

WASHINGTON – House Rules Committee Chairwoman Louise Slaughter this week was joined by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) in seeking more information from the Obama Administration on its position on antibiotic use in farm animals. In a letter to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Slaughter and Feinstein asked the secretary for “clarity” about the agency’s position in the wake of Vilsack’s comments earlier this month suggesting that he was unfamiliar with legislation proposals to curb the overuse of antibiotics.

Slaughter and Feinstein have legislation that would permit antibiotics to be used only for sick animals and could not be used a daily meal supplement in their feed.

The text of their letter follows here:

The Honorable Tom Vilsack

Secretary

U.S. Department of Agriculture

1400 Independence Ave., S.W.

Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to respectfully request clarification to comments you made at the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association on September 15th. Media reports suggest that you may have mischaracterized our legislation and made statements that run contrary to previous positions taken by Department officials. We hope that you can provide us with reassurances that your off-the-cuff remarks were taken out of context, and that you remain committed to protecting human and animal health.

On September 15th, the CattleNetwork publication reported that when asked about our legislation, the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act, you said, “I’ve communicated to Rep. Slaughter, my support of the judicious use of antibiotics. The vast majority of producers do not abuse the use of antibiotics in livestock production. I told her you cannot ban this. It doesn’t make sense.” And then that you went on to say that “USDA’s public position is, and always has been, that antibiotics need to be used judiciously and we believe they already are.”

Taken out of context, these statements highlight a common misperception about our legislation. The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act does not ban the use of antibiotics. And in fact we share your belief banning all uses of antibiotics would be counterproductive. Instead, the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act addresses the usage of seven antibiotics that are critical in human medicine, phasing them out for non-therapeutic uses in livestock production.

We would also like to express our concern with the statement attributed to you that USDA believes that all antibiotics are used judiciously. USDA officials have publicly acknowledged the forty years of evidence suggesting the need to change antibiotic usage practices on farms. In fact, USDA’s own Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr. John Clifford, testified at the House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing on July 14, 2010, that “USDA believes that it is likely that the use of antibiotics in animal agriculture does lead to some cases of antibacterial resistance among humans.” And he went on to say that “USDA is committed to playing an active role in preserving the effectiveness of medically important antibiotics,” and that USDA is “committed to

identifying opportunities to reduce usage and maintain the effectiveness of these drugs...through the development of new treatment options for animals...or through outreach and education to this country’s agricultural producers...” Dr. Clifford’s statements clearly indicate significant concern over this issue, so we hope that you will clarify your comment on the subject.

As you know, outside of the world of agriculture, antibiotic resistant infections are a matter of urgent public health importance. The recent deaths of nine Californian infants due to whooping cough are a reminder of the importance of antibiotics.

- Every year, two million Americans acquire bacterial infections during their hospital stay, and 90,000 will die from them.
- 70 percent of hospital-acquired infections are resistant to at least one antibiotic.
- Antibiotic resistance is estimated to cost society over \$35 billion nationally.

Federal agencies, public health organizations, and scientists are united by their concern with the overuse of antibiotics, and its implications for human health. And we believe that the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act is one step toward addressing this critical problem.

We hope that you share our concern and look forward to receiving a clarification of your recent comments. With so many misperceptions about our legislation, we would welcome the opportunity to sit down and discuss the key components of our bill. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us, or have your staff contact Devin Rhinerson of Senator Feinstein’s staff at (202) 224-2004 or Sarah Norman of Representative Slaughter’s staff at (202) 225-3615.