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Keep Antibiotics Working Applauds California Senate's Action to Ensure Safer and Healthier Food

Keep Antibiotics Working (KAW), a coalition of consumer, environmental, science and humane organizations, applauds the actions taken today by Senate President pro-tem Darrell Steinberg and Senate Majority Leader Dean Florez to reorganize the Senate committee structure in the California legislature to give the full-range of stakeholders in the food system, including consumers, public health experts, environmentalists, animal welfare advocates, and family farmers, a voice in the making of food and agriculture policy in California. For too long, agriculture and food policy have been driven by relatively narrow interests of large-scale food producers. This is an historic initiative to redefine and open up the process.

Agriculture's impact extends far beyond the fields and barns. Decisions about agriculture affect the quality of our air and water, the health and well-being of our children and the general public, the welfare of animals and farm workers, and the vitality of rural communities. It is high time to take a holistic approach to agriculture and food and bring the voices of all affected interests into halls of power where the key decisions are made.

No issue better illustrates the far-flung, often unexpected, impacts of agricultural policy than the issue of antibiotic resistance. Doctors, hospitals, and veterinarians the world around are struggling with the alarming loss of the antibiotics that were the miracle drugs of the 20th century. Without those drugs, 21st century medicine is facing hard-to-treat, more virulent disease, and continually escalating health care costs. Surprising to some, agriculture contributes substantially to this problem.

Resistant populations of microorganisms result from overuse and misuse of antibiotics and it turns out that enormous quantities of antibiotics—the same antibiotics used in human medicine—are used in confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) to stave off disease from crowded, unsanitary conditions and promote rapid growth. Scientists have accumulated mountains of evidence demonstrating clear links between the unnecessary use of these vital drugs in animals and deleterious health effects in humans. The policy challenge is to find ways to make animal production systems less dependent on the use of these drugs.

Although the problem is urgent, it is difficult to find a legislative forum that spans food production and public health. As a result, it falls through the cracks between medical and agriculture legislative committees.

That is why KAW is so enthusiastic about the legislative reorganization announced here today. It will create the needed forum where the many consequences of decisions made about agriculture can be taken into account.

KAW whole-heartedly welcomes this historic initiative.