July 12, 2010

To the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee:

When the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, World Health Organization, and American Public Health Association all agree on a health care policy issue it's worth taking notice. Each of these leading organizations has forcefully urged an end to the rampant overuse of antibiotics in the poultry and livestock industries. Why? Because an estimated 70 percent of the antibiotics used in the United States are fed to animals that are not even sick, making germs drug resistant, and jeopardizing the ability to effectively treat serious diseases in both humans and animals.

When antibiotics were introduced in the 1940s and 1950s they were celebrated as revolutionary. Indeed, many heralded them as ending the terrifying era when disease plagues swept through nations. In 1969, the Surgeon General, in a message to Congress, stated "It is time to close the book on infectious diseases. The war against pestilence is over."

But no one is saying that these days. With each passing year, research indicates that many common infectious diseases are developing new and more problematic resistance to many common antibiotics. The Infectious Diseases Society of America now estimates that 90,000 people die every year of hospital-acquired infectious disease and that 70 percent have infections that are resistant to at least one antibiotic drug. Antibiotic resistant infections are estimated to cost the United States health care system as much as $26 billion annually, according to a Cook County, Illinois hospital study.

Using these drugs in livestock feed and water at low levels (subtherapeutically) is an especially foolhardy practice. It suppresses only the weak germs while allowing the strongest to live and multiply. Yet this is precisely the way most antibiotics are used at industrial animal operations. Rather than a therapeutic dose that would kill all of the illness-causing germs, the drugs are added at lower levels to daily feed or water of chickens, turkeys, pigs and other food animals. This is done both to stave off disease in crowded, unsanitary conditions, and to trigger faster growth.

But this common practice puts the public at risk. Food animals shed resistant bacteria in their feces, breath, and in their skin. Research by the Department of Agriculture and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health has shown that manure contaminated with resistant pathogens can migrate around a farm, in slaughter and meat processing (thus contaminating food), into neighboring farms and the environment, and even travel long distances in the air.

After a two and half year process of research and deliberation, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production (of which Bill was a member) concluded that curbing non-therapeutic antibiotic use at industrial animal farms was essential to protecting public health. The Commission's Chair, former Kansas governor John Carlin, recently stated, "More than three decades of research have shown that overuse of antibiotics in food-animal production contributes to antibiotic resistance in humans."

Because of the connection between antibiotics overuse at agricultural operations and the rise of antibiotic resistance, the European Union outlawed subtherapeutic antibiotics in animal production in 2006. At the time, Markos Kyprianou, EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, said: "This ban on antibiotics as growth promoters is of great importance… We need to greatly reduce the non-essential use of antibiotics if we are to effectively address the problem of micro-organisms becoming resistant to treatments that we have relied on for years."

We are livestock ranchers. Both of us have also visited scores of farms all over the country raising pigs, beef cattle, dairy cattle, sheep, goats, turkeys, chickens, and egg laying hens. Our own experiences raising livestock and poultry as well as our experiences with hundreds of other farms leads us to state unequivocally that on-going feeding of antibiotics to farm animals is not only dangerous, ***it's unnecessary***. In our experience, when an animal operation is continually dosing its animals with antibiotics it is a sign that something is wrong with the operation. Constant administration of antibiotics is utilized when animals are forced to live in otherwise unlivable conditions.

Raised the right way, animals need few drugs and certainly don't need them continuously. On our ranch, where we raise cattle, goats and turkeys, we never give antibiotics subtherapeutically and rarely have to use them at all. By providing our animals fresh air, pasture, and the opportunity to exercise, they stay healthy and thrive without drugs. Bill founded Niman Ranch, Inc., a network of over 600 farmers who all raise pigs, cattle and sheep this way. They are living proof that with good animal husbandry, antibiotics are rarely needed.

We join the countless public health and environmental organizations that are actively calling for legislation to outlaw subtherapeutic antibiotics in animal agriculture in the United States. We have already visited several congressional offices in Washington D.C. to urge passage of PAMTA (the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act), which is currently before the House. We regularly write and speak about the importance of this issue for protecting the health of people and animals. The time to act is now.

Sincerely,
Bill Niman, Rancher; Founder of Niman Ranch, Inc.; Former Commissioner, Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production
Nicolette Hahn Niman, Rancher; Lawyer; Author of *Righteous Porkchop: Finding a Life and Good Food Beyond Factory Farms* (HarperCollins, 2009).

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