

Educating the public about modern pork production

Antibiotic Issue Takes Center Stage

While Katie Couric, anchor of CBS Evening News, may have sparked more debate on antibiotic use in food animals, it's hardly the first salvo in this long-term debate, and it won't be the last. That's why the National Pork Board recognizes the importance of getting the facts out about this important issue and fostering open, honest dialog about why producers need tools such as antibiotics to keep animals healthy and the food supply safe.

"We welcome a fact-based discussion about this issue, because we know that science tells us we're doing the right thing for animal health and food safety," said Liz Wagstrom, assistant vice president of science and technology for the National Pork Board. "Producers care about their animals and the safety of the food they produce. That's really the bottom line that should be understood by everyone."

With that big-picture perspective in mind, the National Pork Board has continued to work on this vital issue from multiple angles, including:

- **Partner communications.** The Pork Checkoff is working closely with the National Pork Producers Council, the American Association of Swine Veterinarians and the U.S. Meat Export Federation to ensure that each group pursues tactics best suited to its expertise and particular sphere of influence. Also, the Checkoff's domestic marketing team continues to lead in communicating this issue with key retail and food service stakeholders.
- **State communications.** Multiple nationwide conference calls and e-mails have helped inform and engage state pork association staff since early January and will continue as needed to inform and assist all producer organizations at the state level.
- **Industry communications.** The Checkoff communications team has reached out to more than 20 agricultural-rated organizations, including the beef, dairy, poultry and meat-processing industries. This has helped ensure all relevant groups were joined in this important dialog and has helped foster a more unified voice.
- **Behind-the-scenes communications.** The Checkoff's communication team has made numerous calls and e-mails to media working on the antibiotic story, including to CBS in New York. While it's not always evident, this work has yielded more positive, or less-negative, stories than would otherwise have been reported.
- **Media training.** This ongoing effort has included training of producers, as well as internal and third-party experts to help them field media questions on antibiotics more precisely and in a way that's best understood by the audience.
- **Talking points.** These are being updated as needed and geared toward specific users and audiences.
- **Letter to the editor.** A template has been created and sent to state associations. It could easily be adapted for use in many contexts regarding false information about antibiotics.
- **Op-Ed.** Dr. Scott Hurd, Iowa State University associate professor and former USDA deputy undersecretary for food safety, has written an op-ed piece that has been submitted to the *Des Moines Register* and other large dailies. Excerpts also can be repurposed for additional op-eds.
- **Factsaboutpork.com.** This existing Web site, which has been a one-stop-shop for consumers to learn the facts about the 2009 H1N1 virus, now offers visitors all the facts about how antibiotics are strategically used on swine farms.
- **Social media.** Pork Checkoff is monitoring and participating in social media such as Twitter and YouTube.

For more information, contact Mike Wegner, MWegner@pork.org, 515-223-2638.

New Message Points Underscore Producers' Responsible Antibiotic Use

With input from top experts in consumer media, the Checkoff communications team created four main talking points, with supporting subcomponents, to help head-off misunderstanding of the antibiotic issue and frame the discussion with facts.

- **Antibiotics are given strategically – administered when pigs are sick, susceptible or exposed to illness.**
 - Antibiotic use is not routine, but targeted when pigs are exposed to illness or are sick.
 - Modern pork-production facilities provide animals with an environment designed to keep them safe, healthy and comfortable.
- **Using antibiotics strategically ensures that the safest meat in the world ends up on America's dinner tables.**
 - Danish government reports show an increase in a variety of human, antibiotic-resistant illnesses, including a 10-fold increase in MRSA since the ban was put in place. (Source: DANMAP)
 - A U.S. congressional fact-finding mission to Denmark last September found no scientific evidence that reducing antibiotic use in agriculture resulted in public health benefits in that country.
 - Denmark recently experienced one of the worst salmonella outbreaks in Danish history.
- **Only antibiotics approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are used to treat pigs.**
 - Farmers work closely with veterinarians to decide which antibiotics to use.
 - Post-approval monitoring programs by the FDA are in place to ensure antibiotic use is not harming public health.
 - There is no conclusive scientific evidence that antibiotics used in food animals have a significant impact on the effectiveness of antibiotics in people. In fact, peer-reviewed studies suggest that over 95 percent of antibiotic-resistance concerns in human medicine are unrelated to animal uses of antibiotics.
 - Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), FDA and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) known as the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System, or NARMS, shows that resistance in animal products and foodborne diseases is steady or declining over the past several years.
- **We have a 20-year history of continuous improvement working with modern farm production to make pork better, healthier and safer to eat.**
 - The Pork Quality Assurance Plus® program, started by farmers in 1989, reinforces good on-farm practices that help produce healthy, well-cared-for animals that yield safe food. This national program, taught by veterinarians, university experts and other swine experts, emphasizes the judicious, strategic use of antibiotics.

For more information, contact Mike King, MKing@pork.org, 515-223-3532.

Veterinarian Sets Record Straight on Misinformation: Science Should Guide Discussion of Antibiotic Use in Livestock

By H. Scott Hurd DVM, PhD - Associate Professor, College of Veterinary Medicine, Department of Production Animal Medicine, Iowa State University

As former USDA Deputy Undersecretary for Food Safety and a scientist who has actively researched food safety for over 20 years, I'm disappointed by recent media reports that blame antibiotic use in livestock for most antibiotic resistance in humans.

The heart of the issue concerns the growing incidence of Methicillin-Resistant *Staph Aureus* (MRSA) in people. Consumers should know that MRSA mentioned in these reports is not a food-borne disease, and the strain found in pigs is different than that found in humans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has concluded that after investigating numerous human outbreaks of MRSA infections in the United States, none of these investigations has found animal exposure to be a risk factor for infection. The CDC concluded that the vast majority of infections result from person-to-person transmission of MRSA in the community.

In my opinion, the national lawmakers who are pursuing a misguided blanket ban on certain antibiotics used in livestock haven't considered sound science.

As President Obama said last year, "We must make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology." I fully agree. Bacteria are nonpartisan. Salmonella and *Streptococcus* don't vote and don't watch TV. The basics of microbiology, animal disease prevention, food production and risk assessment apply equally to us all. If new policies are not built on accurate science, they won't work; they won't make the world a safer place. This issue impacts me not just as a scientist, but also as the father of eight children.

It is critically important to my family and yours to understand that meat consumed in America is to be free from antibiotic residues. The presence of residues is illegal. As a former leader in the USDA Food Safety Inspection Service, I can assure you that the system checks carefully for the presence of this stuff in meat. Today's concern is about the possibility of resistant bacteria.

My years of experience and research in the food safety field have led me to the following conclusion: The published scientific risk assessments done to date on antibiotic use in livestock demonstrate an extremely low to nonexistent human health risk from resistant bacteria. Therefore, the public health and political benefit of antibiotic bans will be low, nonexistent or even contrary to public health. As a veterinarian of over 25 years, I believe antibiotic bans will lead to secondary public health consequences from the consumption of unhealthy animals, not to mention added suffering of sick animals. Experience teaches that evaluation of human health risk and the value of banning certain antibiotics must be made on a case-by-case basis; blanket bans are not effective.

The effects of such blanket bans are apparent in Denmark. After Denmark passed their ban on preventive antibiotics in 2000, the World Health Organization found no measurable public health benefit, partly because farmers were forced to use more antibiotics to treat sick pigs – 100 percent more! These secondary health impacts of the ban and the costs to producers haven't been covered in recent media reports.

If you truly value food safety for your family as much as I do, you'll realize that an antibiotic ban will actually decrease the health of meat animals entering the food chain. Science shows us, the continued safety of our food supply depends on allowing responsible farmers, with veterinary direction, to continue to making decisions based on best science and experience. The choice is ours. Let's base it on sound science, which is best for us all.

PORK CHECKOFF IN THE **SPOTLIGHT**

Iowa Producer Welcomes Antibiotic Discussion

For Heidi Vittetoe, talking about misunderstood issues such as antibiotics is not a new thing—she’s been doing it for years near and far from her family’s farm in Washington, Iowa. When members of the Pork Checkoff communications team paid her a visit recently, an open and honest discussion about antibiotics came quite naturally.

“Consumers need to realize as pork producers that it’s our goal to provide a safe, healthy food supply for their families and ours,” said Vittetoe. “And it’s important to underscore our commitment to providing a good work environment for those who work with us and to safeguard the environment.”

When it comes to using antibiotics specifically, Vittetoe has plenty to share.

“We don’t overuse antibiotics. In fact, we seek to use them as little as possible. When we do use them, we use them for a targeted set of circumstances. However, they’re a really important tool in providing for the well-being of pigs and provide protection against bacterial growth during certain times of stress for the animals.”

One of things Vittetoe takes pride in is in working closely with their herd veterinarian to pinpoint when medication is needed, what type and how much. “We know there are certain times when pigs become stressed and susceptible to certain diseases. That’s why we put the right antibiotic at the right dose in the feed. And of course, we strictly observe proper handling and withdrawal times.”

To make her point about the minimal amount of antibiotics used on their farm, Vittetoe uses her hand to make a major point. “Less than a handful of antibiotics is what an entire barn of 1,200 pigs gets each day when it’s used in the feed. This isn’t typically understood by consumers and I think we need to make that point.”

Over the last five years, Vittetoe noted that her farm has spent less and less on feed antibiotics—going from about \$3 per head, down to \$1.

“As a mother and a consumer I know how important safe food is. And as a pork producer, I know how hard we work to provide exactly that—a safe and nutritious food supply.”

For more information for consumer audiences, go to www.factsaboutpork.com.