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For Immediate Release:
May 19, 2006

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Group Applauds USDA for Proposing Improved Labeling Standard for Grass Fed Beef that Would Help Reduce Antibiotic Resistance in Humans

Proposal Gives Ranchers Incentives to Cut Antibiotic Use, Empower Consumers

Washington D.C. — The Keep Antibiotics Working coalition today praised the U.S. Department of Agriculture for proposing a new labeling standard for grass-fed beef that will help preserve vital human and animal drugs by allowing consumers to choose meats produced in grass-based systems that use fewer antibiotics (see USDA's new proposed labeling standard at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/stand/ls0509.txt>).

Lower antibiotic use in animals reduces the likelihood that drug-resistant bacteria will develop and spread, thereby exacerbating the loss of effective drugs in both human and animal medicine. The USDA new proposed standard requires that animals get 99% of their nutrition from grass and forage.

“Allowing cattle to stay on pasture and get most of their nutrition from grass and forage keeps the animals healthy,” said Margaret Mellon, Ph.D., director of the Food and Environment Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. “That in turn helps protect human health by reducing the need for antibiotics.”

In contrast, antibiotics are routinely given to beef cattle housed in crowded industrial size feedlots to prevent diseases due to stress and to treat liver abscesses caused by consuming grain, an energy source that beef cattle are not evolutionarily equipped to handle.

The USDA's previous proposal in 2003 - that only 80% of the diet come from grass or forage - was withdrawn in the wake of a barrage of public comments objecting that the weaker standard would have allowed many feedlot animals to be marketed as grass fed.

“We applaud the USDA for proposing a label that will allow consumers to choose products from genuinely grass fed animals,” said David Wallinga, M.D., director of the Food and Health Program at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. “We hope the USDA will follow grass-fed with other strong value-added meat labels related to antibiotic use.”

USDA is poised to issue standards on three more value-added claims: 1) livestock raised without antibiotics, 2) livestock raised without supplemental hormones, and 3) free-range production systems.

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