



### About Ben Lilliston

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### About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

# The war on antibiotics

## Without strict new regulations, U.S. beef, poultry and pork production could rob us of effective antibiotics

**MINNEAPOLIS, JULY 30, 2010\*** — Would you like some antibiotic-resistant bacteria with your grilled chicken at your backyard barbecue? Of course not. But that likelihood continues to grow unless the government makes industry change the way most American farm animals are raised.

Turning many of our livestock and poultry farms into factories has led to several decades of feeding our farm animals a steady diet of antibiotics. Now, the bacteria have gotten wise, and we're all paying the price.

An estimated 70 percent of all antibiotics (about 24.6 million pounds a year) consumed in this country are used non-therapeutically in our pigs, chickens, and beef cattle. In short, they're put into animal feed to promote growth, and to compensate for the factory-style practice of shoehorning huge numbers of animals into overcrowded sheds, known as "confined animal feeding operations" (CAFOs). Bacteria in these factory farms are exposed to low levels of antibiotics for long periods of time. These conditions create a perfect formula for breeding bacteria resistant to many or all of these antibiotics. What's worse is that many of the antibiotics used to raise factory-farmed animals (without any prescription) are identical or nearly so to the prescription drugs doctors rely upon for treating sick human patients. Doctors and public experts agree that this farm-raised resistance to antibiotics is adding up to a public health threat for us all. We face the potential in the near future of many superbug infections becoming untreatable.

The medical community has acted aggressively to reduce the over-prescription of antibiotics to humans, precisely to slow the development of these superbugs. But we can't win this battle without a similar effort by meat and poultry companies.

Antibiotic resistance is already proving costly—at least \$20 billion annually in health costs, and billions more in broader costs to society. With very few new antibiotics on the horizon, protecting what we have is essential.

After dragging its feet for decades, the Food and Drug Administration has finally taken the first timid steps to address this crisis. In June, the agency published a draft of new voluntary guidelines for the meat and poultry industry. The agency outlined a

set of principles calling for the use of antibiotics to be limited to treating animal disease and to include veterinary oversight. But no specific actions were required. FDA officials said these voluntary guidelines laid the groundwork for possible future regulations. But, the agency sets no timeline for future regulations, which could be additional years, even decades, in the making.

To protect America's health, Congress must accelerate action to protect antibiotics. More than 350 organizations, including the American Medical Association, the Academy of Pediatrics, the Infectious Disease Society of America and the American Public Health Association, have endorsed a bill that would halt the overuse of antibiotics in raising food animals. The bill, introduced by the only microbiologist in Congress, Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY), would phase out the non-therapeutic use of seven classes of antibiotics in animals—unless the FDA determines the drugs do not contribute to antibiotic resistance affecting humans. The modest bill would still allow farmers to treat sick animals and it only covers antibiotics also used to treat humans.

But Big Pharma and Big Meat represent two of the most powerful lobbies in Washington, and have thus far blocked the bill and FDA action. Why are they expending such effort to prevent this major public health initiative? As usual, it has to do with the bottom line. Banning antibiotics for healthy animals raised in extremely crowded conditions would mean that chicken, cattle and pigs would require more room, and more attention to hygiene. This might pose some minimal additional short-term costs to producers, but it would be nothing compared to the tens of billions consumers and taxpayers are already paying in health costs trying to combat antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. We can raise enough animals for food and still protect the effectiveness of antibiotics. Denmark, the world's largest pork exporter, phased out antibiotic feed additives by 1999. Producers improved animal husbandry and hygiene, and the overall use of antibiotics in agriculture dropped by over 50 percent. Consumers shouldered no additional costs. Costs to producers were negligible. A similar ban is now in place in the rest of Europe. And of course many American farmers in the U.S. already use these more sustainable practices, producing pork, chicken and livestock without antibiotics.

Nearly all of us have needed antibiotics at some point in our lives. If we want antibiotics to work for us and our children in the future, we have to get smarter about how we use them. We need to find the political will to act.

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