

Feeding Factory Farms: A Global Environmental History of Livestock Feed *Floor Haalboom*

The global livestock industry and the feed it is consuming are major issues of current public debate. Problems like deforestation, nutrient deficits in the Global South, and manure surpluses in the Global North are all directly related to the massive amounts of feed going into factory farms. All over the world, many lives—both human and animal—have changed during the past century as a result of the global trade in livestock feed.

This project will analyze historical changes in livestock feeding practices in order to identify how and why these problems came about. It will make the “invisible” stories of what we feed our livestock visible, by providing insight in livestock-feed-related global transformations. Importantly, it aims to give silent groups in these stories a voice.

I ask new questions about the history of the livestock industry. The project will show the different ways in which the trade in livestock-feed commodities changed human and nonhuman communities all over the world, and the social, political, cultural, and environmental factors driving these changes. What were the consequences of the transformation of livestock-feed trade flows during the twentieth century for the places where the feed came from and where it went to? And how did this change over time?

The project focuses on livestock-feed trade flows to the Netherlands as a case study for these major questions. It will map and analyze the trade flows of pig, poultry, and cattle feed commodities from a variety of production places to the Netherlands during the postwar intensification of the livestock industry in the period 1946–1980. I have two reasons for this choice. In the first place, the livestock-feed trade flows towards the Netherlands are surveyable; the country’s position as a world player in the intensive livestock industry and its feed trade simultaneously provides a good starting point for essential environmental and global perspectives. In the second place, the Netherlands has valuable public sources for this type of research that have not been used before.

In short, this project forms the start of a much-needed environmental history perspective on the global impacts of feeding our factory farms.



Piles of fish meal in a Peruvian harbor, ready for transport to far away factory farms (1963). Fish meal was the major imported source of animal protein used in Dutch livestock feed. Source: Nationaal Archief Den Haag, 2.11.29 Archives of the Veeartsenijkundige Dienst, inv. nr. 779.