Markey, Slaughter: Is Ethanol Production Linked to Antibiotic Resistance?

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Lawmakers query FDA on efforts to monitor antibiotics used in livestock feed that may enter human food stream

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Concerned that corn-based livestock feed could be linked to a sharp rise in antibiotic resistance, today Representatives Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) and Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.) asked the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) what the agency is doing to ensure appropriate use of antibiotics in food-animal production. The same antibiotics that are used in animal agriculture, such as penicillin and erythromycin, are also used by ethanol producers to prevent bacterial growth during the corn-based ethanol fermentation process. Producers then sell the byproduct of ethanol production as livestock and poultry feed, a use that appears to be sliding under the regulatory radar.

In the letter sent today to FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg, the lawmakers ask the agency about its recent effort to reduce the use of antibiotics for animal growth promotion in food-animals, as well as what the FDA is doing to ensure that ethanol producers comply with regulations for food additives. Currently, about 80 percent of antibiotics sold in the United States are used in animals and have the potential to make their way into our food stream. A study by the FDA found that levels of certain antibiotics remaining in the byproducts of ethanol production have the potential to cause antibiotic resistant bacteria.

" Antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria are a grave public health threat that is growing worldwide," write Reps. Markey and Slaughter in the letter to the FDA. " As the threat of antibiotic resistance expands, we must ensure that the unnecessary use of antibiotics in agricultural animals is minimized and FDA has the ability to limit their use if it serves to protect public health."

Using small amounts of antibiotics over long periods of time leads to the growth of bacteria that are resistant to the drugs' effects, endangering humans who become infected and can therefore not be treated with routine antibiotic therapy.

Just last month, the FDA for the first time asked drug makers to voluntarily change their labels on antibiotics to require ranchers and farmers to obtain a prescription before using antibiotics in farm animals. This was an attempt by the FDA to force more judicious use of the drugs that have led to the looming public health crisis of antibiotic resistance and to curb the practice of treating livestock animals with antibiotics purely to promote their growth. However, the use of antibiotics in ethanol production results in residues of these drugs in the byproduct sold for livestock feed and may be an indirect means of antibiotic contamination in milk and animal products used for human consumption.

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