FDA Proposed Guidelines on Antibiotic Use in Food Animals

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All too often headlines in the news attack food producers as not caring for their animals, being factory farmers, or industrial food animal producers. These headlines influence the American consumer providing negative perceptions about the high quality food that agricultural producers are producing. It is critically important for food animal producers to have tools available to manage the health and production of their animals. One of these tools is the availability of efficacious antibiotics to treat diseases or to prevent disease from occurring in a herd.

Antimicrobial drugs have been widely used in human and veterinary medicine for more than 50 years with tremendous benefits for both human and animal health. One of the concerns regarding the use of antibiotics is the development of resistance to this class of drugs. This resistance could result in an antibiotic's loss of effectiveness as an antimicrobial therapy, which could pose a threat to public health. It is generally agreed within the health communities that misuse and overuse of antimicrobial drugs may at times create conditions which enable antimicrobial resistant bacteria to increase in numbers more rapidly than antimicrobial susceptible bacteria. This overgrowth of resistant bacteria could potentially allow individuals, people or animals, to become infected with resistant bacteria with those bacteria more refractory to antimicrobial therapy.

With this as a background, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on June 28 2010 issued a draft guidance regarding the judicious use of medically important antimicrobial drugs in food-producing animals. In this guidance document two principles regarding the use of antibiotics in food producing animals were highlighted. The FDA noted they were taking a more proactive approach to considering how antimicrobial drugs are being used and also taking steps to assure that antimicrobial uses are appropriate and necessary for maintaining the health of humans and animals.

The first principle states; The use of medically important antimicrobial drugs in food producing animals should be limited to those uses that are considered necessary for assuring animal health. FDA believes that the use of medically important antimicrobial drugs in food-producing animals for production purposes such as improving growth or feed efficiency represents a injudicious use of these important drugs. FDA does consider antimicrobial uses that are associated with the treatment, control, or prevention of specific diseases, including administration of drugs through the feed or water as uses that are necessary for assuring the health of food producing animals.

The second principle states; the use of medically important antimicrobial drugs in food producing animals should be limited to uses that include veterinary oversight or consultation. Most of the feed-use antimicrobial drugs are currently approved for over-the-counter use in food-producing animals. Their current use is approved for the treatment, control or prevention of disease and for production purposes. In addition to initiating measures that would limit use of medically important antimicrobial drugs in food-producing animals to uses that are considered necessary to assure an animal's health, the FDA also believes it is important to include veterinary oversight or consultation in the use of these drugs. FDA believes veterinary oversight would help assure appropriate use.

Beef cattle producers rarely utilize antimicrobials in their animals feed or water for enhanced production. When a drug is used in the feed or water it is utilized to treat control or prevent a disease occurrence. Beef producers should routinely utilize their herd veterinarian when making treatment decisions. With the consult of their veterinarian and a comprehensive herd health plan antibiotic use will be minimized and when needed appropriate.