

Down Under with Belching and Farting Kangaroos

Australian scientists are trying to give kangaroo-style stomachs to cattle and sheep in a bid to cut the emission of greenhouse gases blamed for global warming, researchers say.

Thanks to special bacteria in their stomachs, kangaroo flatulence contains no methane and scientists want to transfer those bacteria to cattle and sheep who emit large quantities of the harmful gas.

While the usual image of greenhouse gas pollution is a billowing smokestack pushing out carbon dioxide, livestock passing wind contribute a surprisingly high percentage of total emissions in some countries.

"Fourteen percent of emissions from all sources in Australia are from enteric methane from cattle and sheep," said Athol Klieve, a senior research scientist with the Queensland state government.

"And if you look at another country such as New Zealand, which has got a much higher agricultural base, they're actually up around 50 percent," he told AFP. Researchers say the bacteria also make the digestive process much more efficient and could potentially save millions of dollars in feed costs for farmers.

"Not only would they not produce the methane, they would actually get something like 10 to 15 percent more energy out of the feed they are eating," said Klieve. Even farmers who

laugh at the idea of environmentally friendly kangaroo farts say that's nothing to joke about, particularly given the devastating drought Australia is suffering.

"In a tight year like a drought situation, 15 percent would be a considerable sum," said farmer Michael Mitton.

But it will take researchers at least three years to isolate the bacteria, before they can even start to develop a way of transferring it to cattle and sheep. Another group of scientists, meanwhile, has suggested Australians should farm fewer cattle and sheep and just eat more kangaroos.

The idea is controversial, but about 20 percent of health conscious Australians are believed to eat the national symbol already.

"It's low in fat, it's got high protein levels it's very clean in the sense that basically it's the ultimate free range animal," said Peter Ampt of the University of New South Wales's institute of environmental studies.

"It doesn't get drenched, it doesn't get vaccinated, it utilizes food right across the landscape, it moves around to where the food is good, so yes, it's a good food." It might take a while for kangaroos to become popular barbecue fare, but with concern over global warming growing in the world's driest inhabited continent, Australians could soon be ready to try almost anything to cut emissions.