

Press release

Ending routine farm antibiotic use in Europe through better animal welfare

28 January 2022, Brussels. Achieving deep reductions in farm antibiotics use will require widespread changes in animal husbandry practices towards higher animal welfare, argues a new paper written for the European Public Health Alliance.

The release marks today's date at which new, ambitious rules restricting the use of veterinary antimicrobials will start applying across the European Union (EU).¹

These new rules ban the routine use of antibiotics and restrict preventative use to exceptional treatments of individual animals. Also, antimicrobials can no longer be applied to compensate for poor hygiene and animal husbandry practices.

While welcoming these rules and raising the expectation that they will help cut antibiotics use and reduce the threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), the paper raises concern about the probability of widespread non-compliance with the legislation.

This is because, it argues, there is so far little indication that Europe is moving away from highly intensive livestock farming systems. Such systems are often associated with factors that drive the routine and excessive use of antibiotics, such as inadequate animal husbandry and high levels of disease.

- **Cóilín Nunan, Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, (report author):**

“Europe is taking a welcome step forward by banning preventative antibiotic group treatments of farm animals. But too much of European livestock farming is still based on an industrial model, where hundreds or thousands of animals are kept indoors in close confinement, allowing disease to spread far more easily. Current practices such as the very early weaning of piglets, or the use of extremely fast-growing chickens, lead to poor health, more stress and much higher use of antibiotics. Europe needs sustainable farming systems that protect animal health and produce healthier food without any form of routine antibiotic use.”

Focusing on poultry and pig production, the paper proposes six key changes to animal farming practices and four wider policy targets. Implementing those should maximise the opportunity of achieving responsible use of farm antibiotics, while improving the conditions in which animals are raised.

¹ See the Veterinary Medicines Regulation ([Regulation \(EU\) 2019/6 on veterinary medicinal products](#)) and the [official legislative summary](#). See also the accompanying Medicated Feed Regulation ([Regulation \(EU\) 2019/4 on the manufacture, placing on the market and use of medicated feed](#)).

- **Nikolai Pushkarev, Senior Policy Manager for Healthy Environments, European Public Health Alliance:**

“This paper helps understand the links between farm animal welfare and human health, adding meaning to the One Health principle. It credibly argues that a shift to higher animal welfare systems will be essential to achieve deeper reductions in antibiotic use in the fight against drug resistance. Such a production shift also appears to fit well with other public health, climate, and environmental co-benefits of a sustainable transition in animal agriculture. This signals an important direction for policy, including in how Common Agricultural Policy subsidies are directed.”

The paper recommends 10 actions to help achieve significant cuts in farm antibiotic use across Europe while improving animal health and welfare.

Four overarching policies and targets:

1. Ensure low levels of farm antibiotic use
2. Use most antibiotics for individual treatments
3. Collect data on antibiotic use by species and by farming system
4. Restrict the use of highest-priority critically important antibiotics

Six key changes in animal husbandry practices:

1. Later weaning in piglets
2. Use appropriate breeds
3. Improve hygiene, reduce indoor stocking density and provide proper enrichment
4. Provide access to the outdoors
5. Include sufficient fibre in diets
6. Ban tail docking of piglets

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