

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

June 10, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We greatly appreciate the commitment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to ensure that antibiotics are used prudently in livestock animal production. We believe that the USDA has the opportunity and resources to take additional steps to reduce inappropriate usage of antibiotics on farms. On May 25, 2010, when our staffs met, we identified several existing programs that can be modified or expanded to achieve our goal.

The lack of data regarding agricultural usage of antibiotics makes it impossible to assess whether or not current usage is either prudent or responsible. We believe that existing USDA monitoring systems can and should help address this information deficit. In addition to improved monitoring opportunities, the USDA can help educate farmers about animal husbandry techniques that reduce antibiotic use.

Specifically, we urge the USDA to:

- **Use the National Animal Health Monitoring & Surveillance System (NAHMS) as a tool to monitor trends in the volume and type of antibiotics used on farms;**

NAHMS is currently focused on helping farmers become more productive by compiling data on antibiotic usage, among other things. However, antibiotic data is collected voluntarily and qualitatively, and there is no systematic assessment that increases our understanding of antibiotic patterns and trends across livestock sectors. The USDA can help policy-makers to better understand antibiotic usage by adding targeted questions that determine the total volume and type of antibiotics used on farms.

- **Enhance the Agricultural Resource Management Survey's (ARMS) monitoring of antibiotic practices on farms;**

Like NAHMS, the data collected by the Agricultural Resource Management Survey could be expanded to include information about the volume and efficiency of antibiotic usage. This information will help producers make informed business decisions about the optimal amount and type of antibiotic usage, and can be used by public health officials to help understand the potential sources of resistance.

- **Expand the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System (NARMS) to collect data on *Staphylococcus aureus* resistance;**

While NARMS has produced an abundance of information about the frequency and resistance levels of enteric bacteria, there has not been similar progress made in the tracking of other antibiotic resistant pathogens such as MRSA. Expanding the scope of NARMS to include other pathogens would provide public health officials with a wider spectrum of information that will help clarify the magnitude of the antibiotic resistance problem. Furthermore NARMS relies almost exclusively on samples from FSIS when looking for resistant microbes. Again, we believe that the scope of this survey should be expanded and look for antibiotic resistant microbes on the farm.

- **Create annual reports that synthesize data on antibiotic usage in agriculture;**

In addition to enhancing data collection, we ask that you initiate an overarching review of all the data within the Department that measure antibiotic use in livestock production and antibiotic resistance. We believe that such a review is critical to understand the link between antibiotic use in agriculture and antibiotic resistant infections in humans.

- **Require an additional module during the Category II veterinary accreditation processes which reviews husbandry practices that reduce antibiotic usage; and**

Veterinarians play a key role in transforming farm practices, and we ask that the USDA establish an antibiotics module as part of the ongoing accreditation of veterinarians. It is our hope that improved education will reduce unnecessary antibiotic use.

- **Enhance the role of extension agents in educating farmers on judicious antibiotic usage.**

Given the leadership roles and high regard of extension agents and programs, we ask that you expand their role to educate farmers about production and husbandry techniques that can reduce antibiotic usage on the farm.

We thank you for your continued leadership on this and on so many other issues of importance to our constituents. We are eager to work with you to reduce antibiotic usage on the farm and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,


Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator


Louise M. Slaughter
Member of Congress