significantly to a more sustainable food system.

Food system influence on climate and nature

The global food system is a major driver of both climate change and environmental degradation, responsible for around one-third of global emissions.[1] Animal agriculture plays a significant role in these emissions, producing large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions, specifically carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. Beyond greenhouse gases, agriculture is the leading cause of deforestation and biodiversity loss, with the majority of agricultural land going toward producing animal products and growing crops for animal feed. The clearing of forests for livestock grazing and feed crop production further accelerates habitat destruction and reduces biodiversity.

Intensive livestock farming also degrades soil, contaminates water, and contributes to air pollution through the release of pathogens/zoonoses, hormones, waste, and chemicals (i.e. ammonia and nitrogen oxides). These environmental impacts create a vicious cycle that exacerbates climate change, increases extreme weather events, and depletes natural resources, ultimately threatening food security and resilience.

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Vast impact of shifting diets

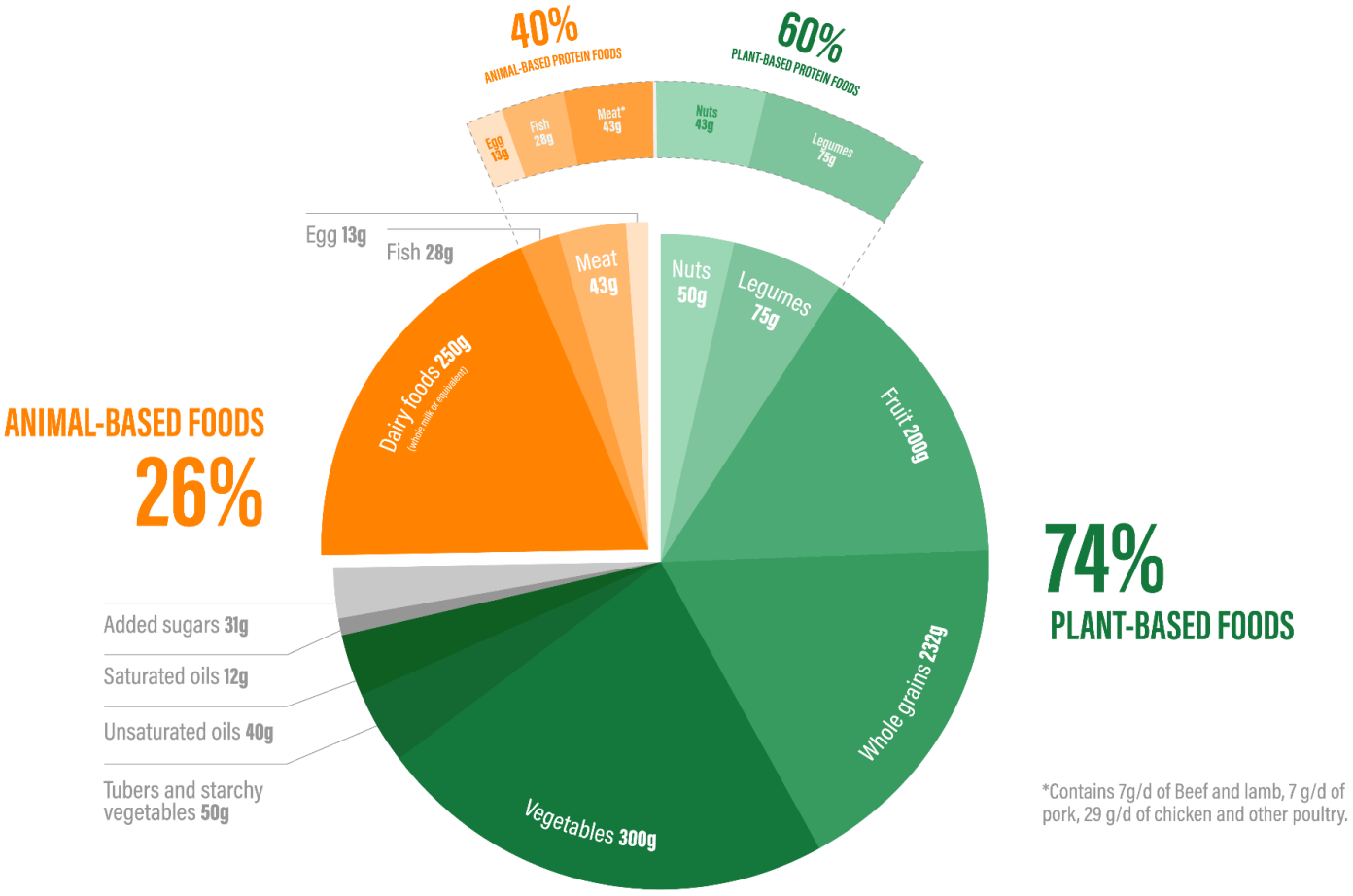
Dietary patterns in high-income countries, on average, exceed population nutrition recommendations for protein. These dietary patterns are also associated with the highest diet-related environmental impact, primarily due to the high consumption of animal-based foods.

Healthy, sustainable diets include a wide variety of foods that are produced responsibly. They are rich in plants, including fruit, vegetables, pulses, and wholegrains, can contain moderate amounts of meat, dairy, eggs, and lower footprint seafood, and can contain minimal amounts of foods high in fat, salt, and sugar. Food environments that incentivise plant-rich diets will deliver health benefits and are imperative from an environmental perspective.

Shifting diets can drastically reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, potentially cutting agricultural emissions by 61% in high-income countries by 2050.[2] Dietary changes can reduce the environmental impact across multiple indicators – including land use and biodiversity loss – and enable a move towards nature-positive farming.[3] [4] Dietary changes can also offer significant social cost savings and enhanced public health, with the potential to further improve global hunger and animal welfare. Shifting dietary patterns presents one of the most optimal ways to mitigate and address these interconnected problems.

The Planetary Health Diet, developed by the EAT-Lancet Commission,[5] represents global healthy, sustainable dietary guidelines. It shows eight food groups (whole grains, tubers or starchy vegetables, vegetables, fruits, dairy foods, protein sources, added fats and added sugars) and sets scientific targets for the proportions in which these food groups (and sub-groups) should be consumed for human health and environmental sustainability by 2050. See table 1 for more detail.

ProVeg International, WWF, and the Green Protein Alliance recommend that food companies set targets to rebalance food sales that are aligned with the Planetary Health Diet. The split between plant-based and animal-based foods in this diet is around 70% plant to 30% animal when all food groups are included,[6] and 60% plant to 40% animal when focusing on the protein source food group.



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Food companies should track their progress toward protein diversification

Given the climate and nature challenges related to our food system, and the potential benefits to public health and global food security offered by dietary change, it is crucial that food companies create food environments that enable their customers to shift toward more plant-rich diets. Physical food environments greatly influence consumer food choices, which presents a significant opportunity for food companies to drive positive change.

To understand and enhance their contribution to the uptake of healthy, sustainable diets, food companies need to assess the volumes of protein foods sold and the balance between plant and animal protein foods in their offerings. This will require setting protein split goals and tracking progress toward these goals.

We call on food companies to track their ratio of plant and animal protein foods and set a goal aligned with dietary recommendations outlined in the Planetary Health Diet. Establishing a standardised method for measuring this ratio will pave the way for a comprehensive understanding of the shift toward healthier, more sustainable food systems. By monitoring and shifting the balance between plant and animal protein foods, companies can significantly reduce their environmental footprint, contribute to global climate and nature goals, and generate value for their business.

Value proposition

Ensuring long-term business viability involves aligning with global sustainability goals and consumer trends towards healthier, more sustainable diets. Addressing the crises outlined above will make business operations more resilient and sustainable.

Regular monitoring allows companies to pinpoint which strategies are most successful in rebalancing sales of plant-based and animal-based foods. Data might reveal that in-store promotions, product placement, or collaborations with brands are needed to incentivize plant sales or disincentivize animal sales. For example, after tracking their 2023 protein split across all food groups, Dutch retailer Jumbo determined that they would need to end promotional discounts on fresh meat in order to achieve their 2030 goal. Then in March 2024, Jumbo

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announced they would discontinue special offers on beef, pork, and chicken. Annual protein monitoring also enables Jumbo to assess the effectiveness of this strategy into the future.

Embracing both voluntary and mandatory disclosure requirements is increasingly important for companies. Voluntary frameworks like the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) and mandatory regulations such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) offer compelling reasons to track and report progress on protein split goals. The CSRD mandates comprehensive sustainability reporting from large companies, including indirect and direct emissions – Scopes 1, 2, & 3. Tracking and reporting on protein split goals specifically can serve as a key metric within these frameworks, offering concrete evidence of progress towards sustainability targets. This proactive approach to disclosure can position food companies as leaders in the industry, meeting the growing demand for accountability and transparency from consumers, investors, and policymakers.

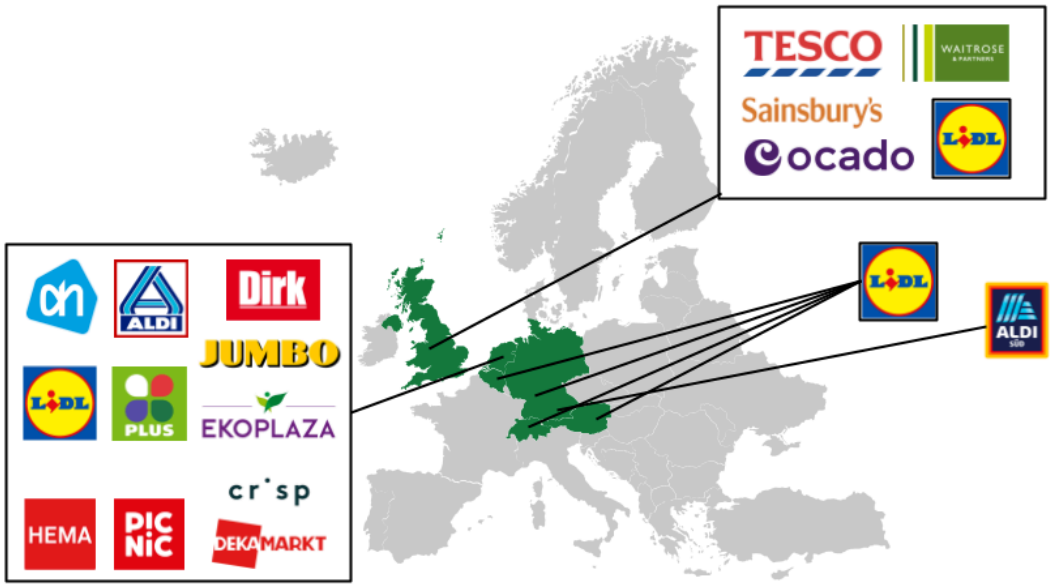
Scope 3 emissions, including those from agriculture, account for over 90% of a company's total emissions. Furthermore, 51% of a food retailer's Scope 3 emissions come from meat and dairy.[7] By integrating these reporting standards, food companies can not only comply with evolving regulations but also leverage their sustainability efforts to gain a competitive edge, build stronger relationships with stakeholders, and contribute to a more sustainable food system. Many major food retailers are already setting science-based targets to align their practices with these objectives.

Momentum building on protein disclosure

Businesses can lead the way, as seen in the Netherlands where food retailers have set more ambitious protein split goals than the Dutch government. In 2024, over 90% of the Dutch food retail market is tracking protein split according to The Protein Tracker methodology, developed by the Green Protein Alliance and ProVeg Netherlands.

In the UK, food retailers have been tracking protein food sales and progress toward protein split goals for several years as part of the WWF Basket. For the 2024 reporting period, nine retailers, representing over 80% of the major UK supermarkets, have adopted the same methodology to report on protein food sales, including Tesco, Sainsburys, Waitrose, Coop, M&S, Lidl and Aldi. Currently, five UK retailers publicly report their protein food sales split.

Major retailers in Belgium, Germany, and Austria have also adopted methodologies to track their protein split goals.



Retailers tracking and publicly reporting on their protein sales split.

Quelle: ProVeg NL / Green Protein Alliance / WWF Schweiz

Recommendations for targets and tracking

- Set time-bound targets for rebalancing sales of animal and plant-based foods, aiming for a goal that is based on scientifically sound and widely recognized dietary recommendations for a sustainable future, like the Planetary Health Diet.
- Report progress toward targets against a clear baseline and reference year, and use a methodology that ensures internal comparability to accurately track progress toward targets.
- Report how and to what extent changes in animal and plant-based food sales contribute to established sustainability targets (e.g. climate, nutrition).
- Report protein source food[8] sales at a minimum, and ideally, report and set a target to rebalance animal and plant-based food sales across the whole product portfolio, including composite and prepared products.
- Convene to agree and continuously improve on methodology and targets. Alignment on tracking and goal-setting will facilitate year-on-year progress and comparability between companies in their market. Collaboration maximises action towards shared goals and creates space for collective advocacy for stronger policies on healthy, sustainable diets.

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Collaboration between food companies, NGOs, and other institutions can facilitate the sharing of experiences, setting shared targets, and continuously improving methodologies and data collection to maximise collective contributions towards achieving goals.

ProVeg International, WWF, and the Green Protein Alliance are working together to support food companies to track sales of animal and plant-based foods and measure progress toward protein split targets.

References & notes

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2. Sun, Z., L. and Scherer, et al. (2022), *Dietary change in high-income nations alone can lead to substantial double climate dividend.* Nature Food 3(1), 29–37. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357723207_Dietary_change_in_high-income_nations_alone_can_lead_to_substantial_double_climate_dividend
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6. The 70% plant to 30% animal target for all PHD food groups remains roughly the same when looking at protein content and food volume.
7. Madre Brava, (2024), *European supermarkets race to lead global protein transition.* https://madrebrava.org/insight/european-supermarkets-race-to-lead-global-protein-transition
8. *Protein source foods* are those found in the protein source food group in the Planetary Health Diet, and include meat, fish, eggs, legumes, nuts and seeds.

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