

Ben & Jerry's – 20 Years of Greenwashing

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Over the last two decades, Ben & Jerry's has been directly confronted about their failure to live up to their stated missions, yet they have consistently refused to address the concerns brought against them
- › Independent testing reveals traces of glyphosate in 10 out of 11 Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavors – evidence they're using cheap, factory-farmed milk from cows raised on GMO feed and tainted, nonorganic flavor ingredients
- › By refusing to use organic milk and organic ingredients that cost more and cut into profits, Ben & Jerry's mission goals have been neglected for 20 years and remain unfulfilled to this day. Join us in encouraging Ben & Jerry's to live up to their promises and deliver the real goods

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I have written about the greenwashing of organic milk, and how organic dairies, such as Aurora Organic, are nothing but concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) in disguise that are unfairly putting true organic dairy farmers out of business with low-quality milk. Few companies are as bad as Ben & Jerry's, however, when it comes to greenwashing and failing to live up to stated mission goals.

Ben & Jerry's vision statement includes social, product quality, environmental and economic missions¹ that aim "to create linked prosperity for everyone that's connected to our business":²

- **Social mission** – To operate the company in a way that actively recognizes the central role that business plays in society by initiating innovative ways to improve the quality of life locally, nationally and internationally.
- **Product mission** – To make, distribute and sell the finest-quality ice cream and euphoric concoctions with a continued commitment to incorporating wholesome, natural ingredients and promoting business practices that respect the Earth and the environment.
- **Economic mission** – To operate the company on a sustainable financial basis of profitable growth, increasing value for our stakeholders and expanding opportunities for development and career growth for our employees.

Over the last two decades, Ben & Jerry's has been directly confronted about their failure to live up to their mission, as they continue promoting themselves as a "green" business while utilizing extremely harmful and polluting agriculture methods.

Ben & Jerry's – One of the Greatest Greenwash Scams in the Business

Chances are, if you like ice cream, you probably like Ben & Jerry's – not just because of their "euphoric concoctions" but also because of their emphasis on sustainability and eco-friendly practices, and their support for labeling **genetically modified organisms** (GMOs). Too bad it's all a façade.

The company recently got a slew of negative press^{3,4,5,6} when independent testing by the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) discovered traces of glyphosate in 10 out of 11 Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavors.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg, and a minor issue in the big scheme of things. As noted by Michael Colby, former editor of Food & Water Journal and co-founder of Regeneration Vermont, a nonprofit advocacy group dedicated to bringing sustainable, regenerative agriculture back to Vermont:⁷

"It was 20 years ago last month that Food & Water published our report on Vermont's atrazine addiction, a toxic herbicide that is banned in Europe but continues to be used in abundance on Vermont's 92,000 acres of GMO-derived feed corn – all for dairy cows. We used the report to get the attention of Ben & Jerry's, and it worked.

We thought when the doors swung open to the offices of Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield themselves that we'd be able to make the case to them. Our plea at the time was the same as it is today: Ben & Jerry's should practice what it preaches and help transition its farmers to organic production.

If they took the lead, we argued, the entire state could begin a transition away from the kind of industrial, commodity-based dairy system that is wreaking so much havoc with Vermont's agriculture ...

We thought the obvious imbalance – and even direct, outright hypocrisy – between what Ben & Jerry's was doing and what they were saying would be enough to get these do-good hippies to do the right thing. We were using logic. Because, certainly, the corporation that wanted to 'save the planet' and 'put the planet before profits' would want to stop being one of the state's top polluters, right?

Wrong. We were told at the time, by Ben himself, after a year's worth of meetings and even an offer of a job to me 'to work with us instead of going after us,' that Ben & Jerry's was not going to transition to organic because it wouldn't allow them to 'maximize profits.'"

Happy, Healthy Cows? Not so Much

Yes, for those of you who might have been misled to think otherwise, Ben & Jerry's is actually supporting one of the greatest polluters in the world – **factory dairy farming**. And the reality of these factory farms is far from the rosy picture put forth in this "Caring

Dairy" campaign video, in which they highlight the idea that Ben & Jerry gets its milk from some 300 "family operated" dairy farms in the U.S. and Europe.

"Healthy land, dedicated farmers, smart energy and a strong local community ... put them together and you got some happy cows," the video says. Wrong. While the video features cows happily skipping through a meadow, CAFO cows are anything but happy and healthy, and CAFOs are where Ben & Jerry's gets their milk — not family-operated farms that pasture their cows and raise them on grass as nature intended.

According to Cornell University researchers, the annual mortality rate in CAFO herds is over 10%. In 2002, the mortality rate was less than 4%. As noted by Will Allen, owner of Cedar Circle Farm, a regenerative farm in Vermont, "Something's seriously wrong in the dairy barn."⁸

Profit at the Expense of Animal Health

Part of it has to do with the way CAFOs push the animals to overproduce. The average amount of milk produced by a dairy cow was 7,000 pounds per year in 1970. In 2012, it was 22,000 pounds — a 313% increase in production per cow.⁹ This unnatural overproduction takes its toll on the animals, as does the unnatural diet and unnatural living arrangements these animals are forced into. As noted by Allen:¹⁰

"The feed programs outlined by the agrichemical corporations have been geared toward one thing: milk production. And the quickest way to do that is to gorge the cow with a rich and continuous diet ... [T]oday's super-producing cows are being fed nearly 130 pounds of feed a day, more than double what they used to eat a few decades ago ...

The problem is that this nutrient loading is all aimed squarely at milk production, to the detriment of the rest of the cow's health.

In the end, the dairy cow can't keep up, succumbing to a whole host of health issues earlier ... in her life ... ultimately leading to an early death, either from a chronic health issue and/or general burnout that results in an unceremonious

exit to the beef yards, where all non-organic dairy cows eventually meet their end in the U.S.

'Dairy cattle death losses are an extremely important problem,' writes Dr. Franklyn Garry, DVM, a professor at Colorado State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. 'Not only are these losses an economic disaster, they also represent very substantial problems with animal well-being ... There is a real need for the dairy industry and dairy veterinarians to re-evaluate dairy management systems with a focus on optimum animal health.'

There's Nothing Socially or Environmentally Friendly About CAFOs

CAFOs are also a blight that causes enormous environmental pollution that destroys soil, water and air quality. While Cohen and Greenfield balked at going organic two decades ago, Colby points out that the situation has only gotten worse since the company was bought by Unilever.

These days, corporate decisions regarding the Ben & Jerry's brand are made in Unilever's headquarters in London. Colby goes on to set the record straight on Ben & Jerry's "environmentally friendly" company, noting that:

"[T]hose free-cone days that Ben & Jerry's rolls out every year for Vermonters aren't so free, nor are the grants they provide to so many environmental and economic justice groups ...

Ben & Jerry's expects loyalty to its carefully orchestrated charade: The consumption of ... pesticide-laden, climate-threatening, cow-abusing ice cream produced with the labor of exploited migrant workers all leads to social and ecological justice for all! Come on, people, really? ...

For 20 years I've been engaging Ben & Jerry's, showing them the damage that it is doing at every level, from the atrazine report in 1997 to the GMO report in

2016 and a slew of face-to-face meetings in between. But it always ends the same way: Ben & Jerry's admits that the marketing is working just fine.

'People think we're organic,' is what we were told time and time again in private meetings, while asking them to actually go organic. If fooling people allows for maximizing profits, why stop fooling them?"

If you've been fooled into thinking Ben & Jerry's was organic, it's time to rip the wool off your eyes. They're not. Far from it. The whole thing is a carefully orchestrated greenwashing sham. As noted by OCA following its glyphosate testing:¹¹

"It's time for Ben & Jerry's to announce it will immediately begin transitioning to 100-percent organic. Otherwise conscious consumers have no choice but to launch a national and, if necessary, international protest campaign and boycott."

'Eco-Friendly' Company Is a Top Polluter

Colby also points out the following facts about Ben & Jerry's less than illustrious business practices, all of which go against their stated missions to improve quality of life, provide quality products and protect the environment:¹²

- Ben & Jerry's actually pays its dairy farmers less than the cost of producing the milk. Contributing farms lose on average \$125,000 a year, while Ben & Jerry's annual reports predict \$100 million-a-year growth, "Teslas for the executives, and a parent corporation CEO drawing a base salary of \$12 million – before the boardroom gifts are doled out."

For each pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream sold, which on average sells for about \$5, the dairy farmer gets 15 cents, while the average cost to produce that milk is 22 cents.

- Since the founding of Ben & Jerry's in 1978 in Vermont, nearly 3,000 of the state's dairy farmers have been forced off their land, unable to withstand the financial strains of working for free, or worse, working at a loss.

- Waterways in Vermont are severely polluted by CAFOs. Even drinking water is testing positive for glyphosate and atrazine – toxic herbicides used to grow feed for CAFO cows (most of which is GMO, despite Ben & Jerry's public support of non-GMO). The cost to clean up Lake Champlain alone is estimated at \$2 billion.

According to state officials, CAFOs such as those supplying milk to Ben & Jerry's are responsible for at least half of the total environmental damage in Vermont and nearly 80% of the pollution in Lake Champlain,¹³ yet the company contributes nothing to the cleanup. In fact, CAFOs get off scot-free when it comes to paying for the pollution they generate, while most other polluting industries are held accountable for cleanup.

What's worse, Vermont secretary of agriculture, Chuck Ross, is even entertaining proposals that would weaken requirements on dairy farms' practices that help rein in water pollution.¹⁴ To learn more about the destructive influence of CAFOs in Vermont, and to get the latest updates, please see [Regeneration Vermont's blog](#).

It's Time to Do the Right Thing

Colby, as part of Regeneration Vermont, is still trying to bring Ben & Jerry's onboard. After all, alongside Cabot Creamery, the ice cream maker is a dominant player in Vermont's dairy industry. By changing over to organic, Ben & Jerry's could have a significant impact on farmers and the environment, not to mention the health of consumers everywhere.

Today, when more than 200 of Vermont's 800 remaining dairy farms have already transitioned to organic and returned their cows to a grass-based diet, going organic would be far easier than before. So, Regeneration Vermont is now asking Ben & Jerry's (and Unilever) to do what they should have done 20 years ago, and pledge to:

1. Make the transition from GMO crops and toxic pesticides/fertilizers to regenerative organic farming.
2. Pay fair farm wages, including premiums based on regeneration benchmarks and assistance in the transition toward regenerative methods.

3. Ensure economic justice for farmworkers, fair and livable wages, decent housing and social and cultural dignity.
4. Adopt climate remediation techniques, with emphasis on healthy soils and cover-cropping for carbon sequestration and erosion control.
5. Support humane treatment of farm animals; phase-out of confinement dairies and transition to grassland grazing and grass-based feed.
6. Clean up and protect our watersheds, streams, rivers, ponds, lakes and groundwater.

Regeneration Vermont isn't just pushing Ben & Jerry's to get onboard with organic dairy production. In an open letter¹⁵ to the governor-elect, Phil Scott, dated December 16, 2016, the group called for a statewide transition toward regenerative dairy production. The letter was co-written by former Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Roger Allbee and signed by a long list of environmental and state business leaders.

There's a Thriving Regenerative Agriculture Movement in Vermont

I have visited Allen's Cedar Circle Farm in Vermont, where I had the opportunity to talk to the late Ronnie Cummins, who was the co-founder of OCA. A key message Cummins and Allen deliver is the importance of avoiding all CAFO animal products, be it beef, poultry, eggs, milk or other dairy products such as ice cream.

CAFOs simply have too many devastating drawbacks, not just in terms of inferior food products, but also in terms of animal welfare and environmental impacts delivered by GMOs that are dependent on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides that end up in the soil, air and water – and eventually into the ice cream and other products we consume.

One of the most impactful changes you as an individual can make is to switch from CAFO animal products to organic, grass fed beef and dairy that doesn't rely on such destructive practices. Many do not realize this, but grazing animals are actually a very important part of the ecology.

Nearly 97% of the native grasslands have been destroyed, much of it planted into GMO corn and soy fields, which in turn are fed to herbivores that could be grazing instead of eating grains fed to them on concrete.

Organic Grass Fed Agriculture Can Solve Many Environmental Problems

Our modern agricultural system focuses on monocropping and CAFOs as two separate food streams that degrade the farmland by reducing organic matter in soil. Scientists have also declared farming and fertilizers as the No. 1 cause of particulate matter air pollution in much of the U.S., China, Russia and Europe, specifically the nitrogen component of fertilizers.^{16,17}

According to Allan Savory, an African ecologist, dramatically increasing the number of grazing livestock is really the only thing that can successfully reverse both desertification.¹⁸ An article¹⁹ by Pure Advantage notes how there is no current or envisioned technology that can simultaneously restore biodiversity and feed people, but livestock can.

Increasing organic matter in soil and pastures also saves all-important water in more ways than one. First, it retains more rain water, thereby reducing irrigation needs; second, it encourages rainfall and prevents extended droughts. In fact, satellite data reveal plant-soil evapotranspiration may exert a far greater influence on weather and rainfall patterns than previously thought.²⁰

The more organic matter there is in the soil, the more moisture is captured and released back into the atmosphere through plant transpiration. For each 1% increase in organic matter, each acre of soil can retain another 20,000 gallons of water. Raising organic soil matter by 1% in Oklahoma alone would allow the soil there to retain an additional 894 billion gallons more water after each rainfall of 1 inch or more!²¹

You Have the Power to Make a Difference

For two decades, Ben & Jerry's has successfully pulled the wool over the public's eyes. The toxic truth about their GMO-dependent CAFOs are now revealed, the company has become a poster child for greenwashing of the worst sort. Their social mission is to "operate ... in a way that actively recognizes the central role that business plays in society," and initiate "innovative ways to improve the quality of life."

Their mission goal has been neglected for 20 years and remains unfulfilled to this day. To fulfill it, they need to transition to regenerative dairy production. Doing so would have a tremendously positive impact on society. CAFOs have no redeeming value aside from corporate profitability. It's not even profitable for the farmers.

Ben & Jerry's product mission is to make "the finest-quality ice cream ... with a continued commitment to incorporating wholesome, natural ingredients and promoting business practices that respect the Earth and the environment." Sourcing milk from CAFOs violates and nullifies this entire mission goal from start to finish.

You cannot make the finest-quality ice cream when you start with toxic inferior raw materials (CAFO milk); you certainly are not committing to incorporating wholesome natural ingredients when you willfully choose CAFO over organic, grass fed milk; and you certainly are not promoting business practices that respect the Earth and the environment when insisting on supporting grossly polluting factory farms rather than regenerative farming.

The only mission goal Ben & Jerry's has ever been able to fully live up to is its economic goal, which is to make "profitable growth" and "increasing value for stakeholders." Congratulations. Too bad that's not what health-conscious consumers really care about.

I hope you join me in calling Ben & Jerry's bluff. Let them know you expect them to live up to the promises on which they've built their little empire. It's time to actually deliver the real goods. You can contact Ben & Jerry's directly by calling (800-625-9932). I strongly encourage you to call them and tell them what you think of their reprehensible, unethical and irresponsible behavior.

You can also send them a message using the [Customer Support form](#) at the top of their contact page. You CAN make a radical difference. Please give them a call, and ask your family and friends to contact them as well.

Sources and References

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