Chapter 11
China’s Growing Meat Demands: Implications for Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examines China’s growing meat demand and its implications. Australia and China are currently set to expand trade in meat and livestock facilitated by a government negotiated Free Trade Agreement. China is already the world’s largest meat consumer and with the increasing consumerism and wealth of its rapidly growing middle and upper class, the demand for animal products is likely to grow. This country’s unprecedented appetite for animal proteins has stimulated the Australian livestock and related sectors, potentially enabling vast growth and profitability within these industries. Chinese customers have strong purchasing power and are eager to buy imported frozen and locally slaughtered Australian meat. While Australian farmers are capitalising on these economic opportunities, only the animal welfare sector voices any concern. This chapter highlights the ignored health and environmental costs.

INTRODUCTION

China as a nation consumes more meat than any other country (see Figure 1) and is also already responsible for more than half of the world’s total pork intake (Winglee, 2014). Rising individual meat consumption is being supported by rapidly increasing urbanisation, rising incomes and a growing middle and upper class demographic, coupled with increasing emulation of western dietary habits and food styles.

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In China (as in other transitioning countries) this increasing affluence and resulting consumerism include an unprecedented demand for meat (Myers & Kent, 2004; Tilman, Balzar, Hill & Befort, 2011; OECD, 2014). The proportion of the population living in urban areas in China has grown from 25% in 1990 to 50% (half of the entire population) in 2011 and is projected to increase even further with 75% of the total Chinese population residing in urban areas by 2050 (Hamshere, Sheng, Moir, Syed & Gunning-Trant, 2014). Furthermore, the percentage of urbanites in the middle class population has climbed from 4% in 2000 to 68% in 2012 (Barton, 2013). By 2022, the population of China’s urban middle class is expected to comprise 650 million people or 76% of all urban Chinese residents (Barton, 2013).

As a result from China’s fast economic expansion, GDP has grown on average over 10% annually for the last 35 years with the per capita income increasing in tandem. Personal income among Chinese residents has drastically increased since 2009 with urban dwellers rapidly becoming richer (see Figure 1). This rise in per capita affluence has greatly enhanced purchasing power and demand for animal proteins including for Australian meat believed to be of a higher quality than local produce. Rising incomes and increasing urbanization have played and continue to play a significant role in China’s growing meat demands (Liu, Parton, Zhou & Cox, 2012), particularly amongst wealthy local middle class consumers (Cao et al., 2013).

CHINA’S GROWING MEAT DEMAND

The growing Chinese urban middle class is pursuing western dietary styles including increasingly excessive meat consumption. As a consequence, per capita meat consumption (see Figure 2) has grown from 13.7 kg per person in 1980, to 27 kg in 2000 and 49 kg per person in 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014). Rapid urbanization brings rural population to the cities where they adopt the urban and more affluent consumption behaviours, including dietary habits such as eating less food grains and vegetables and more livestock products.