

The Greenhouse Gas Guru

The campaign to discredit Prof. Frank Mitloehner.

By Cat Urbigit

The campaign against University of California-Davis professor and cooperative extension specialist Dr. Frank Mitloehner began in earnest back in October 2022, when *Greenpeace Unearthed* published “Revealed: How the livestock industry funds the ‘greenhouse gas guru.’” The University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources defines cooperative extension specialists as “publicly engaged scholars who ensure that university research is applied to help California communities solve problems and realize opportunities.”

Mitloehner, who goes by the handle @GHGGuru on X, is the director of the UC-Davis CLEAR Center, created “to help the animal agriculture sector operate more efficiently in order to meet the demands of a growing population while it lessens its impact on the environment and climate.”

Mitloehner had become a powerful voice in challenging flawed climate science and the resulting recommendations for broad societal change based on that flawed science. He’s challenged and poked holes in the popular narrative that animal agriculture causes more greenhouse gas emissions than other industries and that the world needs to stop eating meat to save the planet from destruction. His criticism of underlying scientific assumptions has been widely reported. He publishes papers, testifies on governing panels, and is a frequent public speaker, conducting outreach efforts as a university extension specialist.

Mitloehner’s dual quest to help animal agriculture operate more efficiently while becoming part of the climate solution has been welcomed by the agricultural industry, but there are climate activists so devoted to promoting a meatless future that they would like Mitloehner to shut up. In the last few years, climate activists have run an active campaign attempting to discredit Mitloehner, but not for his science. They seek to discredit him because he works with animal ag, he receives funding from animal ag, and, most of all, because he is an effective communicator. Willingly or ignorantly, national and international media have been

participants in the campaign orchestrated by a network of academia and nongovernmental organizations with financing from wealthy animal-rights and “alternative-protein” philanthropists.

The Campaign

Although there had been some grumbings before, the *Greenpeace* article tried to cast Mitloehner’s work as more suited to a public relations company than an academic institution. It was followed by similar articles in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Washington Post*. All but the front-page article in the *Times* quoted Jennifer Jacquet, a New

York University professor who had penned an op-ed in 2021 that called Mitloehner “one of the most prominent academic defenders of Big Meat.”

The *Washington Post* published its article in March 2024 with the headline, “Livestock industry coopts academics to downplay its climate impact, study says.” It reported on claims made by Viveca Morris and Jennifer Jacquet in a paper published in the journal *Climatic Change* titled “The animal agriculture industry, U.S. universities, and the obstruction of climate understanding and policy.”

In their article abstract, Morris and Jacquet claim: “The animal agriculture industry is now involved in multiple multimillion-dollar efforts with universities to obstruct unfavorable policies as well as influence climate change policy and discourse. Here, we traced how these efforts have downplayed the livestock sector’s contributions to the climate crisis, minimized the need for emission regulations and other policies aimed at internalizing the costs of the industry’s emissions, and promoted industry-led climate ‘solutions’ that maintain production.”

Morris and Jacquet studied the funding sources and activities of Mitloehner at UC-Davis, as well as his colleague Dr. Kimberly Stackhouse-Lawson at Colorado State University, to “evaluate the nature, extent, and societal impacts of the relationship between individual researchers and industry groups.” Morris and Jacquet concluded, “Given the stakes of failing to mitigate emissions from animal agriculture, we cannot ignore the meat and dairy industry’s use of universities



FRANK MITLOEHNER, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-DAVIS CLEAR CENTER

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JENNIFER JACQUET PHOTO FROM JENNIFERJACQUET.COM



KIM STACKHOUSE-LAWSON, UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AGNEXT CENTER

in climate obstruction.”

Among the 20 questions used to assess these ag scientists were whether the researchers received any grants from industry groups, led a university center that receives such grants, served as a member of a group that could recommend methods or research priorities for that industry, and if their work was referenced by industry groups. That a scientific journal would agree to dedicate 42 published pages to this effort to scrutinize two ag scientists (rather than their scientific works) is extraordinary.

While Morris and Jacquet claimed, “In exchange for donations, some universities have allowed the animal agriculture industry to support the work of professors and create new centers, which have in turn used the universities’ credibility and appearance of academic independence to shape climate understanding and policy,” what if we replace “animal agriculture industry” in that sentence with “animal/climate activists?”

Using the methodology employed by Morris and Jacquet to examine the ag scientists, I applied similar scrutiny to Morris and Jacquet. Here’s what I learned: Wealthy animal rights and “alternative protein” advocates put up millions of dollars to create new centers and sup-

VIVECA MORRIS, CLIMATE SOCIAL SCIENCE NETWORK



FROM TOP LEFT: New York University professor Jennifer Jacquet, the gas guru’s colleague Kim Stackhouse-Lawson, and Viveca Morris, executive director of the Law, Environment & Animals Program at Yale Law School.

OPPOSITE: Frank Mitloehner, director of the UC-Davis CLEAR Center, which was created to “help the animal agriculture sector operate more efficiently in order to meet the demands of a growing population while it lessens the impact on the environment and climate.” He is known as “one of the most prominent academic defenders of Big Meat.”

port the work of professors Morris and Jacquet who seek to reduce or eliminate animal agriculture. Morris and Jacquet have used their universities’ credibility and appearance of academic independence to shape climate understanding and policy. Thus, although coming at the same issue from a polar-opposite worldview, Morris and Jacquet are engaging in the same efforts for which they fault

Mitloehner and Stackhouse-Lawson.

The Funding Network

The core group of philanthropists’ funding for the creation of university centers that focus on advancing animal rights and alternative protein interests include:

■ Chuck and Jennifer Laue of the Quinn Foundation. Chuck Laue serves on the global advisory council of the Good Food Institute (the organization that promotes plant-based and cell-based alternatives to animal products). He also serves on the board of the Humane Society of the United States and is co-founder of the Quinn Foundation. The Laues co-founded Stray Dog Capital, a venture capital fund that invests in vegan pursuits and animal advocacy.

■ Brooks McCormick Jr. Trust for Animal Rights Law and Policy and the Brooks Institute for Animal Rights Law and Policy. Brooks McCormick Jr. was an animal lover and heir to the McCormick family of Illinois whose fortune was based on agricultural machinery giant International Harvester.



SPRING CALVING IN WESTERN WYOMING © CAT URBIGKIT

■ Animal Welfare Trust, created by animal activist Bradley Goldberg when he retired after 30 years in investment banking. His foundation long supported projects promoting plant-based diets and animal welfare. This was the group that funded Yale University’s “Law, Ethics & Animals Program,” with Viveca Morris as its executive director, and the Center for Environmental and Animal Protection at New York University, where Jacquet was a founding deputy director. Jacquet is now a leader of the Climate Social Science Network (CSSN) at Brown University, launched in 2022 with \$11 million from unidentified donors.

These core funders also provided funding for Harvard University’s Animal Law & Policy Program, and the Brooks McCormick money was likewise funneled to animal-law programs at University of Denver Sturm College of Law and to Lewis & Clark College in Oregon. Their philanthropy helped create animal-law programs from coast to coast and a network of academics working toward the same end.

The Authors and Colleagues

Morris and Jacquet published their hit piece on the ag scientists in *Climatic Change*, made possible through the network of colleagues who share their policy views. As mentioned earlier, Jacquet was a founding director of a New York University center that focuses on “global pathways towards a world without meat” while promoting plant-based protein interests and pushing for a “Made in America” meat tax. Jacquet’s NYU colleague Matthew Hayek is another frequently cited

source in the news media who criticizes animal ag while promoting “alternative protein production and consumption in a world without animal meat.”

The links between these networked centers and their academic colleagues is vast. Featured speakers at the grand opening celebration of the NYU center included the executive director of U.S. Climate Action Network (USCAN), a network of organizations seeking to end fossil fuels. USCAN co-founder Michael Oppenheimer is co-editor of *Climatic Change*, where the Morris and Jacquet paper was published.

In 2023, Jacquet moved from NYU to Brown University’s Climate Social Science Network, which “sheds light on the actors and organizations engaged in climate obstruction—who they are, their characteris-

tics, motivations, funding and tactics. We advance research on how these climate obstruction activities have an impact on the media and public understanding of climate change, and how they affect climate policy.”

CSSN provides funding to Morris and Jacquet and the pair is listed as co-chairs of this network’s Agriculture Working Group (even though both were trained in environmental science, not agriculture) but are tasked with learning “how agriculture, fisheries, and aquaculture companies are obstructing meaningful policy reforms” as necessary “to shape effective strategies to combat them.”

Examining the sources used in the four articles targeting Mitloehner, Jacquet was quoted in all except the *New York Times*, where she was replaced by her NYU colleague Matthew Hayek (he was also quoted in three of the four articles). Although the articles refer to Hayek as an NYU professor, all failed to note that he had received funding from the same center as Jacquet or that they served together in a working group supported by the Brooks Institute for Animal Law and Policy. Prior to joining NYU, Hayek was affiliated with the Harvard Law School in the Animal Law and Policy Program. Hayek has advocated that society should rapidly reduce meat consumption as well as accelerate the shift to plant-rich options.

The Guardian’s article, written by Joe Fassler, used a few other unique sources not used by the other media, including Vasile Stănescu, identified as “a Mercer University professor.” The article didn’t mention he’s also a member of the International Association of Vegan Soci-

ologists which calls for “sociology for total liberation and a vegan world.” The reporter on that piece, Joe Fassler, also writes for DeSmog, a site that equates questioning of scientific methodology used in climate-change assessments to being science “deniers” or involved in “misinformation campaigns.” DeSmog is a public relations site for advancing a certain climate-science viewpoint with its own ties to Greenpeace.

Corruption

The Morris and Jacquet paper focused exclusively on two agricultural scientists and repeatedly made comparisons to the tobacco and fossil-fuel industries. For example, “Consistent with other industries, including tobacco and fossil fuels, the animal agriculture industry’s response to evidence that its product caused harm was to push back.” Jacquet calls animal agriculture Big Meat and has said, “We need the animal agriculture equivalent of ‘keep it in the ground’ for fossil fuels.”

Morris maintains that the ag industry is engaging in “a multitude of strategies to obscure public understanding and shape public policy regarding the livestock industry’s role in the climate crisis in their favor” and complains about Mitloehner’s “potentially misleading claims” and lack of transparency about corporate donors, while Jacquet says, “Our work directly challenges that he is neutral, credible, or even a ‘third party,’ given his close ties to and funding from industry.” While Morris and Jacquet point the finger at ag scientists, they remain apparently devoid of the need to fully disclose their own funding network and ideology-driven work.

What will be the fallout for Mitloehner and Stackhouse-Lawson? The *Washington Post* article covering the Morris and Jacquet paper was featured in *Philanthropy News Digest* (a news service used by foundations) and the overall coverage of the Morris and Jacquet paper was

widespread in news media, with one retelling titled, “Study Reveals Academics Corrupted by Livestock Industry Funding.”

Corrupted: As in corrupt. Was that the seed Morris and Jacquet intended to plant? Did they seek to harm the reputations of Mitloehner and Stackhouse-Lawson? Their paper was reviewed by the Climate Science Legal Defense Fund prior to its publication, so perhaps the authors were aware of the legal danger of libel in injuring another’s reputation. In an interview with Greenpeace Unearthed, Jacquet called Mitloehner a “sock puppet for industry, not an independent scientist.” In an interview with *Inside Climate News*, “Jacquet likened Mitloehner to Willie Soon, the Harvard-Smithsonian scientist who described his research as ‘deliverables’ for the fossil-fuel industry.”

Using their own metrics, my examination finds that Morris and Jacquet are participants in an orchestrated campaign to discredit two agricultural scientists, part of a network of academic activists parading as impartial scientists and supported by their institutions in exchange for donations from wealthy philanthropists to fulfill a specific agenda. The mainstream media has failed to do its job in checking the credibility of its sources and to explain the links between them. Borrowing a phrase used by Jacquet, these academics can be described as “sock puppets” for moneyed animal rights interests and enabled by the mainstream news media.

My research leads me to conclude that the greatest fear of animal rights/alternative-protein activists is that Mitloehner and Stackhouse-Lawson will be successful in reducing the meat industry’s carbon footprint. That would pull the rug out from under their drive for a world without meat. The last thing they want is a low-methane cow. ■

Cat Urbigkit is a sheep and cattle producer in Sublette County, Wyo.