

The UK falls behind the EU on farm antibiotic rules

BRIEFING - from the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, Jan 2022.

From 28 January 2022, the UK's regulations on farm antibiotic use are different to and weaker than the EU's. This is despite the government having previously said in Parliament that it planned to implement similar rules to the EU.

New EU legislation, which was agreed in 2018 when the UK was an EU member and now comes into force, prohibits all forms of routine antibiotic use in farming, including preventative group treatments [1].

From 28 Jan 2022 UK rules on farm antibiotic use fall significantly behind those of the EU:

- 1. In the UK it remains legal to give antibiotics to farm animals routinely. This is now illegal in the EU.**
- 2. In the UK preventative group treatments of farm animals remain legal. This is now illegal in the EU.**
- 3. In the UK it remains legal to give antibiotics to farm animals to compensate for inadequate husbandry, lack of care or poor hygiene. This is now illegal in the EU.**
- 4. In the UK it remains legal to import animal foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters. This is now illegal in the EU.**

The UK Government stated in Parliament in 2021 that it was involved in negotiating the new EU legislation and that it supported many of the provisions it contains [2]. It also said in Parliament in 2018 that it intended to implement restrictions on the preventative use of antibiotics in farming that would be in line with the EU legislation **Error! Reference source not found.**, but over three years later it has still not produced any proposals for ending preventative mass medication or other forms of routine farm antibiotic use. This is despite Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, having said in 2018 "We do, however, intend to implement the provisions of the new EU legislation on the use of antibiotics" [4].



The new EU legislation also makes it illegal for EU farmers to use antibiotics to compensate for inadequate husbandry, poor hygiene and lack of care of animals. There are major concerns that this important restriction will not be implemented properly in practice, because EU farmers have not prepared for the scale of husbandry change that compliance would require. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this new rule will lead to major improvements in European animal husbandry in years to come, to ensure the law is respected.

The new EU legislation is motivated by the global antibiotic resistance crisis, which scientists say is causing over one million deaths a year globally. However, the rules also have the potential to improve the health and welfare of hundreds of millions of farm animals across the EU.

The EU has also introduced a new ban on the importation of animal foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters. The UK has not announced any plans to follow suit. EU and UK farmer are already not permitted to use antibiotic growth promoters, but the UK's policy of allowing the importation of animal foods produced in this way puts UK farmers at a commercial disadvantage.

Zinc oxide ban

In June 2022, the EU will also be banning the use of zinc oxide, at high therapeutic doses, in piglet feed, to control post-weaning diarrhoea. Post-weaning diarrhoea is often caused by excessively early weaning of piglets, and is frequently controlled through routine antibiotic or routine zinc oxide use. The zinc-oxide ban is occurring because zinc residues in animal faeces are not biodegradable and are thought to be environmentally harmful when manure or slurry is spread on land. So far, the UK government has indicated that the ban will apply in the UK [5], although it has also announced that it is carrying out its own review of the scientific evidence of environmental harm, and that its findings may ultimately influence whether it does implement the ban or not [6].



Exports to the EU

Most of the new EU rules on farm antibiotic use will not apply to animal foods being exported to the EU. Just two provisions apply to imported food: the ban on the use of antibiotic growth promoters and a ban on the use of certain particularly important antibiotics that cannot be used at all in farm animals, which are to be reserved for human use. This list has not yet been produced but is expected to be published towards the end of 2022.

The UK must improve its regulations on farm antibiotic use

The government says that in 2022 it will be consulting on making changes to The Veterinary Medicines Regulations, including changes to the rules governing farm antibiotic use. This will be a significant opportunity to influence the legislation governing farm antibiotic use in this country.

However, there remains widespread industry opposition to any significant new legal restrictions on farm antibiotic use. Industry points out that over the last six years the use of antibiotics on UK farms has fallen by about 50% and is now lower than in many EU countries. In practice, they say, many of the UK's vets and farmers are already moving in the right direction under a number of voluntary initiatives.



insurance policy against disease.

However, without a legal framework this voluntary progress is vulnerable to market pressures, and can easily be reversed. The government's policy of seeking trade deals with countries like Australia and the United States, which have lower standards of animal welfare, continue to use antibiotic growth promoters and have far higher overall farm antibiotic use per animal unit, could lead to the importation of more cheap meat and dairy. This could undercut UK farmers and force them to reduce their own health and welfare standards and increase their preventative use of antibiotics as an

Furthermore, over the past two years, UK farm antibiotic use has stabilised at a level which is far higher than is sustainable nor necessary, particularly in intensive pig production [7]. Antibiotic use in the British pig industry remains over 2.5 times higher per pig than it is in Denmark or the Netherlands, and over 6 time higher than in Sweden.

Government action

The UK government should legislate to ensure the British rules of farm antibiotics are at least as good as those of the EU. They should also legislate to ensure that animal husbandry is sufficiently good to enable the end of all forms of routine antibiotic use.

The new UK rules should:

1. Ban all forms of routine farm antibiotic use.
2. Ban preventative group treatments of farm animals.
3. Prohibit using antibiotics to compensate for poor animal husbandry and poor hygiene.
4. Improve animal-welfare regulations so that farm animals are kept in healthy, low-stress conditions where routine disease can be avoided. These regulations should include significantly lower stocking densities, a higher minimum weaning age for piglets, and rules on better animal genetics.
5. Ban the importation of animals foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters. Phase out the importation of animals foods produced with preventative group treatments and other forms of routine antibiotic use.
6. Ban the use of zinc oxide at high therapeutic doses in piglet feed.

Proven success of banning preventative mass medication

Six European countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands, banned preventative group treatments years before the EU [8]. These countries generally have much lower antibiotic use than countries that continue to permit such group treatments. The lowest European users of farm antibiotics, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, also have higher animal-welfare regulations than EU minimum standards.

UK progress on farm antibiotic use needs to be protected in law

The UK's developing independent trade policy risks opening up the UK market to animal products from countries where antibiotics are greatly overused, unless sufficient safeguards are in place. This could place UK farmers at a commercial disadvantage and, unless rules are put in place, the voluntary cuts in farm antibiotic use could be reversed.



Outside of the EU, regulatory frameworks are often weaker and enforcement of existing regulations can be poor, with overall levels of farm antibiotic use often far higher than in the UK. Forty-two countries worldwide still allow antibiotic use for growth promotion (a practice banned in the UK and EU). It is therefore essential that domestic and trade policies ensure that UK farmers are not made to compete with imported foods produced to much lower antibiotic standards.

Our recent investigation found far higher levels of antibiotic use in the US, Australia and Canada [9], all countries with which the UK is, or aims to be, in trade talks.

ENDS.

To discuss the information contained in this briefing contact the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics:

Suzi Shingler, Campaign Manager: sshingler@saveourantibiotics.eu

Cóilín Nunan, Scientific Adviser: cnunan@saveourantibiotics.eu

www.saveourantibiotics.org

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