

# POINT OF VIEW

## ***FDA asks farmers to voluntarily stop using antibiotics ... is it enough?***

By Suzanne McMillan  
ASPCA Director of Farm Animal Welfare

As many of you know, animals raised on factory farms often receive antibiotics in order to remain healthy in an otherwise harmful environment as well as to promote growth. But there are dangers involved for both humans and animals. Antibiotic resistance in humans is a very big concern, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has been under increasing pressure to do something about it.

On March 22, a federal judge ruled that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) must address the overuse of antibiotics in farm animals. The fact is, factory farms feed drugs like those in the penicillin family to animals even when they're not sick. The drugs are used to speed up the animals' growth and compensate for their unsanitary and overcrowded conditions, which are major breeding grounds for illnesses. Indeed, the same drugs that we take when we are sick are routinely fed to healthy animals.

### **The FDA Fails to Protect**

More than 30 years ago, the FDA first discovered the overuse of antibiotics creates drug-resistant bacteria that can spread to humans and cause hard-to-treat illnesses. So far, the FDA has failed to follow through on its findings. This new ruling will now require the FDA to withdraw its existing approvals for routinely using penicillin and tetracycline on farm animals unless the farming industry provides evidence that their use does not threaten human health.

### **Did You Know...**

Almost 80% of all antibiotics sold in the U.S. are fed to food animals. In addition to its impact on animal welfare, the misuse of antibiotics also affects our own lives. If we want to keep antibiotics working for us, we must keep industrial farms from abusing them. The ASPCA applauds this recent court decision—not only for human health, but also in hopes that it will help ensure cleaner, more humane living conditions for animals on farms.

Last month the FDA finally responded, releasing three documents addressing the use of antibiotics in livestock. While it's great that the FDA is acknowledging a problem, these documents are extremely disappointing. Producers are simply asked to voluntarily curb their use of antibiotics, and pharmaceutical companies are asked to voluntarily stop labeling certain antibiotics as useful for livestock growth. All of this despite the federal court ruling in March that ordered FDA to stop relying on voluntary programs to curb the use of certain antibiotics. Further, these programs focus only on using antibiotics for growth promotion - not on the similarly common practice of feeding animals antibiotics to prop up their already weak immune systems.

The coalition Keep Antibiotics Working, of which the ASPCA is a member, calls the FDA's new plan an "inadequate response" and urges it to, at the very least, establish "an enforcement mechanism and timeline" for achieving the voluntary protocols it proposes.



### **Consider the Facts**

■ Data released in December by the Food and Drug Administration revealed that most antibiotics sold and distributed in 2009 in the United States were used on livestock. Twenty-eight million pounds were used on agricultural animals while a little over seven million pounds were used on humans.

■ The only microbiologist who is currently serving as a representative in Congress, Louise Slaughter from New York, confirmed these numbers with the FDA and is working on legislation for reducing the use of antibiotics in animal agriculture. Her proposed law is titled *The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act* (PAMTA). Slaughter said, "We know that the widespread use of antibiotics on healthy animals is contributing to the growth of bacteria resistance to the drugs we use to treat humans."

■ A study of cattle feed lot practices came to a similar conclusion: "Growing evidence exists that antibiotic use in agriculture is affecting antibiotic resistance in human pathogens via the food supply."

■ A study conducted by the University of Iowa found that 49 percent of hogs and 45 percent of farm workers observed had a new strain of MRSA, a type of bacteria that is resistant to most antibiotics. The farms studied routinely use antibiotics on their animals.

■ Dr. Shelley Hearne, a public health professor and researcher said, "If the bacteria becomes resistant to antibiotics, it can actually spread in many ways. It could be in the food supply, but it also can be in waters that runoff in a farm. It could be in the air. It can happen very quickly in many different ways. It's why it's a practice that has to stop on the farms."

■ Another potential concern is that people could come into contact with MRSA by handling tainted meat from animals that came from farms where antibiotics were used routinely.

■ Maryn McKenna, author of *Superbug: The Fatal Menace of MSRA*, summarized the problem, saying "When you use antibiotics [this way], they don't stay on the farm. They leave the farm in the systems of animals and leave the animals in manure. [Modern agriculture] generates a lot of manure. Those big lagoons are enormous petri dishes for the breeding of resistant organisms."