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Widespread Antibiotic Drug Use in U.S. Aquaculture, New Report Finds No Official Reporting System in Place

Minneapolis - An estimated 204,000 to 433,000 pounds of antibiotics are used annually in the production of seafood sold in the U.S., according to a new report issued today by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. This includes antibiotics from the same classes that doctors depend on for treating sick humans.

The report, "Antibiotic Drug Use in U.S. Aquaculture," by Dr. Charles Benbrook, found a remarkable lack of information about the amount of fish farm drug use in the U.S. There is no official reporting system of antibiotic use in aquaculture, despite recent scientific developments that increase the potency of these drugs.

The report found that total catfish antibiotic use is estimated to fall between 126,000 and 252,000 pounds a year. Trout and salmon production account for between 63,000 and 104,600 pounds a year, with use in salmon production rising. Use in other species fell within the range of an estimated 15,200 to 76,000 pounds annually.

"While antibiotic drug use has declined in terms of sheer poundage, the development of more potent drugs used in industrial fish farming throughout the world is a matter of great concern, given the amount of uninspected seafood imported into the U.S. The recent chloramphenicol 'shrimp scare' in the U.S. and Europe is a case in point," said Dr. Mike Skladany, Senior Associate for IATP's Industrial Aquaculture Project.

The antibiotics typically used in aquaculture are also important in treating human disease and infection. This could create human health risks as several studies have shown an increase in resistant bacteria in the intestines of fish receiving antibiotic drugs.

Recent studies in the New England Journal of Medicine and elsewhere have linked the large-scale use of antibiotics in livestock and poultry with rising numbers of people contracting infections caused by antibiotic resistant bacteria. Overuse of human antibiotics in aquaculture also merits close scrutiny, the report finds.

“Wherever antibiotics are overused in agriculture, it can raise the odds that people will become infected with strains of drug-resistant bacteria,” says David Wallinga, M.D., a physician at IATP. “So the use of common human drug classes in fish should raise a lot of red flags.”

The most common route of delivery of legal antibiotics to fish occurs through mixing with specifically formulated feed. Three antibiotics are approved for use in U.S. aquaculture – oxytetracycline HCL, sulfamerazine, and a drug combination containing sulfadimethozine and ormetoprim. Antibiotic use is frequently used in fish farms because over-crowding accelerates the spread of disease.

There is little enforcement by U.S. regulators in checking imported seafood for antibiotic levels. Over 68 percent of all seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported, most of which is industrially produced. Fish, and especially shrimp, produced in industrial farms in other countries face even fewer regulations than the U.S.

“Establishing the exact level of drug use and potential dangers is difficult due to lack of data, fragmented laws, regulations, jurisdictions and interpretations of reporting guidelines and large quantities of aquaculture imports from countries where legal and illegal drug use may escape documentation,” says Dr. Benbrook.

To read the report, go to www.iatp.org.

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