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Top Chicken Producers Reported to Have Slashed Antibiotic Use Action Will Help Curtail Spread of Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria to Humans

Washington, DC — The Keep Antibiotics Working Coalition (KAW) applauded a news article stating that four of the nation's top 10 poultry producers have dramatically cut use of antibiotics in producing chicken for human consumption, with one producer reportedly reducing its antibiotic use by more than 90% ("Natural' Chicken Takes Flight," *USA TODAY*, January 24, 2006, p. 5D, www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-01-23-natural-chickens_x.htm).

"This is a key step for keeping the crisis in antibiotic resistance from further depleting our arsenal of antibiotics effective at treating bacterial infections, in sick humans as well as in animals," said David Wallinga, M.D., Director of the Food and Health Program at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

The article reports that Tyson Foods, Inc., the nation's largest chicken producer, has cut its antibiotic use in chicken production by 93% since 1997, and quotes Tyson's chief veterinarian as stating that fewer than 1% of the company's broiler chickens received any antibiotics in 2004 (broilers are chickens produced for human consumption). Other top poultry producers that have also dramatically reduced their use of antibiotics include Perdue, Gold Kist, and Foster Farms, according to the article. Overuse of antibiotics in agriculture promotes development and spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria via food, air, water, and soil.

In correspondence with the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a member of KAW, Tyson states that in 1997 it used 853,200 pounds of medically important antibiotics in producing 2.18 billion chickens. By 2004, Tyson's antibiotic use had fallen 93% to 59,000 pounds, even though chicken production had increased to 2.27 billion chickens. Tyson letter states it has eliminated the use of antibiotics as growth promoters in chickens and now only uses antibiotics to treat or prevent disease when a threat is imminent.

"Tyson's slashing its use of antibiotics in poultry is a remarkable achievement," said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). "It reduces the likelihood that consumers will develop antibiotic-resistant infections. I hope that the rest of the livestock industry quickly follows suit."

The article notes that one impetus for the change has been implementation of policies by large-scale purchasers of chicken, including McDonald's and the food-service company Bon Appetit, to require meat from birds raised using fewer antibiotics. KAW member Environmental Defense worked with both companies in crafting their antibiotic policies.

"While Tyson's achievement is good news, these kinds of data require independent, third-party verification," said Margaret Mellon, J.D., Ph.D., Director of the Food and Environment Program, Union of Concerned Scientists. "The process should be transparent, enforceable, and accountable to the public. Federal government action is essential to ensure that all meat producers compete on a level playing field with respect to their use of antibiotics. Congress therefore should pass 'The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act.'"

The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act (S. 742/H.R. 2562), introduced by Senator Olympia Snow (R-ME) and Rep. Sherrod Brown (D-13th/OH), would level the competitive playing field and protect public health by phasing out use of medically important antibiotics as feed additives, unless the FDA concludes that this use is safe under modern scientific standards. The bill also requires drug manufacturers to report on the quantities of antibiotics produced for agricultural use and has been endorsed by more than 350 organizations including the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics and American Public Health Association.

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