Industry presents united front in response to scrutiny on antibiotics

In recent years, the joint dairy industry issues management team has anticipated that the dairy industry would face more intense and higher-profile scrutiny on the use of antibiotics in livestock production from the media and the public.

The team (DMI, U.S. Dairy Export Council, National Milk Producers Federation, International Dairy Foods Association and Milk Processor Education Program) has developed consumer-friendly messaging and background information to explain the benefits of responsible use of antibiotics and reassure dairy consumers about the safety and wholesomeness of dairy foods.

DMI, through the National Dairy FARM Program, has taken the lead on educating the dairy community about antibiotic residue prevention through ongoing education on appropriate practices, as documented by the Milk and Dairy Beef Drug Residue Prevention Manual. The manual is an excellent resource for producers on which antibiotics are approved for use in dairy animals, residue testing, extra-label drug use, underlying causes of antibiotic residues and a best management checklist to avoid drug residues.

On January 25, a New York Times article brought the proposed FDA antibiotic residue compliance program for fluid milk into the limelight. A representative of Dairy Farmers of America underscored the safety of the milk supply, but the article also quoted critics who implied that residues are routinely present in milk. NMPF, IDFA and American Association of Bovine Practitioners also served as sources for the reporter – but were not quoted.

Following the article’s publication, a joint industry statement reinforced that the nation’s 55,000 dairy farmers have a strong track record of compliance with state and federal regulations and support education and enforcement efforts to further strengthen that record. The statement pointed out that the dairy industry is cooperating with the FDA as it collects input to review the proposed scope and methodology of the residue compliance program.

DMI’s myDairy social media network, comprised of producers who are active online, was activated to share the industry’s history of providing safe and wholesome milk and dairy products.

While follow-up media coverage and online dialogue sparked by the New York Times article was short-lived, issues management activity is ongoing. DMI is sharing resources and consumer-tested messaging with animal health companies that play a key role in ensuring the responsible use of antibiotics. Dairy producers, veterinarians and extension agents are encouraged to enroll in DMI’s Telling Your Story communications training program. And DairyFarmingToday.org serves as the ultimate web resource to connect the general public with life on the dairy farm.

With industry-wide alignment on the issue, we will remain positioned to prevent situations that could be portrayed by others as a food safety concern and to defuse any criticism of routine on-farm practices.
Answer: The U.S. milk industry has an exemplary record concerning management of antibiotics. Under a comprehensive program administered by the state regulatory authorities and overseen by FDA, the U.S. dairy industry already conducts nearly 4 million tests each year to ensure that antibiotics are kept out of the milk supply. In 2009, only .028 percent of samples tested positive, and in those very rare cases, the milk is not sold to the public.

Steps to take:
If you have the opportunity to set the record straight on antibiotic use on dairy farms in general, use the following messages to help shape your response:

- Milk and dairy products are among the most highly regulated foods in this country.
- Strict U.S. government standards ensure that milk is wholesome, safe and nutritious.
- Milk is strictly tested for antibiotics on the farm and at the processing plant. Any milk that tests positive for antibiotics cannot be sold to the public.
- Sometimes it’s necessary for farmers to treat cows with antibiotics when they are ill, just as humans sometimes need medication when they are sick.
- A cow being treated for illness is separated from the milking herd to ensure its milk does not go into the milk supply.

Test your answer
How can I be assured there are no antibiotics in the milk my family is drinking?

More resources about antibiotics and the dairy industry’s commitment to responsible antibiotic use can be found at:

- Dairy Farming Today: www.dairyfarmingtoday.org
- Pfizer Animal Health: www.residueavoidance.com
- Animal Health Institute: www.healthyanimals.org

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