

FDA Limits Some Antibiotics in Livestock

MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Food and Drug Administration on Wednesday ordered farmers to limit the use of a type of antibiotics they give livestock because it could make people more resistant to a key antibiotic that can save lives, encouraging news for public health advocates who say such animal antibiotics are overused.

FDA officials have been clear in stating their belief that antibiotics given to animals before slaughter are linked to growing antibiotic resistance in humans, but it has struggled with how to tackle the problem because the powerful livestock industry says the drugs are needed to keep animals healthy.

Calls for limiting antibiotics have been stronger than ever as consumers have become more aware of the issue and are clamoring for antibiotic-free meat.

The agency's order Wednesday will limit cephalosporins, which are given to some cattle, swine, chickens and turkeys before slaughter. The drugs are used to treat pneumonia, skin infections and meningitis, among other diseases, in humans.

Cephalosporins, which are injected directly into eggs or animals, are not as widely used as many other antibiotics that are mixed with animal feed in massive quantities. But they are significant because the drugs often are used in life-threatening situations for humans, and lives could be lost if resistance is built up over time.

"This is an incredibly critical class of antibiotics for humans," said David Wallinga, a physician at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minnesota and a member of the Keep Antibiotics Working coalition. "In the medical world you'd call it a 'big gun' or a 'drug of last resort.' It's effective against a pretty broad spectrum of bacteria."

In the order, the FDA said the drugs can be particularly critical for treating children and some adults for salmonella poisoning. The agency said human exposure to food containing antibiotic-resistant bacteria like certain forms of salmonella is "the most significant risk to the public health associated with antimicrobial resistance." In recent years, the number of foodborne outbreaks associated with antibiotic-resistant pathogens has been increasing, a trend the agency associates with animal antibiotic use.

Because of these concerns, public health advocates long have pushed the government to force livestock producers to use fewer antibiotics. Some farmers use them in healthy animals to spur growth or to keep them well in unsanitary feedlot conditions.

The FDA's order to limit cephalosporins is not a total ban, and the agency would still

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allow some uses of the drug in agriculture. Advocates praised the move but said it didn't go far enough.

"This is a modest first step by the FDA, but we're really just looking at the tip of the iceberg," said Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., a microbiologist who has pressured the government on the issue. "We don't have time for the FDA to ploddingly take half-measures. We are staring at a massive public health threat in the rise of antibiotic-resistant superbugs. We need to start acting with the swiftness and decisiveness this problem deserves."

Industry groups said after the announcement that they opposed the limits and argued there isn't enough evidence that their antibiotic use is unsafe. Kristina Butts of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association said antibiotic resistance is a complex issue and "the top priority for cattle producers is to raise healthy cattle because healthy cattle are the foundation of a safe, wholesome food supply."

Tom Super of the National Chicken Council said antibiotics are already used sparingly in chicken production and that additional regulations could take medical decisions out of the hands of veterinarians.

This is not the first time the FDA has sought to limit cephalosporins. In 2008 the agency said it would limit the drugs for animals, citing the importance of cephalosporins for treating disease in humans. But the Bush administration reversed that decision just before it was to take effect after receiving several hundred letters from drug companies and farm animal trade groups.

In the first two years after President Barack Obama took office, FDA officials repeatedly said antibiotics in agriculture pose a serious public health threat and said they would act on the issue. But they had taken no concrete steps to limit the drugs until Wednesday's announcement.

In a statement on the FDA website, the agency said the announcement is "among a number of ongoing FDA activities and initiatives intended to address concerns about the use of antimicrobial drugs in animal agriculture." Those include increased monitoring and voluntary guidelines for producers on how to use the drugs judiciously.

Laura Rogers of the Pew Campaign on Human Health and Industrial Farming says the issue is "often more emotional than intellectual."

To farmers, she says, it often seems that public health advocates are telling them how to do their jobs. But she said the need for change will be even greater as the market responds to consumer demand — grocery stores and restaurants now tout antibiotic-free meats.

"While this announcement today is a great first step," Rogers said, "more work needs to be done."

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