

Ranchers have a beef with plant-based burgers

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ENTERPRISE, Ore. — Real beef? Impossible Burgers? Beyond Meat? Old-fashioned veggie burgers? They’re all being considered these days as consumers add concerns for health, the environment and climate change to their interest in flavor.

But northeast Oregon beef producers are wary of the newest-generation of plant-based burger offerings, including Beyond Meat and Impossible Burger. They are beef look-alikes that seemingly masquerade as meat. Ranchers want consumers to know what they’re getting: It’s not beef, it’s not local and it’s not as environmentally friendly or as healthy as many consumers think.

A case of mistaken identity — that consumers will think they are buying meat when they choose a less healthy, highly processed product out of the grocery store meat case — is at the top of local rancher’s concerns. The newer generation of plant-based “meats” — most notably a brand called Beyond Meat — have muscled their way into the supermarket meat case and onto the hamburger shelves. These products are clearly labeled “plant-based patties.” But they are engineered to look like beef. They sort of taste like beef.



Beef cattle graze amid the snow in a pasture along Alder Slope Road south of Enterprise, Ore., on Nov. 25. With the snow coming down, these cattle are likely getting the last of what they’ll graze for the season and depend on hay their owner provides.



Todd Nash

They are a different animal than the antiquated low-fat veggie-burgers hibernating in supermarket freezers.

Long-time Wallowa County rancher Mack Birkmaier doesn’t like having plant-based meat substitutes marketed next to the ground beef and steaks in supermarket meat counters. “It’s kind of like cheating,” he said.

Rancher and County



Mack Birkmaier

Commissioner Todd Nash agreed.

“I would like people to know that they’re buying a plant-based product rather than a beef product and have it labeled appropriately so that the consumer can make that choice,” he said.

The unease is a national one. Curtis W. Martin, a board member of the U.S. Cattlemen’s Association

who ranches in North Powder, echoes Birkmaier’s and Nash’s concerns.

“By no means are you going to steal our reputation, our labeling and our quality by trying to confuse ... the consumer by using ‘meat’ or ‘beef’ on the labeling or advertising,” he said. The USDA wants the U.S. government to ban the words “meat” or “beef” from being used to promote non-beef products.

Touted as a healthy food that will save the planet, the new generation of plant-based burgers are increasingly popular. Beyond Meat is now sold in about 35,000 grocery stores nationwide. In Wallowa County it’s available in Safeway, Dollar Stretcher and the Market Place in Joseph. Impossible Burgers, sold only in restaurants, are available for lunch or dinner at Heavenly’s. The popularity of these “plant-based meats” is growing rapidly across the nation, even though they are more expensive than locally grown grass-fed beef.

The healthiness and environmental credentials of the new plant-based “meats” are also near the top of local rancher’s concerns. “They just aren’t very natural,” Birkmaier said.

Beyond Meat’s “meaty texture” comes largely from processed pea protein isolate and rice protein. The juiciness is courtesy of generous amounts of canola oil, coconut oil and cocoa butter. These plant patties contain more saturated fat per “burger” (30% of your daily saturated fat ration) than most of the ground beef next to them. The Impossible Burger, which is soy-based, offers a stunning 40% of daily saturated fat. In addition to its heart-stopping fat content, the Impossible Burger relies on genetically modified ingredients to produce its meaty texture.

Local nutritionist Lana Rose said she would not choose to eat products that were as processed and as high in saturated fat content as these plant-based burgers.

“There are better things to eat. You are really not eating plants,” she said.

The Harvard Health Review notes that “along with the ambition to replicate hamburgers comes a comparable amount of saturated fat. Since diets higher in saturated fat are associated with increased rates of both heart disease and premature death, they may not be the type of food to opt for if your ambitions are purely health-related.”

Based on these data, Wallowa County ranchers’ concern for consumer health seems justified.

In addition to its high fat content, the new meatless-meat is also considered to be an ultra-processed food — a category now under increased scrutiny for obesity, cardiovascular and metabolic disease, along with breast and all cancers, depression, frailty in the elderly and premature mortality, as outlined in a 2019 report by the U.S. National Institute of Health. (Ultra-processed foods are defined by the prestigious British Medical Journal as “formulations of food substances often modified by chemical processes and then assembled into ready-to-consume hyper-palatable food and drink products. ... These foods include ... reconstituted meat products,

pre-prepared frozen dishes and soft drinks.”)

This is also perfectly in line with Birkmaier’s principal concern about these plant burgers: their potential negative effects on human health.

“I think the mothers of America should be somewhat wary of feeding this concoction of cells, plants and chemicals to their children,” he said. “Should it have a warning label attached? What does this do to a developing child’s body?”

For the environmentally concerned, there are other considerations. Both Impossible Burgers and Beyond Meat claim that their products have a lower “carbon footprint” than beef and are helping save the planet from climate change.

A study done for Impossible Burger has certified that its product has an 89% smaller carbon footprint than the “equivalent beef product.” But that statistic appears to include cattle raised on cleared portions of the Amazon rainforest or driving similar ecological deforestation and devastation. It does not take into account grazing on rangelands or restorative grazing practices.

Impossible Burger also claims that the total land area used to produce their ingredients is only 4% of the area needed to produce beef.

“That’s a very, very conservative estimate on our part — most cattle globally require far more land than that estimate,” said Rebekah Moses, Impossible Burger’s senior manager of impact strategy, during an interview with Adele Peters, a staff writer at the online magazine Fast Company. “It’s completely inefficient, and it’s why beef is the leading cause of deforestation in the Amazon. If most of the land that’s used for cattle feed were to be left alone, without the gassy animals, to revegetate and actually store carbon in trees and grasslands, it’s not an exaggeration to say that we could set the clock back on climate change through food choice alone.”

However, Impossible Burger did not address the fate of private land once cattle were removed. And it also seems unaware of the environmentally-based farm-to-table movement, which advocates buying locally produced foods and supporting local agriculture as a way to lower carbon emissions globally.

To Wallowa County ranchers, Moses’s statement seems jaw-droppingly exaggerated.

“First,” Nash said, “you can always manipulate science and say whatever you want, in my opinion. We have a tremendous amount of range and when cattle graze that properly, you have a minimal impact,” he said. “Agriculture as a whole has changed practices radically and we can sequester more carbon in agriculture than we produce.”

Martin, the North Powder-based rancher, said he was unsure of the carbon footprint involved in plant-based substitutes, portions of which may be raised in places as far away as Indonesia or the Philippines, and may be grown on deforested land, shipped long distances for processing and then shipped again to consumers.

But he does know about cattle production.

“It’s pretty dramatic how



Beyond Burger

The plant-based Beyond Meat’s Beyond Burger is sold in grocery stores, but stores vary on whether they display it on the meat counter or in the frozen food aisles. Each plant-based Beyond Burger contains 30% of the daily recommended amount of saturated fat.

American ranchers are creating more protein with less input,” he said. That claim is substantiated by a 2012 study published in the journal Sustainability, which showed that U.S. beef production had decreased its carbon footprint by 16% per animal over the period 1977-2009, and that rate of decrease was expected to continue. And a 2017 report on livestock production and climate by Oxford University’s Food Climate Research Network noted that while range-raised, grass-fed livestock could not feed the planet’s growing population sustainably, “... well-managed grazing can cause carbon to be sequestered in the soil — and at the very least, can provide an economic rationale for keeping the carbon in the ground.”

Demand for the new plant-based meatless burgers seems to be exploding. The Motley Fool’s website reported in October that “... major players like Tyson, Nestle and Hormel have announced that they are launching or developing (similar) plant-based products.” Food giant Smithfield Foods is already in the game, along with Safeway/Albertsons. In addition, more fast-food and other restaurants are adding faux meat to the menus, including Subway, which plans to offer Beyond Meatballs in its marinara sandwich early next year.

In Wallowa County, where grass-fed beef production is an economic mainstay, the rapid rise of faux meats presents a challenge.

“The problem is, we’re a county with 7,000 people and 25,000 cows and we can provide everybody with a wholesome, grass-fed product here and even the tourists who come in, we can fill up the trunks of their cars with grass-fed products,” Nash said. “But we don’t have a processor that is large enough to be able to handle that.”

Still, local cradle-to-market grass-fed beef, (and lamb, bison and yak) are available here, and its purchase supports local ranches and the local economy. It contains less fat and sodium than plant-based burgers. It has just one ingredient, and no added chemicals. There are no genetically modified organisms in Wallowa County beef. It has a low, and probably much lower carbon footprint than the new plant-based alternative. And it costs the same or less.

To all interviewed, the choice between local beef and meat substitutes comes down to the quality of the food, as well as the effects on our local landscape and economy.

“We (cattlemen) question whether these new plant-based foods are a good, healthful product,” Birkmaier said. “I look at these new kinds of patties, with all their chemicals, processing, and fat. And I wonder if they won’t be like other things that we thought were healthy and good, but turned out to be very, very bad for us. I think that especially mothers should think about this when they decide what their children are eating. We know what’s truly healthy. These plant-based products have not yet stood the test of time.”

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