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THE FARTS HEARD ‘ROUND THE WORLD: WHERE COW-TAPPING FALLS ON THE INTERNATIONAL AGENDA OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Alexandra C. Nolan*

To meet sustainable development goals, countries have developed innovative technologies to create a cleaner environment. One technology developed in Argentina for cleaner methane extraction entails the *entrails* of cows. A cow’s diet and biological disposition is made up of “ruminants,” which creates the perfect chemical birthplace for methane gas.¹ The methane emissions from one cow’s burps and farts are harmless.² However, cows’ collective methane emissions can be lethal.³ Recently, a barn housing ninety cows exploded in Germany because of the cows’ collective methane emissions, suggesting that methane can be inherently dangerous.⁴

Methane also has long-term consequences for the environment, as it is expected to negatively affect the environment twenty to twenty-three times more than carbon dioxide in the next 100 years.⁵ Methane emissions from cows account for a quarter of the world’s total methane emissions.⁶ With these statistics in mind, it is evident that cow burps and farts significantly contribute to the deterioration of our environment.

To address the methane challenge posed by cows, Argentina’s National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA) developed the cow “fart-pack.”⁷ The process of using the “fart-pack” is called “cow-tapping.”⁸ The “fart-pack” extracts methane through a tube inserted into the cow’s stomach, stores the methane in containers, and uses it as an alternative fuel source.⁹ By utilizing “fart-packs,” 300 milliliters of methane a day can be extracted from the cow to power a 100 milliliter refrigerator for one day.¹⁰ While INTA perfected the “fart-packs,” they are not unique to Argentina—England also uses “fart-packs.”¹¹

Despite the “successes” of “fart-packs,” they raise imperative ethical questions regarding animal welfare.¹² Is there international law that adequately addresses animal welfare? Are the values of clean energy prioritized over values of animal protection?

Cow-tapping exemplifies the compromise of animal welfare for a scientific procedure of innovation. As to date, there is only one ratified international agreement adequately addressing the use of animals in scientific procedures of innovation, and it pertains only to Europe. It is called the *European Convention for the Protection of Vertebrate Animals Used for Experimental and Scientific Purposes* (“Convention”).¹³ Does the Convention approve cow-tapping?

Article One of the Convention calls for the main purpose of a procedure to be for the protection of the environment.¹⁴ The main purpose of cow-tapping is trapping methane gas, and thus can be seen as environmentally beneficial.¹⁵ Another purpose for such procedures under Article One is research.¹⁶ Another purpose of cow-tapping is to research how methane can be used as an alternative energy producer.¹⁷ A third acceptable purpose for such a procedure under Article One is forensic inquiry.¹⁸ Cow-tapping is a process of forensic inquiry because it reveals the natural process of methane production. Therefore, cow-tapping is a justified procedure under the Convention.

The Convention outlines requirements to ensure animals experience the least amount of pain possible.¹⁹ Such requirements include the animal’s freedom of movement and that the animal be given food, water, proper healthcare, and proper supervision.²⁰ Cow-tappers *may* meet these requirements.²¹

The Convention also calls for the use of animals in scientific procedures as a last resort.²² Article Four expressly states the Convention cannot inhibit liberties of signatories to adopt stricter animal welfare measure involved in the procedures.²³ The Convention further states in Article Six, “[a] procedure shall not be performed for any of the purposes . . . if another . . . method, not entailing the use of an animal, is reasonably . . . available” and calls for active research into alternative methods.²⁴

Under Article Six, cow-tapping is legal in Europe. While alternative methods for methane extraction, not including the use of cows, are reasonably available, there is not currently an alternative method to extract methane *from cows*. The challenge faced is not how to extract methane, but how to specifically reduce cows’ methane emissions. Currently, the only way to address this threat is to cow-tap.

Multiple international agreements governing animal welfare are awaiting ratification.²⁵ For now, only the Convention adequately approves cow-tapping in Europe.²⁶ The lack of international law governing cow-tapping indicates the international community values clean energy over animal welfare. While there are several international agreements governing clean energy, animal welfare agreements have taken a back seat.²⁷ One thing is clear: the time for international consensus on animal welfare is long overdue.



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