

# Hamburger, Fries, and a Cola

## What Did it Take To Produce This American Meal?

The meat came from cattle grazed initially on public or private land, and later fed grain. About 10 percent of all public lands in the western United States have been turned to desert by overgrazing, and about two-thirds of those public lands are significantly degraded. Streamside lands, where cattle graze, have been especially damaged.

It took approximately 2 pounds 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 also took substantial amounts of pesticides and fertilizers (half of all fertilizer in the United States 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 build that 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-ounce order of fries came from one 10-ounce potato grown in Idaho on half a square foot 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 irrigation, 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 hydropower.

The meal was served in a fast-food restaurant built on what once was originally forest, then farmland, then converted to commercial/industrial uses as the city expanded. The ketchup in aluminum-foil packets came from Pittsburgh and was made from Florida tomatoes. The salt came from Louisiana.

The cola came from a Seattle processing plant. It is made of 90 percent water from the Cedar River. The high-fructose corn syrup came from Iowa, as did the carbon dioxide used to produce the fizz, which is produced 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 percent decrease in the salmon runs of the Columbia Basin.

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

Adapted from *Stuff...The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*, by John C. Ryan and Alan Thein Durning, published by Northwest Environment Watch. [www.northwestwatch.org](http://www.northwestwatch.org).