UK government urged to ban routine antibiotic use on farm animals as superbugs found in waterways abroad

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The UK government is being urged to ban antibiotic use on healthy farm animals in line with the EU following research by World Animal Protection that found antibiotic resistant superbugs dangerous to public health in rivers and lakes beside factory farms in Spain, the USA, Canada and Thailand.

The report, '*Silent superbug killers in a river near you*', found Antibiotic Resistance Genes (ARGs) downstream from factory farms and contaminated samples upstream in areas with a high concentration of pig farms. This suggests factory farms could be discharging ARGs and superbugs into the wider environment as a result of pig waste being spread on fields and leaking into public waterways.

Antibiotics are given to healthy animals in poor factory farm conditions to stop them getting sick and the EU will be banning this practice from 28th January 2022. The UK imports 60% of its pork products[1] (832,000 tonnes each year[2]) from countries including Spain and the USA identified in the report. Pigs on factory farms globally are cruelly caged, painfully mutilated and young animals are taken from their mothers at a young age.

Lindsay Duncan, World Animal Protection farming campaigns manager said, *"Superbugs emerge due to the overuse of antibiotics on animals in factory farms and we're calling on the UK government to follow the EU's lead and ban routine use. Raising animal welfare on farms is vital to reducing antibiotic use and helping prevent antibiotic resistance which the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates will kill 10 million people a year by 2050**[3]**."*

The superbug crisis poses a threat that could eclipse the COVID-19 pandemic. Already, more than 700,000 people die each year from superbugs where antibiotics are ineffective in treating infections.

The World Animal Protection investigation found ARGs resistant to antibiotics including: third generation cephalosporins, fluoroquinolones, colistin and macrolides, which are of most concern to the WHO. These antibiotics are the last line of defense for common infections like urinary tract infections or to keep patients alive with life threatening conditions like respiratory infections, when other antibiotics fail.

The WHO recommends that antibiotics should not be routinely used to prevent disease across groups of farm animals[4]. Despite this, the practice remains widespread on cruel factory farms with as much as 75% of the world's antibiotics used on farm animals[5].

Suzi Shingler, Alliance to Save our Antibiotics campaign manager, *"These findings are highly alarming as they show that it's possible for any resistance emerging amongst farm animals to transmit out of the farm via the surrounding waterways. To combat this, we want to see an increase in whole farm systems that put animal health and welfare at the core of the business. Research is increasingly showing that high animal welfare has the brilliant knock-on effect of needing very low amounts of medication given to the animals."*

World Animal Protection also interviewed people from local communities to gauge their experiences and firsthand accounts. Many complained about the farms but were too afraid to speak out.

One smallholder farmer who wished to remain anonymous in Thailand said:

"Rice doesn't grow the way it should when the farms release the water to the field. Some rice crops are damaged and some just die. Fish can't also live in the pond, it's actually the whole ecosystem in this area. I used to complain about this, but nothing has happened."

Another resident, known as just Rosa, who lives in the Aragon region in Spain said:

"Without water there is no future, and here we don't have any water to spare. These villages will not survive if you cannot open the windows, or be outside or walk, if you cannot drink the tap water, or if we lose our great attraction, which is the landscapes and tranquility.

"The meat lobby is very powerful, and the profit of a few companies is taking precedence over public health."

In England the latest figures from the Environment Agency show that all rivers have failed to meet quality tests for pollution with agricultural run-off one of the key sources of pollution.[6]

World Animal Protection is calling for governments to ban the routine use of antibiotics to prevent disease across groups of farm animals and to ensure that remaining factory farms meet FARMS animal welfare standards at a minimum.

You can read the full report here.

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Notes to Editors

For media interviews, images or video clips, please contact: George White; georgewhite@worldanimalprotection.org.uk; 020 7239 0634; 07814 695 298

1. Superbugs are antibiotic-resistant bacteria and have been called one of the biggest threats to global health and development. The overuse of antibiotics has led to the spread of superbugs, and impacts millions of people around the world, especially in developing countries. 700,000 people worldwide die each year from antibiotic-resistant infections, and this is projected to rise to 10 million deaths annually by 2050.

2. The United Nations Environment Programme has acknowledged that antibiotics are used to mask low welfare conditions on farms and called for an end to unsustainable agricultural practices and more investment in sustainable, agroecological systems[7].

3. A 2020 poll commissioned by World Animal Protection across 15 countries found that 88% of people are concerned about superbugs from farm animals, and want animals treated well. Two-thirds of people would help test for pollution from farms to hold big business to account.

4. There is no international standard describing the concentration at which superbugs in the environment become dangerous to people. Consequently no one is being held responsible and farm discharge of antibiotics and superbugs into water ways are unmonitored.

Key outcomes from each country from the investigation

Canada Testing found ARGs resistant to tetracycline, streptomycin, cephalosporins, fluoroquinolones and macrolides in surface water and sediments.

Spain Testing found ARGs resistant to tetracycline, sulfonamides, cephalosporins and fluoroquinolones. ARGs from surface water samples were up to 200 times higher than the baseline levels. Extremely high levels of ARGs were found in dust samples collected adjacent to farms. Testing of groundwater near farms also revealed very high levels of ARGs.

Thailand Testing of water and sediment found ARGs and superbugs resistant to third generation cephalosporins, fluroquinolones, or colistin plus co-trimoxazole, gentamicin, amikacin, trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole or amoxicillin.

USA Testing of water and sediment or soil found very wide evidence of ARGs conveying resistant to streptomycin, fluoroquinolones, cephalosporins, macrolides and most broadly tetracycline.

ABOUT WORLD ANIMAL PROTECTION

World Animal Protection seeks to create a world where animal welfare matters, and animal cruelty has ended. Active in more than 50 countries, we work directly with animals and with the people and organisations that can ensure animals are treated with respect and compassion. We hold consultative status at the Council of Europe and collaborate with national governments and the United Nations.

[1] Pig World UK exports up www.pig-world.co.uk/news/uk-exports-up-but-imports-down-in-2020.html

[2] Pig meat trade https://ahdb.org.uk/pork/pig-meat-trade

[3] Review on Antimicrobial Resistance. Antimicrobial resistance: tackling a crisis for the health and wealth of nations. Chaired by Jim O'Neill. 2014. Available from: https://amr-review.org/sites/default/files/AMR Review Paper - Tackling a crisis for the health and wealth of nations_1.pdf

[4] World Health Organisation. WHO guidelines on use of medically important antimicrobials in food-producing animals. 2017. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/258970/9789241550130-eng.pdf

[5] Ritchie, H. Three-quarters of antibiotics are used on animals. Here's why that's a major problem. World Economic Forum; 24 November 2017. Available from:

[6] Environment Agency. The state of our waters: the facts: https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2020/10/02/the-state-of-our-waters-the-facts/

[7] United Nations Environment Programme, Preventing the next pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission. 2020.

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