



Nonprofit Publisher
of Consumer Reports

Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

December 18, 2013

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Consumers Union, the public policy and advocacy arm of *Consumer Reports*, is writing to share our concerns about the non-therapeutic use in animal agriculture of antibiotics, especially those that are considered critical to human medicine. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Organic label is important to consumers who share this concern and who seek meat and other food products from animals that were not treated with antibiotics. We believe, however, that there is a loophole in the standards that needs to be closed in order to protect the public health, and to meet consumer expectations about meat and poultry labeled “organic.”

As you know, the National Organic Program is a marketing program. “Organic” is widely marketed to consumers as meaning “no antibiotics.” Yet while the standards expressly prohibit any animal treated with antibiotics to be sold, labeled or represented as “organic” (*see* 7CFR205.238(c)(1)), the organic law (section 6509(e)(1)) and standards (7CFR205.236(a)(1)) exempt day-old chicks from organic management. It is unclear which standard takes precedence, and we urge the agency to clarify the rules that govern the treatment of chicks raised to be sold under the “organic” label.

Currently, one of the most common antibiotics administered to day-old chicks in conventional hatcheries for the prevention of disease is gentamicin. Gentamicin is classified by the World Health Organization as “critically important” for human medicine, as it is the sole therapy or one of few alternatives to treat serious human disease. Its routine use to prevent disease in day-old chicks is disconcerting in any segment of agriculture, but especially when those chicks are raised under organic management after the first day of their lives and eventually sold as “organic.”

We urge USDA to clarify the language in the organic regulations to specifically prohibit the administration of antibiotics to day-old chicks, as well as chicks still in the egg. Due to the prohibition against antibiotic use in virtually all other segments of organic agriculture and the common marketing of “organic” as “no antibiotics used,” consumers expect all organic animals -- including day-old chicks -- to be raised without antibiotics.

Specifically, we urge that the following phrase be added (see bold) as clarification to the standards, 7CFR205.238(c)(1):

(c) The producer of an organic livestock operation must not:

(1) Sell, label, or represent as organic any animal or edible product derived from any animal treated with antibiotics, **including chickens that were treated with antibiotics while in the egg or on day one of their lives**, any substance that contains a synthetic substance not allowed under §205.603, or any substance that contains a nonsynthetic substance prohibited in §205.604

The emergence of antimicrobial resistance is a serious and urgent public health concern. Earlier this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report that notes that 23,000 human deaths could be attributed to the development of antibiotic resistance from overuse of antibiotics, including in agricultural settings.

Organic agriculture is marketed as being part of the solution to this widely recognized public health crisis. The marketing of “organic” as “no antibiotics used” is rooted in the organic standards, which clearly prohibit any animal or animal product from being sold as “organic” if it was treated with antibiotics. Given the current lack of clarity in the standards, consumers need assurance that this prohibition against antibiotics takes precedence and applies to day-old chicks.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,



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Consumer Reports Food Safety and Sustainability Center