



## POLICY & ACTION FROM CONSUMER REPORTS

November 20, 2015

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Consumers Union, the public policy and advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, writes regarding the use of antibiotics in agriculture. An overwhelming portion of the antibiotics sold in the U.S. are given to animals raised for food – such as hogs, cattle, chickens, and turkeys. After a Consumer Reports investigation, we would like to express our serious concern with the inappropriate use of antibiotics in the meat and poultry industries.

Consumer Reports this week released “Making the World Safe from Superbugs,” which is featured at [ConsumerReports.org/superbugs-in-meat](http://ConsumerReports.org/superbugs-in-meat) and in the January 2016 issue of *Consumer Reports* magazine. This story examines the progress – and work yet to be done – to stop the antibiotic overuse in meat and poultry production that gives rise to dangerous bacteria. It is the third installment in Consumer Reports’ investigative series on America’s antibiotic crisis, following an overview of the threat from “superbugs” in the August 2015 issue, and an analysis of antibiotic-resistant hospital infections in the September 2015 issue.

Antibiotics are losing their life-saving effectiveness. Their overuse – including in meat and poultry production – has allowed bacteria to evolve so that they are almost impervious to the drugs. According to the most recent data from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), more than 32 million pounds of antibiotics were sold for use in food animals in the U.S. in 2013 – up 17% from just four years earlier. This increase contributes to the rise of superbugs, which infect at least 2 million and kill approximately 23,000 Americans every year.

The story released this week reflects several elements of our commitment to addressing the antibiotic resistance crisis. It includes a review of a series of in-depth Consumer Reports studies showing that, in general, meat, poultry and shrimp from animals raised without antibiotics are less likely to harbor multidrug-resistant bacteria than conventionally-produced meat from animals that get the drugs routinely. It includes new calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data estimating that about 20% of people sickened by an antibiotic-resistant bug do not contract it in the hospital or from another person, but rather from their food. It includes the results of a survey we conducted in September 2015, showing that more than one-quarter of Americans report that they are buying meat and poultry raised without

antibiotics more often than they did a year ago. It includes charts that show which chain restaurants and meat and poultry producers have the best practices with regard to the use of antibiotics and other drugs. And it includes a sidebar piece that shows what various meat and poultry supermarket labels actually mean.

As consumers increasingly seek more sustainable food options, Consumer Reports supports the significant work of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to ensure the fairness and accuracy of meat labeling. At the same time, we have long pushed for this labeling to be as clear and meaningful for consumers as possible. We therefore make the following recommendations.

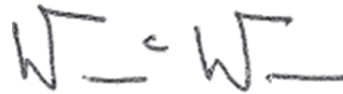
- **Prohibit misleading labeling.** USDA requires producers making a no-antibiotics claim to submit paperwork that states that animals were raised without antibiotics. But the department has approved some claims that imply “no antibiotics,” when in fact they can still be used for disease prevention. One example, found on turkey, is “no antibiotics used for growth promotion” accompanied by the USDA Process Verified shield. The claim does not mean “no antibiotics,” but the shield gives a false sense of credibility. While USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service seemingly approves these types of claims, the department’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has indicated that it does not, and that in addition, it enforces these and all meat claims. USDA should not approve such claims unless antibiotics are never used, and there should be consistency in label approvals across different agencies within USDA.
- **Address the misleading “natural” label.** USDA should not allow misleading uses of the natural label, and should respond to our June 2014 petition to ban the use of this labeling on meat because it is misleading. According to a 2014 Consumer Reports national survey, 60% of consumers believe meat labeled “natural” was raised without antibiotics and that the animal was not given artificial ingredients in its food; 68% think it means no artificial growth hormones. None of that is true.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations. Consumer Reports stands ready to work with you to combat antibiotic-resistant bacteria and provide consumers with the information they need to make healthy and sustainable choices.

Sincerely,



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Consumer Reports



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