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FDA Blasted For Voluntary Plan To Ending Antibiotics In Big Ag

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has released a plan it says will phase out the practice of giving healthy animals[antibiotics](http://www.offthegridnews.com/2013/11/30/the-truth-about-the-meat-on-your-table/) simply to fatten them up, although the plan is only voluntary and already has many critics.

The FDA issued the “guidance” document Wednesday, saying that the feeding of antibiotics to the animals has led to bacteria growing resistant to antibiotics – a fact that has led to thousands of people dying because the antibiotics that were supposed to heal them did not work.

In the agricultural industry, antibiotics are placed in the animals’ food and/or water. Eighty percent of antibiotics sold in the US are given to animals in the ag industry.

“Because all uses of antimicrobial drugs, in both humans and animals, contribute to the development of antimicrobial resistance, it is important to use these drugs only when medically necessary,” the FDA said. “Governments around the world consider antimicrobial-resistant bacteria a major threat to public health. Illnesses caused by drug-resistant strains of bacteria are more likely to be potentially fatal when the medicines used to treat them are rendered less effective.”

That all sounded good to critics of the agriculture industry, but the FDA said the plan was only voluntary. In other words, there is no plan to impose penalties on producers that keep feeding antibiotics to cattle, pigs and poultry.

**What critics say**

“The FDA’s voluntary guidance is an inadequate response to the overuse of antibiotics on the farm with no mechanism for enforcement and no metric for success,” Congresswoman Louise M. Slaughter (D-New York) [complained](http://www.louise.house.gov/press-releases/rep-slaughter-voluntary-regulation-on-antibiotics-inadequate-to-protect-public-health-no-enforcement-mechanism-or-criteria-for-success/). “Sadly, this guidance is the biggest step the FDA has taken in a generation to combat the overuse of antibiotics in corporate agriculture, and it falls woefully short of what is needed to address a public health crisis.”

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Slaughter, who is a trained microbiologist, believes the use of antibiotics to enhance animal growth should be banned. She has introduced legislation to ban the practice.

“As a microbiologist, I’m angry,” Slaughter told Food Safety News. “As a member of congress I’m furious.”

**The Natural Resources Defense Council also criticized the FDA.**

“FDA’s policy is an early holiday gift to industry,” said NRDC health attorney Avinash Kar.**“**It is a hollow gesture that does little to tackle a widely recognized threat to human health. FDA has essentially followed a voluntary approach for more than 35 years, but use of these drugs to raise animals has increased. There’s no reason why voluntary recommendations will make a difference now, especially when FDA’s policy covers only some of the many uses of antibiotics on animals that are not sick. FDA is failing the American people.”

The NRDC further said that the “FDA’s policy would address only uses of antibiotics to speed up animal growth” even though antibiotics used to avoid diseases associated with poor conditions pose the same risks, are similar in nature, and have significant overlap with uses for growth promotion.”

**The danger from the overuse of antibiotics**

Some scary facts about antibiotics and agriculture include:

* Around 30 million pounds of antibiotics were sold to livestock producers to feed to animals in 2011.
* A report from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in October identified antibiotics fed to livestock as a [potential cause of antibiotic resistant infections](http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2013/09/drug-resistant-infections/#.Uqig5OKmb3R).
* Antibiotic resistant infections now kill around 23,000 Americans a year.
* The number of outbreaks of antibiotic resistant foodborne infections has been increasing. There have been 55 documented outbreaks of such infections such 1973, but 34 of those outbreaks have occurred since 2000.
* Studies indicate that hog farms could be the source of a new strain of MRSA or Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus — a [pathogen that kills more Americans than AIDS](http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/solutions/strengthen-healthy-farm-policy/pamta.html), the Union of Concerned Scientists noted.
* 453 organizations of medical professionals and consumer advocates have endorsed PAMTA. Groups supporting include the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Nurses Association. Slaughter claims the list contains every major scientific group in the country supports her legislation.
* Food industry groups spent more $17 million lobbying against limits on antibiotic use in Congress.

The FDA says if the plan is implemented, antibiotics would then be available only from veterinarians with a prescription.

Slaughter believes that pressure from consumers could be more effective than legislation. She believes that falling meat sales would send the industry a message it cannot ignore.

“We’re not going to eat it,” she said of meat that contains antibiotics. “We will not feed this to our families. Cut it out.”

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