

Antibiotics in pork: Is pig industry sending mixed message to public?

Swine forum questions what 'antibiotic-free' means

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During the International Pig Forum at the 30th Alltech Symposium, experts and attendees discussed the use of antibiotics in pork production and how consumers react to their usage.

What does 'antibiotic-free' mean?

The first call-to-action at the forum was for the industry to define what exactly "antibiotic-free" means. Does it mean the therapeutic use of antibiotics in pork production? Does it mean no growth-promoting antibiotics? Does it mean no antibiotic use at all? The forum group agreed that the swine industry needs a definition in order to present a unified front to the public, helping circumvent consumer confusion.

Consumer confusion

Without a definition of what "antibiotic-free" means, attendees noted that companies like A&W and Chipotle are capitalizing on consumer ignorance by marketing their antibiotic-free meat.

Dr. Megan Edwards, a pig nutritionist, mentioned an example of consumer confusion in Australia: "Most consumers who purchase meat labeled antibiotic-free presume the animal has never been treated with antibiotics. Again, this comes back to our debate about how to define the term 'antibiotic-free'."

In the forum, Dr. Edwards said that she was aware of a situation in Australia whereby a veterinarian had prescribed antibiotics to treat sick pigs on herd (not treating in itself would be a welfare issue). Those pigs could then be sold as antibiotic-free, since technically at the time of slaughter, they are antibiotic-free.

Dr. Mark FitzSimmons, a veterinarian and pig farmer from the U.S., added that consumers do not seem to be on the same page as to what exactly they do not like about the use of antibiotics. "When you ask people what they're afraid of about antibiotics, you get all sorts of answers. To me, we really need to understand if they are afraid of antibiotic resistance [or something else]."

Potential solution

The forum concluded with the opinion that there needs to be a holistic approach when it comes to educating the public about antibiotic use in pork production. With consumers, clarity on the term "antibiotic-free" should come from both inside and outside the production chain in order to have an effect. The industry also needs to understand and address what exactly consumers fear about antibiotics. Are they afraid of "antibiotic residue" on meat? What about antibiotic resistance?

Dr. Megan Edwards' comments in the forum were clarified on May 27, 2014. We apologize for any misunderstanding.

http://www.wattagnet.com/Antibiotics_in_pork_Is_pig_industry_sending_mixed_message_to_public.html