



NSA Policy Position

Responsible antibiotic use

Background

- Antimicrobial resistance is a naturally occurring phenomenon as bacteria defend themselves.
- Any use of antibiotics in human or animal medicine can contribute to the development of resistance.
- An internationally coordinated “One Health” approach integrates animal health with human health.
- Resistance in human health has been shown by scientific evidence to be caused by overuse and misuse of human drugs in human health.
- Studies have found resistant bacteria are different in humans and animals, suggesting animal use of antibiotics cannot be the source of human resistance.
- Antibiotic growth promotion was banned in the EU in 2006.
- Many sheep farms achieve an average antibiotics use of <10mg/PCU, which is the industry target.

NSA Believes

- Antimicrobials are essential for animal health and welfare reasons.
- Blanket use of antibiotics for disease prevention (prophylactic use) is not recommended without a risk assessment and vet supervision.
- The sheep sector is a low user, but more can be done to measure and further reduce antimicrobial use.
- A zero-use approach would reduce health and welfare standards.
- Hygiene, management, genetics, vaccination can all be used reduce antimicrobial use.
- Antibiotic usage data collection is important, but NSA believes it needs to be at sales / vet level in order to achieve consistency and accuracy of data. Where farmers choose to collect on-farm data for management purposes, this should be handled appropriately and confidentially and only with permission.
- Marketing food as antibiotic-free requires extreme caution and ignores the fact that antibiotics are essential within high welfare production systems. Some countries using ‘antibiotic-free’ messages are referring only to a ban on prophylactic use and NSA does not support this misleading message for UK consumers.
- Responsible use of all medicines is vital to keep them working. NSA works with Sheep Vet Society and Sheep Antibiotics Guardian Group to drive industry change.



Reasoning

- Using 'as little as possible and as much as necessary' is the mantra of Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) Alliance and is an industry-approved, cross-species approach.
- Welsh Lamb and Beef Producers (WLBP) cooperative data and medicine hub records through Red tractor account for 10% (8,000) of the UK's sheep farms show the industry is a low user.
- A 2024 study of 52 Northern Irish farms found a median use of 11.35mg/PCU [Antibiotic use in the Northern Irish sheep flock: What lessons can be learnt from medicine records and farmer attitudes to improve stewardship of these essential medicines? - ScienceDirect](#)
- Oral dosing of new born lambs with antibiotic has largely disappeared after a popular product (spectam) had its UK market authorisation withdrawn.
- Annual reports in the RUMA targets taskforce literature shows progress. A general trend of falling abortion diagnoses and increased abortion vaccine sales suggests vaccination is an effective way the industry is combatting pathogens without antibiotic use.

Future

- Exports and British brand credibility may hinge on antibiotics data and proving the industry is a low user, meaning less reliance on WLBP figures and wider reporting
- EU rules requiring antimicrobial reporting from 2026 in sheep from member states will put pressure indirectly on UK producers to maintain export competitiveness and standards equivalence
- A vaccine taskforce is working for a national vaccine supply strategy to minimise supply disruption
- NSA will work with AHDB and stakeholders on the development of Medicine Hub to increase antibiotics reporting
- Best practice initiatives (such as the *Colostrum is Gold* campaign) will remain important to improving management and keeping antibiotic use low

Updates:

September 2016

January 2019

May 2019

July 2025