

# **FDA Week**

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***an exclusive weekly report on Food and Drug Administration policy, regulation and enforcement***

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## **Momentum Growing On Animal Antibiotic Ban With Possible Danish Assist**

Support for a bill that would ban antibiotic use in animals is growing on Capitol Hill, particularly within a key committee that could hold hearings on legislation later this year. Stakeholders might solicit assistance from Danish experts to help explain the impact of a European ban on growth promotion uses of the pharmaceuticals, and they say that data regarding the ban has been misrepresented by industry and opponents of the prohibition.

Lobbying efforts on both sides of the antibiotics debate have intensified lately, fueled in part by a “CBS Evening News” segment that thrust the issue into a more public light (see related story, Feb. 19).

A supporter of limits on animal antibiotics said the House Energy and Commerce Committee might be “feeling enough pressure” and hearing substantial “noise” on antibiotic resistance to fuel a hearing — or possibly even a markup — of the legislation later this year. However, the source stressed that legislators still need to hear additional information on the issues and that Congress is addressing many other topics, thereby complicating whether animal antibiotics will receive committee attention by year’s end.

A committee spokesperson did not return a request for comment.

House Rules Committee Chair Louise Slaughter (D-NY) introduced legislation — the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act — earlier this year that would prevent non-therapeutic use of antibiotics in animals by reserving seven classes of antimicrobials for humans only. The source noted that 10 of the 104 cosponsors of the legislation are on the Energy and Commerce Committee. Further, the bill picked up four additional cosponsors already this year. The Rules Committee held a hearing on the issue last year.

“We are very excited about the growing enthusiasm for this legislation,” a House staffer said. “The fact that the First Lady frequently talks about healthy food, combined with increased awareness of the issue thanks to recent books and movies, is very helpful for our case.”

A companion bill introduced by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) has 17 cosponsors, with two senators signing on during the last two months. The supporter of the ban noted that momentum has grown less quickly on the Senate side, adding that action on the legislation is likely to occur first in the House.

The supporter also said Danish experts might help with “educating” lawmakers on the antibiotic ban in Denmark, noting that foreign representatives would not necessarily support the legislation but would explain data to interested parties.

Both supporters of the ban and industry opponents have used facets of the Danish experience to support their platforms. The supporter of the legislation said that some Danish experts have expressed concern that data from Denmark has been “misrepresented” and might help clarify any misconceptions.

Rep. Steve King (R-IA) — who represents the largest pork-producing congressional district in the U.S. and recently traveled to Denmark — said he did not observe positive effects to animal health resulting from the ban. Moreover, King has said that no scientific evidence exists linking animal antibiotics to antimicrobial resistance and has pointed to the Danish studies and his visit as proof.

FDA officials have not formally expressed a position on the legislation, but Principal Deputy Commissioner Joshua Sharfstein has indicated a desire to crack down on the use of antibiotics for growth promotion purposes.

To help highlight the health ramifications of animal antibiotics and build momentum for legislative changes, the Pew Campaign on Human Health and Industrial Farming held a briefing on Capitol Hill this week focusing on alternative feed animal production methods. “Congressional action is desperately needed,” Indiana University professor Stephen Jay said. “PAMTA would make significant strides.”

Supporters of limiting antibiotic use said that simple changes to farms could improve animal health and negate any negative ramifications by removing antibiotics from animal feed. For example, the panel mentioned that increased space, better ventilation, frequent facility cleanings, later weaning and straw bedding could bolster animal health without antibiotics.

PAMTA supporters urged lawmakers’ staff to take data and information from the event to continue building

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momentum for the measure. “Get your policy makers fired up,” said Niman Ranch, Inc. founder Bill Niman, who opposes animal antibiotic use for growth purposes.

Industry representatives who are supportive of organic and natural meats said the market for non-medicated animals is growing. Chipotle Mexican Grill Chairman and co-CEO Steve Eells said that consumers prefer to eat non-antibiotic fed animals for philosophical reasons and because those animals simply taste better. “People really, really liked it. Sales went up on these items,” Eells said, adding that he hopes PAMTA “will expedite this transition to a better meat supply and hopefully serve as a catalyst.”

Central Coast Farms owner and CEO Andrew Carlson acknowledged that costs slightly increase for producing animals without using antibiotics, but he stressed that the future of meat consumption will mandate growth in antibiotic-free agriculture.

Applegate Farms President Linda Boardman said the average growth rate for natural and organic meat sales rose 4.5 percent in the last two years. She noted studies suggesting that individuals — regardless of race, gender and socio-economic status — prefer to purchase meat produced without growth hormones and antibiotics. “It’s getting to be a larger and larger group every day,” she said. “The demand here is exploding as public awareness is increasing.”

In opposition to the legislation, industry officials lobbied individual congressional offices late last month on animal antibiotics. Further, industry groups have encouraged FDA officials to visit feed animal production facilities before drawing any conclusions on the association between animal antibiotic use and antimicrobial resistance or the safety of feed animals treated with antibiotics.

“Taking FDA-approved animal drugs off the market would leave farmers and veterinarians with very limited options for preventing and controlling disease in livestock and poultry, which would have serious repercussions for animal health and preventing foodborne disease, with the strong likelihood that there would be no improvement in human health,” Mississippi State University professor Timothy Cummings said in a statement. “It’s absolutely vital that any decisions about the care of animals and the safety of our food be based on sound science rather than unsubstantiated concerns.”

The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, the National Chicken Council, the National Pork Producers Council, the National Milk Producers Federation, the National Turkey Federation, the American Meat Institute and the National Meat Association co-hosted the briefings in opposition to PAMTA. — *Ben Moscovitch*

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