

POLICY ASKS

FROM THE ALLIANCE TO SAVE OUR ANTIBIOTICS

Major improvements to farm antibiotic use regulation and animal husbandry standards are needed if truly responsible farm antibiotic use is to be achieved.

The regulation of farm antibiotic use is a reserved matter and is therefore the responsibility of the UK Government. However, for all other policy asks listed below, devolved governments based in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and industry bodies also have a responsibility to take action if the UK Government fails to deliver.

We call for the following new regulations and targets:

1

THE UK GOVERNMENT SHOULD IMPLEMENT RESTRICTIONS ON THE USE OF FARM ANTIBIOTICS WHICH ARE AT LEAST AS STRINGENT AS THOSE INTRODUCED BY THE EU IN JANUARY 2022.

- a. All forms of routine farm antibiotic use, including preventative group treatments, should be prohibited.
- b. Using antibiotics to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry, lack of animal care and poor farm management should be prohibited.
- c. The highest-priority critically important antibiotics, the fluoroquinolones and the modern cephalosporins, should only be permitted when other treatments are unlikely to work, and should only be used in individual animals. No preventative use of these antibiotics should be permitted.
- d. Use of the colistin, which is used in human medicine as a last resort antibiotic for treating life-threatening infections, should not be permitted in farming.
- e. The importation of animal foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters should be prohibited.
- f. Mandatory collection of antibiotic-usage data by animal species and by farming system should be introduced. Usage data should be collected for systems like intensive, higher-welfare indoor, free-range, organic or pasture-fed.

2

SET TARGET TO REDUCE OVERALL UK FARM ANTIBIOTIC USE TO 15 MG/PCU OR LESS BY 2030.

UK Usage in 2022 was 25.7 mg/PCU, so this target is for a 40% reduction between 2022 and 2030. Four European countries (Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland) already have usage levels below 15 mg/PCU.

3

SET TARGET TO REDUCE GROUP TREATMENTS TO LESS THAN 30% OF UK FARM ANTIBIOTIC USE BY 2030.

Individual treatments are more targeted and less likely to select for antibiotic resistance. Group treatments already account for less than 30% of total farm antibiotic use in four European countries (Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland).

To reduce the need for antibiotics, we call for the following major improvements to farm-animal husbandry:

1

INCREASE MINIMUM WEANING AGE OF PIGLETS TO 35 DAYS.

A new minimum weaning age for piglets of 35 days should be adopted, as evidence shows this leads to far lower antibiotic use.

2

BAN TAIL DOCKING OF PIGLETS.

Routine tail docking is not permitted in the UK but is still widely practiced. An estimated 84% of British piglets have their tails docked. Tail docking can cause long-term chronic pain and infections. It is done to minimise tail biting, an abnormal behaviour of pigs linked with the intensive conditions in which they are kept. Risk factors associated with tail biting include high stocking densities, the lack of rooting material, such as deep-straw bedding, poor health, and low-fibre diets. Many of these risk factors are also associated with high antibiotic use. A small number of European countries have fully banned tail docking, except in cases of medical need, and avoid significant tail-biting behaviour through their higher welfare standards, which also help reduce antibiotic use. A ban on tail docking would therefore be expected to contribute to significant reductions in antibiotic use.

3

END THE USE OF FARROWING CRATES.

Farrowing crates are metal cages that are used to confine sows a few days before they give birth, and until their piglets are weaned. About 60% of British sows are confined in farrowing crates when they give birth. This can cause poor cardiovascular function and bone and muscle weakness and for heavy sows, it can also predispose to lameness. Lameness is an important factor predisposing sows to developing urinary tract infections, which are associated with increased antibiotic use. Urinary tract infections are also linked with higher levels of other infections that are treated with antibiotics. Sows should preferably give birth outdoors, or else in free-farrowing systems in pens with straw.

4

USE APPROPRIATE BREEDS.

Animal breeds should be selected to increase health and welfare, rather than focusing exclusively on productivity, as this helps reduce the need for antibiotics. A new minimum slaughter age for chickens of 56 days should be introduced. Hyper-prolific sows, which produce very large numbers of piglets, should be abandoned. There is a need to move away from excessively high-yielding dairy cows.

5

IMPROVE HYGIENE, REDUCE INDOOR STOCKING DENSITY, AND PROVIDE PROPER 'ENRICHMENT'.

Animals should be kept in conditions which enable them to avoid ingesting faeces or inhaling bad air. High stocking densities are associated with worse hygiene, increased levels of stress and easier disease transmission between animals. Broiler chickens in the UK can be kept at densities of up to 38 kg of animal per square metre, which means that the average space allowance per chicken is less than an A4 sheet of paper. This maximum stocking density should be reduced to 25 kg/ m². Similarly, there should be significant reductions to the stocking densities for all animals farmed indoors. Animals should not be kept in barren environments and must be provided with appropriate enrichment materials, for example straw bedding for pigs, which allow them to express natural behaviours and reduce stress.

6

PROVIDE ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS.

All farm animals should be provided with access to the outdoors, as this is likely to help reduce stress, disease, and antibiotic use. A new animal-welfare law should be introduced requiring that all dairy cows have access to pasture during the summer months. Such a law already exists in Sweden.

7

INCLUDE SUFFICIENT FIBRE IN DIETS.

Reducing the protein content and increasing the fibre content of diets has been used successfully to reduce disease incidence and antibiotic use in both pigs and poultry. Animal-welfare standards should ensure that all farm animals receive sufficient fibre in their daily diets, particularly when they are raised indoors.

GLOSSARY

ANTIBIOTIC

Any substance with a direct action on bacteria that is used for treatment or prevention of infections or infectious diseases.

ANTIMICROBIAL

Any substance with a direct action on micro-organisms used for treatment or prevention of infections or infectious diseases, including antibiotics, antivirals, antifungals and antiprotozoals.

ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE

The acquired ability of bacteria to survive or to grow in the presence of a concentration of an antibiotic agent that was previously sufficient to inhibit or kill bacteria of the same species. This makes treating previously simple infections increasingly difficult.

GROUP TREATMENTS

Antibiotic treatments given to groups of animals, most often in their feed or drinking water.

LAST-RESORT ANTIBIOTIC

In human medicine, these antibiotics are reserved for treating serious and often life-threatening infections that are resistant to many other types of antibiotics.

POPULATION CORRECTION UNIT

A theoretical unit of measurement developed to measure the size of a livestock population being treated with antibiotics. It takes into account the number of animals of each species, as well as estimates of their average weight at treatment.

PREVENTATIVE/PROPHYLACTIC ANTIBIOTIC TREATMENT

Antibiotic treatment given to an animal or group of animals before clinical disease has been diagnosed, in order to prevent the occurrence of disease.



The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is an alliance of health, medical, environmental and animal welfare groups working to stop the over-use of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded by the Soil Association, Compassion in World Farming International and Sustain in 2009. The Alliance vision is for a world in which human and animal health and well-being are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely on routine antibiotic use.



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