

Veterinary Link: New rules concerning antibiotic uses in cattle

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Starting in December of 2016, the ways that cattle producers will be able to use antibiotics to control and treat disease in their herds will change. During the past several years, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has taken steps to fundamentally change how some

antibiotics can be legally used in feed or water for food-producing animals.

Important for human medicine

Starting Jan. 1, 2017, antibiotics used in feed or water that are considered to be important for human medicine (i.e.,

tilmicosin, neomycin, tylosin, virginiamycin, chlortetracycline and oxytetracycline) can only be used to control or treat specific animal health problems. The cattle must be under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian who issues a new document called a veterinary feed directive (VFD) for antibiotics administered in feed or a veterinary prescription for antibiotics administered in water — both of which are similar to a prescription that a person would receive from their doctor.

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For now, many commonly used antibiotics that are injected are not covered by these new rules. Extra-label use of in-feed antibiotics is illegal today and will remain illegal after Jan. 1, 2017. The new rules require that in order for a veterinarian to provide a VFD, the veterinarian and cattle producer must have a valid veterinary-client-patient-relationship (VCPR). Basically, in order to have a valid VCPR, the veterinarian must engage with the cattle producer:

- to assume responsibility for making clinical judgments about individual cattle and the herd;
- to have sufficient knowledge of the herd through examination of individual animals and/or visits to the facility where the herd is managed; and
- to provide for any necessary follow-up evaluation or care.

Changes for medicated feed

In the near future, a VFD will be required for any type of medicated feed containing a medically important antibiotic, even for small quantities of feed for individuals or small groups such as show cattle. These new rules will also affect free-choice feed used in grazing situations, such as mineral mixes or range cubes if they contain added antibiotics.

In order for a cattle producer to go into a feed store or mill to buy feed containing one of the affected antibiotics, the producer will have to have a VFD that specifies which cattle the feed will be fed to and for what purpose the antibiotic has been added to the feed. VFDs will only cover a limited period of time.

While some aspects of convenience will be lost and feed and water delivery of antibiotics for some disease conditions will no longer be allowed, some common uses of feed-grade antibiotics such as for controlling anaplasmosis will still be allowed — just under the rules of the VFD. Many feed stores may stop handling some forms of antibiotics that are administered through water or feed, and producers will definitely have to plan ahead and work closely with their veterinarian to use the available feed-grade and water-soluble antibiotics.

On the positive side

One good aspect of the new rules will be that cattle producers and their veterinarians can have some very valuable conversations about the best way to deal with cattle diseases. Some of the things your veterinarian will consider will be whether or not an antibiotic is needed and would be effective to treat the disease, or if there are some nonantibiotic alternatives, such as vaccinations, nutritional alterations or management changes, that can be implemented to deal with the current problems.

In addition, because neither cattle producers nor their veterinarians are allowed to use antibiotics in feed in any way that is not directly on the label, your veterinarian will have to decide if the proposed use matches the specifications on the product's label and if the cattle can meet the withdrawal time prior to slaughter. Finally, your veterinarian will have to decide if the risk of developing antimicrobial resistance that could hamper future treatment options overrides using the antibiotic for treating an animal or herd today.

Very few people really like change, and new rules often bring inconvenience and other headaches. However, new rules concerning antibiotic use in cattle are coming, and working closely with your veterinarian now to determine the best way to make the new system work for your herd is your best strategy to be prepared. With proper communication between veterinarians and cattle producers, the health and productivity of cattle herds and access to important antibiotic tools can be protected now and into the future.



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