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New Economic Analysis Shows the Use of Antibiotics in Chicken Feed Increases the Cost of Poultry Production

Johns Hopkins study based on data from Perdue, the fourth-largest U.S. poultry producer

Washington, DC – Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the use of growth-promoting antibiotics in chicken feed is a financial loser for poultry producers, according to an economic study published by researchers at Johns Hopkins University. Using data from poultry giant Perdue, the researcher found that antibiotics slightly accelerated chicken growth, but that the benefit was offset by the cost of purchasing antibiotics, with the total cost rising by about one penny per chicken.

The Johns Hopkins study is in line with a 2002 study by researchers at Kansas State University showing that the use of growth-promoting antibiotics provided no economic benefits during the “finishing” stage of hog production, when weaned pigs are grown to market-weight.

“We have never believed that shaving a few pennies off production costs justified the erosion of our valuable arsenal of antibiotics” said Richard Wood, Steering Committee Chair of the Keep Antibiotics Working coalition (KAW). “But the fact that in today’s poultry operations, growth promoting antibiotics don’t even reduce costs just strengthens the case for eliminating them. It doesn’t make sense—or cents—to continue this practice.”

Medical and public health experts have long decried the use of growth promoting antibiotics (GPAs) as an important cause of antibiotic-resistant infections. Europe has banned the use of growth promoting antibiotics for this reason. Agricultural and pharmaceutical interests have defended the practice by arguing that GPAs are needed for efficient farm production, an argument that this new study refutes using the poultry industry’s own data.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has failed to take action to curtail the widespread use of antibiotics important in human medicine as farm animal feed additives. The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates that 70% of all antibiotics used in the U.S., nearly 25 million pounds annually, are used as feed additives for chicken, hogs, and beef cattle.

Perdue and three other large poultry producers—Tyson, Gold Kist, and Foster Farms—say they no longer use antibiotics to promote growth. However, because the government does not collect drug use data, there is no way to verify these claims. In addition, companies such as McDonald’s and Compass Group, one of the largest contract food service companies in North America, have adopted policies that prohibit the purchase of certain meats if the animals were given antibiotics important in human medicine to accelerate their growth.

Proposed federal legislation, The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act, (H.R. 2562/ S. 742), sponsored by incoming Senate Health Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy (D-MA), would phase out the use of antibiotics that are important in human medicine as animal feed additives within two years. The American Medical Association, the Infectious Diseases Society of America, and the American Academy of Pediatrics are among the more than 350 health, agriculture and other groups nationwide that have endorsed this bill.

The study, “Growth Promoting Antibiotics in Food Animal Production: An Economic Analysis,” appears in the January-February issue of Public Health Reports (<http://www.publichealthreports.org/>). It was written by Jay P. Graham, MBA, MPH, John J. Boland, PhD, and Ellen Silbergeld, PhD, at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health.