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Ethanol Industry Can Stop Using Unnecessary Antibiotics, New Report Finds

Nearly Half of Ethanol Plants Already Use Alternatives

Minneapolis – The ethanol industry should voluntarily stop the unnecessary use of antibiotics in the production process, particularly because viable alternatives are readily available, concludes a new report by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

More than 70 percent of all U.S. antibiotics are used as feed additives for healthy beef cattle, pigs and poultry to promote growth and to help manage the stresses on animals posed by confinement housing. Strong evidence implicates overuse of antibiotics in livestock with rising antibiotic-resistant bacterial infections in humans. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) testified before Congress earlier this month that the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics should be phased out in agriculture.

“The epidemic of antibiotic resistance threatens every one of us,” said IATP’s David Wallinga, M.D. “The best way to keep our existing antibiotics effective is to stop unnecessary antibiotics wherever they are used—in hospitals, in animals and in ethanol production.”

For decades, ethanol producers have added antibiotics to the ethanol fermentation process to control bacterial outbreaks. There are no reporting requirements for antibiotic use in ethanol production, so no reliable numbers are available on how widespread the practice is. In 2008, the FDA found residues from four types of antibiotics in dried distillers grains—the nutrient-rich residue sold as livestock feed that is a co-product of ethanol production. The agency has yet to make its findings public or take enforcement action against any ethanol facilities.

IATP’s report *Fueling Resistance? Antibiotics in Ethanol Production* estimates that of the 170 ethanol production facilities in the U.S., nearly 45 percent already are avoiding antibiotic use through readily available alternatives. Dozens more facilities are running trials of one of these alternatives, based on extensive conversations with ethanol plant producers and vendors of antimicrobial alternatives. Some ethanol producers promote their dried distillers grains as antibiotic-free.

“The bad news is that many ethanol facilities are currently using antibiotics. The good news is that they don’t have to,” said IATP’s Jim Kleinschmit.

According to the report's author, IATP's Julia Olmstead, "There are several effective, economical antibiotic-free options on the market that are widely used that industry people we talked with are very pleased about. The ethanol industry can stop the unnecessary use of antibiotics today."

The report calls for the ethanol industry to enact an immediate, voluntary ban on antibiotic use; for the FDA to make its DDGS testing public and enforce existing regulations on antibiotic residues; and for further action by the FDA to restrict all unnecessary uses of antibiotics in agriculture. The full report can be found at: www.iatp.org.

IATP works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems.

