

**People's Climate March Organizers  
Squander Opportunity to Educate the Public  
About the  
Greenhouse Gas Contribution of Livestock Agriculture<sup>1</sup>**

by Mike Hudak  
30 October 2014

While no less a respected body than the [FAO](#) of the United Nations has pegged the contribution of livestock agriculture at [14.5% of human-induced greenhouse gas \(GHG\) emissions](#), the People's Climate March (PCM) organizers chose to behave as if our food choices play no role in the Earth's changing climate. As stated in the PCM's "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ):

We have 14 New York City food trucks lined up with some of your favorite eats; vegan, pizza, ice cream (they have vegan), tacos, African, Asian Fusion, frozen yogurt, Philly Cheesesteaks, sandwiches, Italian, Latin, and lobster rolls.

As it turned out, the array of vendor trucks even included one serving shrimp, a highly climate-impacting commodity. Whereas shrimp was traditionally harvested from the open sea, much of global production today comes from Southeast Asian shrimp farms having a carbon footprint [ten times that of "beef from cows raised on cleared Amazon rainforest."](#) Ninety percent of U.S.-consumed shrimp is now imported, with much of it coming from those shrimp farms.

Let's be clear: the primary importance of PCM organizers limiting their chosen vendors to the selling of plant-based food would not in itself have been to significantly reduce the carbon footprint of the vendors' customers, but to provide a teachable moment for PCM participants and spectators alike.

Most likely the selection of food vendors was not the result of a conscious decision to dissociate animal agriculture and climate change in the minds of marchers. Rather, it is reflective of a culture among many mainstream environmental groups, including those groups at the helm of the march, of holding a dismissive attitude about the importance of reducing consumption of animal products as a vital strategy for mitigating climate change. Consequently these groups are reluctant to suggest that personal food choices have a role to play in mitigating climate change, particularly when those changes indict the livelihoods of the farmers and ranchers many environmental groups are trying to court.

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1. A section written by Mike Hudak that is excerpted from "Marching to Nowhere: Why a 'Big Tent' Won't Save the Planet," a critique of the People's Climate March (of 21 September 2014) by Adam Weissman, Wendy Scher, and Mike Hudak, [gjae.org/?page=PCMCrit](http://gjae.org/?page=PCMCrit) (accessed 20 October 2014).

This is especially true when environmental groups are actually FUNDED by ranchers. PCM organizer 350.org has reportedly received “millions” from former hedge fund manager and current rancher Tom Steyer through his Tomkat Charitable Trust. [Also worth noting is the fact that much of Steyer’s money has come from less than “clean” investments—over 15 years, Steyer’s fund Farallon Capital Management invested in companies that operate coal mines and coal-fired power plants.] For 350.org, condemning the livestock industry would be biting the hand that feeds it.

From its beginning, 350.org has remained silent about animal agriculture as a force for good or ill. In a [2011 article](#), historian James McWilliams pointed out to the organization that “Eating a vegan diet is seven times more effective at reducing [GHG] emissions than eating a so-called sustainable, local, meat-based diet.” McWilliams then noted having received an email from 350.org that stated “we don’t really take official stances on issues like veganism.”

McWilliams offered a few possible explanations for 350.org’s refusal to embrace a plant-based diet in its fight against climate change. He cited the comparative “aesthetics of pipelines and pastures”—the former being “brute technological intrusions” while the latter appeals to our myth of a nature more pure in the absence of human beings.

McWilliams also cited the matter of “personal agency” as a possible factor in 350.org’s position—while what one puts into one’s body is a personal, intimate decision, a coal-fired power plant represents a “sinister corporate-government alliance.” And so, McWilliams suggests that 350.org eschews discussing personal eating habits for anti-coal advocacy because “it appeals to our instinctual, if misguided, sense of personal agency.” In other words, individuals are more likely to act against an external, ominous threat than to change personal behavior intertwined with a lifetime of positive associations.

Then McWilliams raised the matter of fundraising, noting that the image of McKibben getting arrested at a protest over construction of a natural gas pipeline is much more effective in attracting donors than him “staying at home munching kale, and advising others to do the same.”

But while 350.org has stated that it [does not take a position on human dietary choice in regard to climate change](#), this hasn’t stopped its co-founder, chairman and “leader”<sup>2</sup> Bill McKibben from advocating on behalf of certain types of animal agriculture over competing methods, even in the face of scientific evidence that such substitutions yield little-to-no environmental benefit.

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2. An example of characterizing Bill McKibben as the “Leader of 350.org” can be found on ice cream producer Ben & Jerry’s website: [www.benjerry.com/whats-new/peoples-climate-march](http://www.benjerry.com/whats-new/peoples-climate-march) (accessed 3 October 2014). As the public face of 350.org, McKibben’s remarks carry significance well beyond that of his status as an author of books about the environment.

Consider McKibben's 2010 [article in \*Orion\*](#)<sup>3, 4</sup> that extolled the environmental and human-health benefits of pasture-raised beef in comparison to feedlot-produced beef. Raising cattle on pasture is, coincidentally, what 350.org donor Tom Steyer does. Yet research supports neither McKibben's claim for lesser GHG emissions by cattle [raised on pasture compared to grain-fed cattle at a feedlot](#), nor that pasture-raised beef is healthier for human consumption, as it remains [high in cholesterol and saturated fat](#), risk factors for [atherosclerosis](#), while its high-protein content has been implicated in raising one's [risk of cancer](#).

Commenting on a presentation in Melbourne that McKibben gave during a 2013 Australian speaking tour, environmental and animal rights campaigner Paul Mahony notes [McKibben's promotion of Allan Savory's approach to ranching](#) known as [Holistic Management](#). (The scientific community has been critical of Holistic Management (and its predecessors "Holistic Resource Management" and "Savory Grazing System") since the 1980s. Charges have included its being based on several false premises about grassland ecology, along with the absence of peer-reviewed studies showing that this management approach is superior to conventional grazing systems in outcomes of land health and animal productivity.<sup>5</sup> Also noteworthy is the [article by Briske et al.](#) that challenges specific claims (including one regarding rangeland sequestration of atmospheric carbon) made by Allan Savory<sup>6</sup> in the [TED talk](#) that Mahony witnessed Bill McKibben promoting on his Australian lecture tour in 2013.<sup>7</sup>)

3. In his *Orion* article, McKibben states in regard to the controversy over the climate impacts of animal agriculture (particularly the raising of cattle) that "I Do Not Have A Cow In This Fight." Yet viewed within the context of his organization receiving large donations from a rancher, McKibben's denial rings hollow.
4. Mike Hudak criticized aspects of McKibben's *Orion* article in the [third comment](#) shown on the *Orion* website, 2 April 2010.
5. Examples of articles in scientific publications that have been critical of Allan Savory's grazing management include 1) Rod Heitschmidt and John Walker, "Short Duration Grazing and the Savory Grazing Method in Perspective," *Rangelands* 5, no. 4 (August 1983): 147–50; 2) Jon Skovlin, "Southern Africa's Experience with Intensive Short Duration Grazing," *Rangelands* 9, no. 4 (August 1987): 162–67; 3) Jerry L. Holechek, Hilton Gomes, Francisco Molinar, Dee Galt, and Raul Valdez, "Short-Duration Grazing: The Facts in 1999," *Rangelands* 22, no. 1 (February 2000): 18–22; 4) John Carter, Allison Jones, Mary O'Brien, Jonathan Ratner, and George Wuerthner, "[Holistic Management: Misinformation on the Science of Grazed Ecosystems](#)," *International Journal of Biodiversity* 2014, Article ID 163431 (10 pages).
6. The claims by Allan Savory addressed in Briske et al. are 1) that all nonforested lands are degraded, 2) that rangelands can store all fossil fuel carbon in the atmosphere, and 3) that intensive grazing is necessary to prevent rangeland degradation.
7. Neither Allan Savory in his TED talk of February 2013, nor Bill McKibben in his Australian lecture provided a source for their claims that livestock under Holistic Management would increase the soil's ability to sequester atmospheric carbon. But a citation on a [Savory Institute webpage](#) (W. R. Teague, S. L. Dowhower, S. A. Baker, N. Haile, P. B. DeLaune, and D. M. Conover, "[Grazing Management Impacts on Vegetation, Soil Biota and Soil Chemical, Physical and Hydrological Properties in Tall Grass Prairie](#)," *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment* 141 (2011): 310–22) may be that source. The Savory site notes that Teague et al. demonstrates that "regenerative grazing" increases soil carbon by 30 tons per acre over that from conventionally grazed pastures. While the statement accurately reflects the findings of the cited research, the relevance to Holistic Management is dubious, as the multi-paddock grazing studied in the research was described as "light to moderate," NOT the intense grazing advocated by Allan Savory. Not mentioned on the Savory Institute site, but even more significant from the perspective of reducing atmo-

As regards that Australian speaking tour, [Mahony's article](#) further examines McKibben's advocacy for positions that coincide with those of Allan Savory (and largely with those of Tom Steyer, as best one can ascertain from [web resources](#)<sup>8</sup>). These positions include advocacy for buying locally raised beef, for favoring beef raised on pasture over that from feedlots, for using domesticated ungulates to mimic the ecological role of "old-school" ungulates, for claiming that soil microbes absorb atmospheric methane in excess of that emitted by cattle that graze on the land,<sup>9</sup> and for touting the health benefits of pasture-raised beef. Citing reputable sources, Mahony finds all of McKibben's claims wanting.

Mahony also reveals the extent<sup>10</sup> to which individuals associated with Allan Savory's organization, the Savory Institute, had assisted McKibben in writing his *Orion* article of 2010. The appearance of cozy relationships among Allan Savory, Bill McKibben, and

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spheric carbon, the researchers found that multi-paddock grazing did not result in significantly greater soil carbon than that found in soil of comparable land from which grazing had been long excluded (see Teague et al., Table 5, p. 314). Since the addition of cattle to the landscape would introduce carbon into the atmosphere through methane produced by enteric fermentation, the most effective action, from the perspective of reducing atmospheric carbon, WOULD BE "no grazing."

8. Stephanie Strom, "An Accidental Cattle Ranch," *New York Times*, sec. B1, 12 November 2013.
9. Paul Mahony's [article \(Sec. 2.2\)](#) reports research showing that one hectare of grassland in the Snowy Mountain region of Australia can absorb the amount of methane produced by only 0.162 of a cow. In other words, for livestock grazing there to remain "methane neutral" the density of cattle cannot exceed 1 cow for every 6 hectares. Recall also that the article by [Teague et al.](#) cited in Footnote #7 showed that ungrazed land sequestered as much atmospheric carbon as did the multi-paddock system touted by the Savory Institute. Research by Teague et al. is not unique in demonstrating that ungrazed grassland can sequester significant amounts of atmospheric carbon. Corroboration is found in the following publications: 1) Wu L, He N, Wang Y, and Han X, "Storage and Dynamics of Carbon and Nitrogen in Soil after Grazing Exclusion in *Leymus Chinensis* Grasslands of Northern China," *J. Environmental Quality* 37, no. 2 (Mar–Apr 2008): 663–68; 2) Qui L, Wei X, Zhang X, Cheng J, "Ecosystem Carbon and Nitrogen Accumulation after Grazing Exclusion in Semiarid Grassland," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 1: (2013): e55433. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0055433; 3) Stefani Daryanto, David J. Eldridge, and Heather L. Throop, "Managing Semi-arid Woodlands for Carbon Storage: Effects on Above- and Belowground Carbon," *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment* 109 (2013): 1–11; 4) Xing Wua, Zongshan Lia, Bojie Fua, Wangming Zhou, Huifeng Liua, and Guohua Liu, "Restoration of Ecosystem Carbon and Nitrogen Storage and Microbial Biomass after Grazing Exclusion in Semi-arid Grasslands of Inner Mongolia," *Ecological Engineering* 73 (December 2014): 395–403.
10. More details about the assistance provided to Bill McKibben by Adam Sacks and Seth Itzkan, who are associated with the Savory Institute through the New England Center for Holistic Management (NECHM) (see photo captioned "[Taken after Allan Savory's presentation at the Tufts University Fletcher School on January 25.](#)"), can be found on [Paul Mahony's blog](#), but the essential information is as follows. Postings on the [Google Group "soil-age"](#) give some indication of the assistance these individuals provided to McKibben in the writing of his *Orion* article of March/April 2010. The initial posting by Adam Sacks states: "McKibben comes out with his rotational grazing article. Although a bit sparse on details, a very good start (dare I say thanks to Jim Laurie and me and our explanations to him at the MCAN conference), let's see if he and 350 act on it." Sacks' remarks elicited the following reply from Seth Itzkan, which quoted in part reads: "Yes. This article is a direct result of your interaction with him and the subsequent correspondences that you, me, and Jim [Laurie] had with him in the following weeks, both the general theme, as well as the particulars and specifically all the language about about [*sic*] electric fences, dung beetles, predators, and of course 'methane-loving bacteria.' He was profoundly influenced, and grateful for our influence, and I'm thankful to you for helping to make that connection."

350.org donor Tom Steyer is further strengthened by the fact that Steyer hosted Savory in a [ranching workshop at his ranch](#) in December 2013.

While Bill McKibben's untenable positions on animal agriculture would alone be sufficient to call into question his competence, if not, his veracity, animal agriculture is not the only topic on which his remarks have failed to coincide with facts. Fundamental to the integrity of an organization is the nature of its funding sources, and the ways in which those sources might influence the policies of the organization, or even of just the remarks made by its spokespersons.

McKibben, it seems, has been reluctant to disclose the sources and magnitude of his campaigns' funding. By way of background, a February 2013 [article by Vivian Krause](#) notes:

Since 2006, McKibben has led three campaigns: Step it Up, 1Sky and 350.org. Each campaign built on the previous one. In the summer of 2006, Step it Up organized a protest walk across Vermont to push for a moratorium on coal-fired power plants and other federal actions. Created in 2007, 1Sky began a national movement to jump-start a clean energy economy. 350.org built on 1Sky and in April of 2011, the two campaigns officially merged.

Krause further notes that McKibben has in articles portrayed himself as "starting 350.org with seven students and almost no money" and elsewhere, stating in 2010: "last year, with almost no money, our scruffy little outfit, 350.org, managed to organize what Foreign Policy called the 'largest ever co-ordinated global rally of any kind' on any issue." Krause discovered that McKibben's suggestion that his campaigns have been poorly funded is contradicted by financial filings. Her article reveals:

1Sky began in 2008. In its first year, 1Sky reported expenditures of US\$2.6-million, tax returns show. Of that, US\$2.2-million was payroll, including US\$1.2-million for consultants. In 2009, 1Sky's campaign director, Gillian Caldwell, a lawyer by training, was paid US\$203,620 through the Rockefeller Family Fund.

During 2011, the most recent year for which tax returns are publicly available, 350.org again had a US\$2-million payroll, including US\$622,000 for consultants. 350.org spent US\$1.2-million on grassroots fieldwork, partnership with other organizations and media coverage, and US\$356,000 to recruit participants through emails, blogs and social networking.

Krause further reports that "McKibben's campaigns have received more than 100 grants since 2005 for a total of US\$10-million from 50 charitable foundations. Six of those grants were for roughly US\$1-million each."

And from where did that funding arise and towards what purposes was it directed? Krause reports:

More than half of the US\$10-million came from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF), the Rockefeller Family Fund and the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy, where McKibben, a trustee, was paid US\$25,000 per year (2001–09). Since 2007, the Rockefellers have paid US\$4-million towards 1Sky and 350.org, tax returns say. The Schumann Center provided US\$1.5-million to McKibben’s three campaigns as well as US\$2.7-million to fund the Environmental Journalism Program at Middlebury College, in Vermont, where McKibben is on staff.

And finally, as regards 350.org’s acknowledged list of donors, Krause writes:

What 350.org’s list of donors fails to convey is that some foundations provide only US\$5,000 or US\$10,000, while two unidentified donors provide half of 350.org’s budget for 2011, according to its financial statements. Four grants accounted for two-thirds of 350.org’s budget. 350.org declined to identify the donors of those grants.<sup>11</sup>

Bill McKibben’s pro-ranching statements contained in his writings and live presentations must please 350.org donor Tom Steyer, and they can only benefit the industry in which Steyer presumably believes. Additionally, McKibben’s promoting a self-serving genesis myth for 350.org, along with that organization’s shielding of its donor identities accounting for the bulk of its income can only further arouse suspicions about hidden agendas, including ones that promote animal agriculture. By inviting meat, dairy, and seafood vendors into the People’s Climate March, event organizers have further increased that suspicion.

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Mike Hudak has been a grassroots organizer and advocate for ranching-free public lands since 1997. He is the founder (1999) and director (1999–2013) of the nonprofit project [Public Lands Without Livestock](#) (subsequently named Vibrant Public Lands). From 1998–2000, through articles in [Sierra Club](#) publications and 45 live presentations at Club venues in 20 states he lobbied that organization to oppose commercial ranching on federal public lands, ultimately securing supportive resolutions from groups and chapters representing 37 percent of Club members. Hudak subsequently participated in negotiations that resulted in a [compromise policy](#) sufficient to support a viable legislative solution. He then took his advocacy (2000–2012) for ranching-free public lands to a variety of [organizations](#). Hudak is the author of *Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching* (2007) and producer of [47 companion YouTube videos](#). As the volunteer Vice Chair (2007–2008) and Chair (2008–2013) of the Sierra Club’s Grazing Team, Hudak orchestrated the four-year effort to reintroduce voluntary grazing retirement legislation to the U.S. House, a goal that was realized

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11. Additional evidence of Bill McKibben’s reluctance to disclose the funders of his organizations can be found in his 2011 interview with Karyn Strickler: <https://vimeo.com/17613444>. (This segment taken from McKibben’s full interview above deals solely with funding: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KKV6TqHrEw&spfreload=10>)

in 2011 with the introduction of the [Rural Economic Vitalization Act](#). Hudak's most recent public remarks were at the June 2014 [Speak for Wolves](#) event in Gardiner, MT, where he [recounted](#) the largely ineffective 30-year history of opposition to ranching on public lands, and offered suggestions for how such advocacy might best proceed within the current dysfunctional climate of federal politics.