

Tyson Foods hopes to rid US chicken of antibiotics by 2017

April 28 2015, by Kelly P. Kissel



In this file photo taken June 19, 2003, chickens gather around a feeder in a Tyson Foods Inc., poultry house near Farmington, Ark. Tyson Foods said Tuesday, April 28, 2015, it wants to stop using human antibiotics in its U.S. chicken houses by September 2017. (AP Photo/April L. Brown, File)

Tyson Foods intends to stop using human antibiotics in its domestic chicken flocks by September 2017, the company said Tuesday, and will

explore doing the same for its beef, pork and turkey operations.

The move comes as restaurants demand more natural, unaltered food and amid concerns that widespread antibiotic use can lead to drug-resistant germs. An animal welfare group said if antibiotics are to be taken away, other steps were needed to ensure birds remain healthy.

McDonald's said in March it wants suppliers to stop using human antibiotics in poultry within two years and the Panera and Chipotle restaurant chains say chicken they currently serve is antibiotic-free.

Donnie Smith, Tyson's president and CEO, said the 2017 target wasn't intended to match any customer's timetable.

"As we worked with our animal pharmaceutical partners and with researchers and with others ... it's just the first point at which we felt like we would be in a position to totally eliminated the human-used antibiotics," he said on a conference call.

Christine Daugherty, Tyson's vice president of sustainable food production, said discussions would begin in the summer about additional antibiotic restrictions, though the company made no pledge.

"For other proteins, the animals in the cattle, hog and turkey supply chain, we want to get to reducing human-use antibiotics on the farm as well but we don't have a time frame," she said.

She said human-used antibiotics would still be used in poultry if it was the best course of treatment.

"We will not compromise the well-being of the animals," she said.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

cautioned that if antibiotics are taken away, the industry must take other steps to keep birds healthy, such as giving chickens room to roam, improving sanitation and addressing poor genetics.

"If animal welfare is not addressed in conjunction with pulling back the drugs, this could actually be a very dangerous move for birds and ultimately for consumers," said Suzanne McMillan, content director for the Farm Animal Welfare Campaign of the ASPCA.

Tyson said while it already has premium, antibiotic-free line of poultry, weaning all flocks from human-use antibiotics is not expected to increase costs to consumers. Smith said only a small percentage of birds are treated with antibiotics and are cleared of any residuals before being sent to a processing plant.

Dr. Bill Hewat, the director of Tyson's international veterinary and live operations services, said the company has strict guidelines on who can enter poultry houses, which can help reduce the risk of contamination.

"We either prevent or contain diseases with our practices of entering houses and transportation and movement of people around the farms," Hewat said. "Part of this ability for us to reduce these antibiotics has to do with the biosecurity program as well."

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