

New European Union rules on farm antibiotic use

In 2022, new EU legislation will prohibit all forms of routine antibiotic use in farming, including preventative group treatments.

Regulation (EU) 2019/6¹ on Veterinary Medicines and Regulation (EU) 2019/4 on Medicated Feed² come into force on 28 January 2022. The Veterinary Medicines Regulation includes the following restrictions on farm antibiotic use:

1. **Antimicrobial medicinal products shall not be applied routinely** nor used to compensate for poor hygiene, or inadequate animal husbandry or lack of care or to compensate for poor farm management. (Article 107.1 of Regulation (EU) 2019/6)
2. **Antimicrobial medicinal products shall not be used for prophylaxis³** unless, in exceptional cases for the administration to an individual animal or a restricted number of animals when the risk of an infection or of an infectious disease is very high and the consequences are likely to be severe. In such cases the use of antibiotic medicinal products for prophylaxis shall be limited to the administration to individual animal only, under the conditions laid down in the first sentence. (Article 107.3 of Regulation (EU) 2019/6)
3. **Antimicrobial medicinal products shall be used for metaphylaxis⁴ only when the risk of spread of an infection or of an infectious disease in the group of animals is high and where no other appropriate alternatives are available.** Member States may provide guidance regarding the other appropriate alternatives referred to in this paragraph and shall actively support the development and application of guidelines which promote the understanding of risk factors associated with metaphylaxis and include criteria for its initiation. (Article 107.4 of Regulation (EU) 2019/6)

The Medicated Feed regulation includes a ban on prophylactic use of medicated feed containing antibiotics:

4. Medicated feed containing antimicrobial veterinary medicinal products shall be used in accordance with Article 107 of Regulation (EU) 2019/6, except as regards paragraph 3 thereof, and shall not be used for prophylaxis. (Article 17 of Regulation (EU) 2019/4)

In practice this means for many farmed animals across the EU their good health will need to be achieved by avoiding routine antibiotic use and using alternative approaches, such as improving animal husbandry and welfare. There were 148 million pigs, 87 million bovine animals and 98 million sheep and

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/6/oj>

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019R0004>

³ According to Article 4 of the Regulation, 'prophylaxis' means the administration of a medicinal product to an animal or group of animals before clinical signs of a disease, in order to prevent the occurrence of disease or infection.

⁴ According to Article 4 of the Regulation, 'metaphylaxis' means the administration of a medicinal product to a group of animals after a diagnosis of clinical disease in part of the group has been established, with the aim of treating the clinically sick animals and controlling the spread of the disease to animals in close contact and at risk and which may already be subclinically infected.

goats in 2018, and the EU produced 15.2 million tonnes of poultry meat in 2018⁵ – this new legislation has the potential to improve the welfare of hundreds of millions of farm animals across the EU.

Unfortunately, the UK Government is yet to unequivocally commit to adopting these key changes into legislation. The government says that it does plan to introduce some restrictions on prophylactic antibiotic use but will organise a consultation later this year before doing so. The Alliance is campaigning for the UK Government to fully adopt the same changes as the EU.

The case for banning preventative group treatments and routine use

It is legal in the UK for a veterinary prescription to be written for mass medication with antibiotics even if no disease is diagnosed in any of the animals, which is an unacceptable misuse of these crucial medicines. Group treatments currently account for over 70% of farm antibiotic use in the UK, and over 95% in the case of the pig industry.⁶

Six European countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway Sweden and the Netherlands, have already ended preventative group treatments. These countries generally have much lower antibiotic use than countries that continue permit such group treatments. The UK is at risk of having some of the weakest regulations on farm antibiotic use in Western Europe if the government chooses to weaken the EU's regulations when implementing them.

While the UK's farm antibiotic use has fallen 50% in the past five years, this action has been voluntary and could be reversed if the UK livestock sector is outcompeted by competitors producing to lower standards. It is therefore essential that steps taken by UK farmers to reduce, and in some cases end, preventative group treatments are backed up by legislation, which is also applicable to imports.

Why there is doubt about the UK Government's intentions

When questioned, the responses from government officials have not been clear about whether the UK will ban group preventative treatments with antibiotics, or the routine use of antibiotics, referring instead to "restrictions" on prophylactic use without providing further details. The UK Government is yet to go on record saying it will ban routine antibiotic use, including all group preventative treatments.

1. [The Government's 5 Year Action Plan](#) on antibiotic resistance, published in 2019, does not mention banning group prophylaxis.
2. In a letter to the Alliance in April 2020 Defra stated: "The Government does have plans to introduce restrictions on the preventative use of antibiotics. We will be consulting with all interested stakeholders, following the usual processes when amending domestic legislation."

⁵ Eurostat, Agricultural Production – Livestock and meat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Agricultural_production_-_livestock_and_meat#:~:text=Livestock%20population,-Majority%20of%20livestock&text=The%20EU%20has%20a%20substantial,sheep%20and%20goats%20in%202018.

⁶ UK-VARSS 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909987/15_87146-v23-VARSS_2018_Report_2019_accessible.pdf

3. George Eustice statement in the House of Commons, referring to “restrictions” not a ban.

Animals: Antibiotics:Written question - 176052

Q Asked by **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) Asked on: 08 October 2018

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  176052

Animals: Antibiotics

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whether the Government has plans to ban the preventative use of antibiotics in groups of animals in line with proposals by the EU to introduce such a ban; and if he will make a statement.

A Answered by: **George Eustice** Answered on: 16 October 2018

The proposed EU veterinary medicines legislation includes provisions to restrict the use of antibiotics in animals for preventative purposes. The UK has played a key role in the revision of this legislation and supported the Commission's main aims. The UK Government plans to implement the restrictions on preventative use of antibiotics in line with the EU proposals.

We will continue to work closely with the veterinary profession, the livestock sectors and other stakeholders in developing, interpreting and implementing policy and legislation for tackling antimicrobial resistance.

4. Further George Eustice statement in the House of Commons referencing “implementing restrictions”.

Animals: Antibiotics:Written question - 183298

Q Asked by **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) [N] Asked on: 24 October 2018

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  183298

Animals: Antibiotics

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the Answer of 16 October 2018 to Question 176052 on animals: antibiotics, whether the legislation the Government plans to bring forward will ban rather than restrict the administration of antibiotics to groups of animals for disease prevention in line with the EU veterinary medicines legislation.

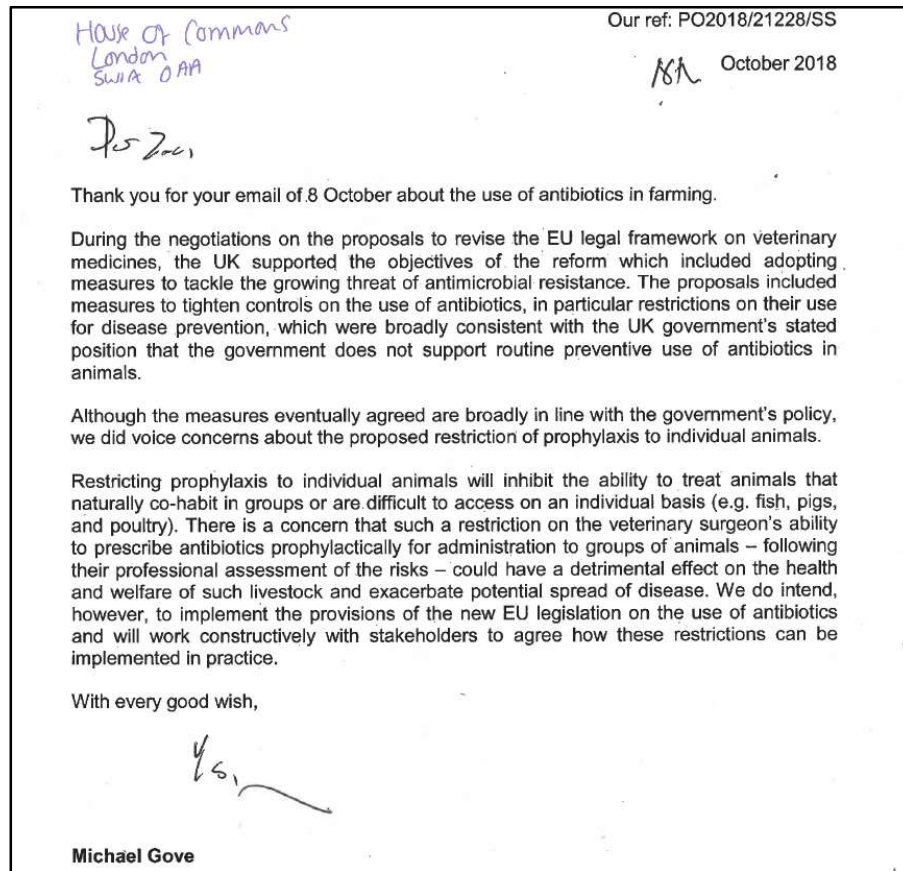
A Answered by: **George Eustice** Answered on: 29 October 2018

The EU Veterinary Medicine legislation proposals included measures to tighten controls on the use of antibiotics, in particular restrictions on their use for disease prevention.

Ministers have confirmed the Government's intention to implement restrictions on the preventative use of antibiotics in line with new EU legislation.

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5. Letter from Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Defra, to Zac Goldsmith MP expressing opposition to banning group preventative treatments.



Zinc Oxide restrictions

70-90% of British piglets receive zinc oxide in their feed⁷, mainly to control post-weaning diarrhoea which occurs more frequently when piglets are weaned very early. Use of zinc oxide in 2016 (the last year for which data is currently available) was at record levels and had increased by over 30% in five years.⁸

Zinc oxide will be banned for medicinal use in the European Union, and the UK on 26 June 2022.⁹ It is being phased out due to concerns that it is not biodegradable, and therefore accumulates in the environment where it is toxic to plants and aquatic organisms. There is also growing evidence that the use of zinc oxide increases the incidence in pigs of the superbug MRSA and of antibiotic-resistant *E. coli*.

From 2022 in the EU zinc oxide can no longer be marketed as a veterinary medicine and will only be permitted in feed at much lower doses for nutritional purposes. A commonly administered dosage is 100mg per kg body weight per day for 14 consecutive days, amounting to 2500ppm zinc in feed. The new legal limit will be 150ppm in feed, meaning therapeutic doses of zinc are now effectively banned. In the EU, the combination of a ban on preventative group treatments with antibiotics and restrictions on the use of zinc oxide mean that post-weaning diarrhoea in piglets will have to be avoided through other means, such as weaning piglets at a later age. These actions may create a significant opportunity for a widespread transition to health-orientated systems in pig farming across the EU. The UK

⁷ <http://www.pig-world.co.uk/news/member-states-given-five-years-to-ban-zinc-oxide.html>

⁸ Data obtained from the Veterinary Medicines Directorate via a freedom of information request.

⁹ 5 key facts pig producers need to know about the EU's ZnO ban, <https://thepigsite.com/news/2020/01/5-key-facts-pig-producers-need-to-know-about-the-eus-zno-ban>

Government should maintain its commitment to ban the use of zinc oxide for therapeutic purposes in line with the EU.

What needs to happen

The UK government should adopt the EU changes in full which includes:

- A complete ban on preventative mass medication with antibiotics
- A complete ban on all routine use of antibiotics
- Maintaining its commitment to banning the therapeutic use of zinc oxide
- Introduce regulations and other measures aimed at ensuring that farm animals are kept in healthier, less stressful conditions where routine disease can be avoided

The pig and poultry industries have made major reductions in their antibiotic use in recent years, but they remain very heavily reliant on alternative, unsustainable routine medication, such as the use of zinc oxide in pig farming or of “coccidiostats” in poultry farming. Many intensively farmed animals are still kept in stressful conditions, permanently indoors, in high numbers with poor air quality, and so they are sick all too frequently. Only by raising animals in healthy conditions, where they are not exposed to high number of bacterial and viral infections, can we expect to be able to avoid reliance on excessive antibiotic or other veterinary treatments.

For more information about the use of antibiotics in livestock farming visit saveourantibiotics.org

The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is an alliance of health, medical, civil society and animal welfare groups campaigning to stop the overuse of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded by [Compassion in World Farming](#), [the Soil Association](#) and [Sustain](#) in 2009. Our vision is a world in which human and animal health and well-being are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely on routine antibiotic use.

