



Big Dairy: Global Tactics and Political Influence



Lucas Thibault Puech

Doble major in political science and environmental studies, Boston College, and Barcelona Program for Interdisciplinary Studies, Universitat Pompeu Fabra



lucas.puech@bc.edu



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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which the dairy industry engages in lobbying activities, measuring not only the methods they employ in this lobbying, but also the calculated outcomes. In doing so, the dairy industry can influence policy and surgically create their public image, all for the sake of expanding profits and providing for long-term business growth.



Keywords

Big dairy industry, lobbying, animal rights, exploitation, cruelty, ag-gag laws, ecological terrorism

1. Introduction

Industry in general has, since the advent of capitalism, been remarkably influential in the behavior and actions of states on a global level. As it relates to animal rights, industry has long been the bane of their existence, responsible for their degradation and the widespread exploitation of animals on an unimaginable scale. One of the most notable and powerful industry perpetrators is the dairy industry, known colloquially as Big Dairy, a term indicative of its influence. Equipped with a complex and extensive arsenal of market and state actions to protect themselves and their interests, the dairy industry is capable of perpetuating the animal cruelty they partake in. Whether it is using one of the largest lobbying avenues in congress, launching an enormous image-bettering campaign, or the plethora of other managerial alternatives available to an industry with such ungodly sums of money, the dairy industry is supremely capable of cementing its power and the activities they carry out, cruel as they are.

In order to even begin a discussion on the actions the dairy industry takes in order to maintain its animal exploitation activities, there needs to be an in-depth analysis of the sheer size of the industry, and the results are staggering. In the US in 2021 alone, there were about 9,500,000 cows that produced 226,276,000,000 pounds of milk. (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2022). To put that into context, if one theorizes that the average weight of a person in the US is 150 pounds, the dairy industry produces more pounds of milk than four times the total weight of the US human population. In December 2021, milk and its products were sold at 21.80 \$/cwt, which means the dairy industry made approximately \$49,328,168,000 in 2021 (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2022). With such extraordinary sums gained through exports and domestic sales, the power of the dairy industry can be understood with greater clarity, and its ability to force conformity to its will becomes more understandable. It must also be reiterated that these quantities of production and income only describe the United States alone. It is helpful to analyze the statistics of American dairy production because it is the largest dairy production and processing country in the world. However, the shocking size of the industry is not particular to the US, and many countries around the world contain a dairy industry of proportionally equal or greater size and power.

Analyzing the global dairy industry as a single entity is useful for several reasons, but it remains fruitful to delineate some of the most significant market actors. The biggest dairy company in the world is Nestlé, a Switzerland-based company with a reputation for scandals such as contributing to environmental degradation as well as human and animal rights violations. Nestlé also has an annual revenue of \$24.3 billion. However, they are not the biggest milk-producing company in the world, which is Dairy Farmers of America, responsible for producing about 3.5% of the entire world's milk supply. The largest dairy companies in the world aside from these two include Lactalis, Danone, Fonterra, FrieslandCampina, Tyson, Arla Foods, and Yili Group. Essentially all of these companies come from different countries, all with immense capabilities of influencing policy and their public image in their respective states (BizVibe 2021).

2. Tactics and Political Influence

Having established the most significant market actors and given a snapshot of the truly enormous quantities of money they deal with, it is necessary to analyze what actions the dairy industry takes with their power. One of their most influential and widely-known practices is the intense lobbying that the dairy industry constantly partakes in. Lobbying by the dairy industry is most commonly done to achieve three goals: hiding their animal rights violations, twisting their immense contributions to climate change, and exaggerating how beneficial dairy is for human health.

Dairy industry lobbying is a giant operation, and to understand why the government capitulates to the industry's wants and needs, it is helpful to illustrate precisely how giant it is. In 2021 in the US alone, \$6,694,383 was distributed to 31 different members of the US congress by the dairy industry (OpenSecrets 2022). If divided evenly among them, this would mean each congressperson made \$215,947 off the industry in a single year, which is \$41,947 more than their annual salary of \$174,000. Putting in perspective that the dairy industry pays them more than their government job helps us understand some of the reasons for participating in this legal corruption. Furthermore, contributions of the dairy industry to lobbying efforts have been steadily increasing since 2009, as their desperation to correct their worsening public image is increasing.

2.1. *Disguising Cruelty and Degradation*

One of the most significant reasons the dairy industry is so willing to contribute immense sums to government officials is that they need to hide their animal rights abuses to maintain their popularity. Through their extensive lobbying, the dairy industry has successfully concealed a laundry list of types of animal cruelty. To obtain the milk from the cows, calves are separated from cows an average of one hour after birth. The milk produced by the cow for her calf is taken from her and sold to customers. Furthermore, "over 90% of U.S. dairy cows are confined in primarily indoor operations, with more than 60% tethered by the neck inside barren stalls, unable to perform even the most basic behaviors essential to their well-being" (Animal Equality 2018). As calves grow up in their confined environments as they wait to become dairy cows forcefully, they experience painful mutilations such as branding, dehorning, and tail docking, all of which are cruel acts taking away from the lives these cows deserve to lead. Finally, as soon as a cow's milk production declines, they are killed quickly and horrifically, such as getting their throats slit, before being used for meat production and the beef industry. All of this is information the dairy industry is fearful of leaking, as it will further damage the image they need to sustain in order to continue being successful economically.

Another one of the most significant reasons why the dairy industry partakes in extensive lobbying is to hide the huge extent to which they cause environmental degradation and contribute to climate change. The dairy industry's carbon intensity is massive, so its lobbying tactics to build a successful

facade must be equally so. For example, the US meat and dairy “agribusiness industry spent \$2.5 billion on lobbying” between 1998 and 2019 (Lazarus, McDermid and Jacquet 2021, 17). This does not include contributions directly to national political candidates, which accounts for another giant sum. To put in perspective exactly how desperate the dairy industry is to disguise its carbon footprint, it is helpful to compare its lobbying efforts to that of the most notable climate destroyer, the oil industry. Findings by a New York University research group found that, “relative to each company’s revenue, Tyson spent double what Exxon spent on political campaigns and 33 percent more on lobbying” (Gustin 2021).

So what is the carbon footprint that the dairy industry is trying to hide so dramatically? We know well that animal agriculture as a whole contributes to about 15% of the world’s emissions, but animal agriculture is a diverse group. The dairy industry is actually one of the two most significant contributors to this portion of emissions, along with the beef industry (and as has been previously discussed, the two are intertwined in many ways). In other words, the dairy industry plays a direct role in global climate change. A shocking illustration of this fact is that, “with a continuation of existing practices, two companies will each make up over 100 percent of their headquarters country’s emissions targets by 2030: Fonterra in New Zealand and Nestlé in Switzerland” (Devitt 2021). The scale of agribusiness firms, and particularly the dairy industry, is truly difficult to comprehend because their climate impact rivals that of entire countries rather than other companies. Furthermore, these dairy giants, for the most part, have no plans to reduce their emission output any time soon. The same New York University research paper found that only five of the 35 biggest dairy companies—Dairy Farmers of America, Nestlé, Danish Crown, Danone, and Arla—had pledged to reach net-zero emissions by 2050 (Gustin 2021).

It has been established that the dairy industry lobbies extensively in order to hide its climate change contributions in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, but it is important to describe another major reason for their lobbying: climate and decarbonization policies are bad for business. In a report examining the ten biggest US dairy companies, the study found that all ten of them had “contributed to efforts to undermine climate-related policies” (Lazarus, McDermid and Jacquet 2021, 1). In the US, and it could be reasonably predicted to occur equally in other countries as well, the dairy industry combats the climate agenda by supporting politicians who claim that climate change is a hoax, who support pro-agribusiness bills, and who repeatedly vote against climate change legislation such as decarbonization bills (Lazarus, McDermid and Jacquet 2021). One of the most nefarious ways that they combat climate policy is by paying government officials to vote against reporting rules so that people are not even able to find out how much they contribute to climate change if they want to.

2.2. *Painting a Calculated Picture*

The dairy industry’s lobbying is evidently a complex and formidable entity. Its purpose is to conceal dark facts about big dairy’s animal abuses and climate

change contributions, but also to paint the industry itself as a positive and formative body for society. One example of how the dairy industry does this is related to a food pyramid called the Eating Right pyramid published by the US Department of Agriculture in 1991, which was essentially a guide by the government for people to choose the healthiest foods that would reduce risks from chronic diseases. Since it did not label milk as one of the healthy food choices everyone should constantly choose, the dairy industry lobbied aggressively, and the US government decided to withdraw the pyramid, saying it required further research and testing (Nestle 1993). Clearly, the dairy industry will use lobbying to jeopardize the health of the general public (and, of course, the animals they torture to obtain products) in order to maintain the facade of dairy being healthy and necessary.

In order to provide for their long-term success, the dairy industry knows that establishing ideas in children when they are young makes them believe in something and exhibit behavior for the rest of their lives. In other words, if they instill the belief that dairy is necessary for children, they will have consumers to buy their products for as long as possible. Much like they do to achieve any goal, the dairy industry does this by lobbying. Through their extensive lobbying efforts, the US dairy companies have successfully established a curriculum in the US for 7th and 8th graders where they are taught that “milk and other dairy products [are] the single best sources of calcium, stressing to children that vegetables just don’t cut it” (Podell 2014).

Another commonly accepted claim distributed by the government because of the dairy industry is that milk and other dairy products strengthen your bones. According to a study by the British Medical Journal, “calcium intake from dairy sources were not associated with fracture risk” (Trajanoska et al 2018, 1). In other words, the dairy industry has successfully pushed the US government to pass education policy in order to mandate a curriculum for all children in the US, and the curriculum itself is a lie. Not only is it hiding the truth, but studies also suggest it is actually contrary to the truth. Countries and areas with a high calcium intake actually have higher, not lower, rates of osteoporosis and other types of bone disease. According to a study done by the Indian Journal of Clinical Biochemistry, cow milk, and other dairy products have high rates of both proteins and phosphorous, which result in a disturbed calcium balance. “The overall net result is that the more dairy consumed in combination with other dietary sources of phosphorus and protein, the higher the risk for osteoporosis” (Mahdi, Brown and Razzaque 2015: 365). It is frightening that the dairy industry is so large and powerful that it can use lobbying to not only hide its extensive animal abuses and contributions to climate change but also are actively brainwashing entire generations of humans in society to believe in the necessity of milk and other dairy products, which are hurting these same humans in the long run.

3. Comparative Analysis of Actor-State Interactions

It has been established that the government is overly lenient and promoting of the dairy industry’s interests. Consequently, a consideration of the political

economy of big dairy and its relationship with the government necessitates a consideration of the opposing interests and their relations with the state. Regarding opposing interests, there is no more directly opposing group to the dairy industry than animal rights activists. After conducting such an analysis on the government's relationship with animal rights activists, the hypocrisy of the government becomes appalling. The government's main justification for the acceptance of lobbying money is that these dairy companies are simply carrying out their freedom of speech. Inherently existent in a word such as freedom is that it should be available for all who wish to use it. However, animal rights activists, unfortunately, do not appreciate the same freedom of speech and because of it, influence, on legislation.

It would be one thing if the government chose not to listen to the animal rights activists, but instead, it chooses to actively and violently suppress their speech. One of the aspects of American legislation that is very clearly a result of the dairy industry and other agribusiness lobbying is the ag-gag laws in the US. These laws prevent undercover filming and photography of the immense quantity of animal rights abuses found in the dairy industry. As many animal activists, first amendment groups, and many others have claimed, these ag-gag laws are a blatant attempt at hiding the extent of animal rights abuses as well as a censoring of activist groups, a violation of their freedom of speech.

However, the government did not simply stop there. For example, in the US, the government passed the Animal and Ecological Terrorism Act to protect the dairy industry which pays them such high wages. This act criminalizes people "encouraging, financing, assisting or engaged in politically motivated acts of animal and ecological terrorism" (American Legislative Exchange Council 2013). Animal and ecological terrorism is defined as someone participating in activities "intended to obstruct, impede or deter any person from participating in a lawful animal activity" (American Legislative Exchange Council 2013). Analyzing the language of this legislation, it is shocking that there was not more extensive judicial review, much less a complete repeal, on the grounds that this law actively and unashamedly prevents the lawful exercising of crucial first amendment rights.

Evidently, when one of the organized interest groups has seemingly infinite money compared to the other, there becomes a stark inequality in how they interact with the government. Since the dairy industry can simply throw money at congress until it does its bidding, the activist groups trying to fight for justice cannot compete. Therefore, the laws and freedom of speech violations put in place to silence the activist groups are a testament to two things. On the one hand, it shows the power that money has in government. On the other hand, it shows that the dairy industry is deathly afraid of the activist groups and their relentless drive to fight for animal rights. If they were not so afraid, they would not be committing such sums of money to the government to protect them. Although this consideration was largely centered on the US, because the information is more readily available than in other countries around the world, the experience described here is not so specific. Similar laws and actions have

been passed by several different governments worldwide, protecting industries over people and other animals.

4. Conclusion

The power of the dairy industry is legitimately frightening. It has a wallet so deep and with it a voice so loud that governments around the world capitulate to their every need. With an unfortunately successful lobbying mechanism, the dairy industry is able to hide its cruel exploitation of cows, its significant emissions contributions, and its brainwashing of entire populations of people. Because the dairy industry's grip on governments worldwide is so tight, these same governments fight any opposing interests to appease the industry that pays them well. This inconvenient and unfortunate truth should infuriate people and invigorate everyone to join the fight to defend animals and their delicate rights. Only with more people, greater funding, and louder voices can the voices of nonhuman animals be heard as well, and only then can their meaningful lives be protected as much as the dairy industry's.



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