

# U.S. PIRG

## Education Fund

November 18, 2021

Chris Kempczinski

McDonald's Corporation, CEO

Dear Mr. Kempczinski,

We write to you as health care professionals to express our ongoing concerns about the overuse of antibiotics in livestock production. We see the devastating consequences of antibiotic resistance first-hand in the medical field, and we're urging you to take action now to reduce antibiotic use and help keep these life-saving medicines effective. McDonald's position as a global leader in the fast food industry is vital in this effort.

When McDonald's stopped serving chicken raised with medically important antibiotics in 2016, we welcomed the change. After your 2018 commitment to set targets for reducing medically important antibiotics in beef production by the end of 2020, we considered McDonald's a true leader in efforts to preserve these drugs. That's why we're disappointed that it seems McDonald's has not followed through on that commitment.

Antibiotic resistance is often considered a silent and slow burning pandemic, but the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) consider antibiotic-resistant bacteria among the top threats to global public health. Millions of Americans get sick each year from drug-resistant infections. One estimate suggests drug-resistant infections account for up to 160,000 annual deaths<sup>1</sup>.

Overusing antibiotics in any setting can spur resistance, but it's critical we work to reduce use in the livestock sector, where nearly two-thirds of medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are used each year<sup>2</sup>. Meat producers overuse these antibiotics, routinely giving them to animals that are not sick to prevent diseases caused by unsanitary, overcrowded, and stressful conditions. That practice spurs the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which can then spread from farms and ultimately infect people and cause dangerous illnesses<sup>3</sup>.

*While we believe that antibiotics should be used to treat sick animals--just as we treat sick people--they should not be used to compensate for industrial farming conditions.*

McDonald's commitment to reduce antibiotic use in beef is crucial because this sector accounts for 41 percent of the medically important antibiotics sold to the meat industry in the U.S.<sup>4</sup> Your 2018 commitment would restrict use and set reduction targets for medically important antibiotics across 85 percent of McDonald's global beef supply chain by the end of 2020. Your policy also included a commitment to phase out routine use of medically important antibiotics for prevention of disease. These commitments rightly were based on the 2017 World Health Organization "Guidelines on Use of Medically Important Antimicrobials in Food-Producing Animals" as clearly indicated in the 2018 announcement<sup>5</sup>.

As far as we can tell, McDonald's missed its own 2020 deadline for setting reduction targets, and has not publicly reported any progress toward phasing out the routine use of the drugs.

We are calling on McDonald's to fulfill its previous commitments and continue to lead on this issue by:

1. Following through on setting meaningful reduction targets for medically important antibiotics across 85 percent of your global beef supply chain. Aggressive reductions will be especially important for the U.S. market, where sales of medically important antibiotics for use on cattle continue to rise.
2. Publicly reporting on progress regarding your commitment to prohibit routine use of medically important antibiotics for prevention of disease.
3. Adopting third-party, independent auditors with expertise in antibiotics to verify antibiotics use practices amongst your suppliers, to ensure public confidence in your progress.

Increasingly, consumers are asking for meat raised without the routine use of antibiotics. According to a recent national poll, labels claiming that meat was raised without antibiotics were important to two-thirds of consumers surveyed<sup>6</sup>.

As a leader in the fast food sector and the beef production industry, McDonald's is poised to lead the way in producing meat ethically and without the overuse of antibiotics. Fulfilling your commitment to reduce antibiotic use in beef will set the tone for other fast food companies, and help spark transformative change for health across the globe.

We appreciate your attention to this pressing issue.

Respectfully,

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology, New Estimate of Annual Deaths Caused by Treatment Resistant Infections Highlights Gaps in Research, Stewardship, Surveillance 3 December 2018, <https://www.idsociety.org/es/news--publications-new/articles/2018/new-estimate-of-annual-deaths-caused-by-treatment-resistant-infections-highlights-gaps-in-research-stewardship-surveillance/>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Food and Drug Administration (hereinafter FDA), Center for Veterinary Medicine, 2016 Summary Report on Antimicrobials Sold or Distributed for Use in Food-Producing Animals, December 2017, <https://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/NewsEvents/CVMUpdates/ucm588086.htm>. Data on 2015 sales of antibiotics for human medicine in the United States were obtained from Eili Klein of the Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy (CCDEP). Klein also provided data for years prior to 2015 in Kar, A., and Klein, E. “Animal Antibiotic Sales Finally Drop, but Much Work Remains,” Natural Resources Defense Council (hereinafter NRDC), December 2017, <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/avinash-kar/animal-antibiotic-sales-finally-drop-much-work-remains>. CCDEP also provided those figures for years preceding 2015; 2016 data are not yet available.

[5] Natural Resources Defense Council, Livestock Antibiotic Sales See Big Drop, but Remain High, 18 December 2018, <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/avinash-kar/livestock-antibiotic-sales-drop-remain-very-high>.

[6] “Medically-important antibiotics” or “antibiotics important to human medicine” refers to antibiotics that are the same as, or similar to, classes of drugs used in human medicine. For example, the antibiotic tylosin, used in livestock, is a member of the medically-important macrolide class of antibiotics. Throughout this report, we will use the term “antibiotics” and “medically-important” antibiotics interchangeably, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> US PIRG, Chain Reaction VI: How top restaurants rate on reducing antibiotic use in their beef supply chains, July 2021, <https://uspirg.org/feature/usp/chain-reaction-vi>

<sup>4</sup> FDA, Center for Veterinary Medicine, 2019 Summary Report on Antimicrobials Sold or Distributed for Use in Food-Producing Animals, December 2020, <https://www.fda.gov/media/144427/download>.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization, WHO guidelines on use of medically important antimicrobials in food-producing animals, November 2017, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241550130>

<sup>6</sup> Forbes, Antibiotics-Free Labels are Important to Two Thirds Americans when Buying Meat – and Data to Back-Up Claims is Paramount, a New Poll Shows, February 2021,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnzogby/2021/02/11/antibiotic-free-labels-are-important-to-two-thirds-of-americans-when-buying-meat---and-data-to-back-up-claims-is-paramount-a-new-poll-shows/?sh=2e22007b3c2b>