

Shadow Health and Defra ministers urge Conservative counterparts to respond positively to proposals for reducing the routine, overuse of antibiotics in farming

The Shadow Secretaries of State for Defra and Health, Kerry McCarthy MP and Heidi Alexander MP, have written an open letter to Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt and Defra Secretary Liz Truss, asking them to respond positively to proposals for reducing the routine, overuse of antibiotics in farming.

The letter comes amid growing concern that current EU proposals to limit veterinary prescribing are being watered down by MEPs sympathetic to the views of the intensive farming industry.

Two related regulations are currently under consideration by the European Parliament, one on veterinary medicines, the other on medicated feed. Between them these will determine under what circumstances it will remain legal to routinely dose groups of animals via their feed or water - a practice which currently accounts for around 90% of total farm antibiotic use within the EU.

In two recent votes, the Parliament has taken different positions on this key question.

On 10 March, when considering the proposed regulation on veterinary medicines in a plenary vote, 95% of MEPs voted for an EU-wide ban on the routine preventive use of antibiotics in groups of animals. This included restrictions on the routine dosing of groups of livestock where just one or a few animals are actually ill - a practice that the Parliament said should be used only on a case-by-case basis, alongside measures to boost animal health and welfare.

But just days later, when considering the proposed regulation on medicated feed, the Parliament's Agriculture Committee (AGRI) adopted a different position, which would allow group treatments without any requirement to restrict such use to a case-by case basis, or to adopt measures to promote animal health and minimise disease.

Campaigners are concerned that the AGRI committee's proposals would enable farmers to side-step the Parliament's intended ban on routine preventative use, since by waiting for clinical signs of disease in one or two animals farmer could then give antibiotics to the whole group.

Emma Rose of the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics said: *"The rise of antibiotic resistance requires urgent action, and means that reductions are needed in use in all sectors, human medicine and livestock farming. We therefore strongly welcome the Parliament's attempt to ban routine preventative antibiotic use but are concerned that it may prove ineffective if loopholes are introduced which allow business as usual to continue."*

Regulators also need to realise that significant improvements to animal health and welfare are required to truly reduce farm antibiotic use. Intensive farming systems inevitably have high disease levels - this is part and parcel of keeping animals in crowded conditions - which leads to the overuse of medicines like antibiotics. There is overwhelming evidence that more extensive, health-orientated farming systems have much less need for antibiotics.

.The UK Government has already outlined its opposition to routine preventative use. It now needs to back up its words the European Parliament's attempts to introduce an effective ban."

Whilst the full European Parliament supports an EU-wide ban on the routine use of antibiotics, the AGRI Committee wishes to allow continued routine use in groups of predominantly healthy animals and has voted to open negotiations with the Council and Commission. This may result in an agreement being reached on the medicated feed proposal before its counterpart proposal on veterinary medicines. In this case, the less ambitious regulation is likely to prevail, compelling the Parliament to bring their position into line.

Farming organisations such as Copa Cogeca have openly opposed an EU-wide ban to the routine preventative use of antibiotics in farming, saying; "the correct use of prophylaxis [purely preventative antibiotic use] is a good veterinary practice."