

# Hamburger, fries and a Cola:

## What does it take to produce this American meal?

The **beef** came from cattle grazed initially on public or private land, and later fed grain. About 10% of all public lands in the western U.S. have been turned into deserts by overgrazing, and about 2/3 of those public lands are significantly degraded. Streamside lands where cattle graze have been especially damaged.

It took approximately 2 lbs. of grain to produce that quarter pound of meat, and that grain production caused five times its weight in topsoil loss due to erosion from unsustainable farming methods. Producing that grain took substantial amounts of pesticides and fertilizers (Half of all fertilizer in the U.S. is applied to feed corn for animals), some of which ran off into surface water or seeped into groundwater supplies. By the time the steer was finished in the feedlot, it took 600 gallons of water to make that one hamburger patty. Once slaughtered and processed, the meat was frozen, shipped by truck, kept cold, and then cooked on a grill using natural gas.

The **5 oz.** order of fries came from one **10 oz.** potato grown in Idaho on **0.5 ft<sup>2</sup>** of soil. It took 7.5 gallons of water to raise that potato, plus quantities of fertilizer and pesticides, some of which ran off into the Columbia or Snake rivers. Because of that, and dams that generate power and divert water for agriculture, the Snake River Sockeye salmon is virtually extinct. A number of other species are also in decline because of these production practices.

The potato was dug with a diesel-powered harvester and then trucked to a processing plant where it was dehydrated, sliced and frozen. The freezing was done by a cooling unit containing hydrofluorocarbons, some of which escaped into the atmosphere and likely contributed to global climate change. The frozen fries were then trucked to a distribution center, then on to a fast-food restaurant where they were stored in a freezer and then fried in corn oil heated by electricity generated by a hydroelectric dam.

The meal was served in a fast food restaurant built on what was once originally forest, then farmland, then converted to commercial/industrial uses as the city expanded. **The paper the burger was wrapped in and the box the fries came in were made of paper made from trees cut from a forest, to be discarded after one use.** The ketchup in aluminum foil packets came from Pittsburg, PA and was made from Florida tomatoes. The salt came from Louisiana.

The cola came from a Seattle processing plant. It is made of 90% water from the Cedar River. The high-fructose corn syrup came from Iowa, as did the **CO<sub>2</sub>** used to produce the fizz, which was made by fermenting corn. The caffeine came from a processing plant that makes decaffeinated coffee. The cola can was made from one-third recycled aluminum and two thirds bauxite ore strip-mined in Australia. It came to Washington State on a Korean freighter, and was processed into aluminum using an amount of energy equivalent to a quart of gasoline. The energy came from some of the same dams mentioned earlier that have contributed to a 97% decrease in salmon runs on the Columbia River.

**The typical mouthful of food consumed in the U.S. traveled 1,200 miles for us to eat it.** Along the way it required packaging, energy, roads, bridges and warehouses, and contributed to **water, land and** atmospheric pollution, adverse health effects and traffic congestion.

**Question: Is this system sustainable?**

©2006 Facing the Future: People and the Planet [www.facingthefuture.org](http://www.facingthefuture.org)

