

Huge level of antibiotic use on US farms intensifies fears over post-Brexit trade

Fiona Harvey
Environment correspondent

Livestock raised for food in the US are dosed with five times as much antibiotic medicine as farm animals in the UK, new data has shown, raising questions about rules on meat imports under post-Brexit trade deals.

The difference in rates of dosage rises to at least nine times as much in the case of beef cattle, and may be as high as 16 times the rate of dosage per cow in the UK. There is currently a ban on imports of American beef throughout Europe, owing mainly to the free use of growth hormones in the US.

Higher use of antibiotics, particularly those that are critical for human health – the “medicines of last resort”, which the World Health Organisation

wants banned from use in animals – is associated with rising resistance to the drugs and the rapid evolution of highly dangerous “superbugs”.

The contrast between rates of dosage in the US and the UK throws a new light on negotiations on Brexit, under which politicians are seeking to negotiate trade deals for the UK independently of the EU. Agriculture and food are key areas, particularly in trading with the US, which as part of any deal may insist on opening up the UK markets to imports that would be banned under EU rules.

When negotiating outside the EU for a new trade deal, the UK will come under severe pressure to allow such imports. Over the summer, a row broke out over the potential for imports of chlorinated chicken from the US. Bleaching chicken, according to experts in the UK, is dangerous because it can serve to disguise poor hygiene practices in the food chain.

But Ted McKinney, US under-secretary for trade and foreign agricultural affairs, told an audience of British farmers last month he was “sick

and tired” of hearing UK concerns about chlorinated chicken and US food standards, providing further indication that the US government is likely to strike a hard deal on agricultural products as part of any trade agreement.

Antibiotic resistance can spread rapidly among herds and flocks, but can also be spread through eating affected food products, according to the World Health Organisation.

Antibiotic use in the US is three times higher in chickens than it is in the UK, double in the case of pigs, and five times higher for turkeys, according to research by the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, a UK pressure group, which based its report on new data that has recently become available through industry groups and government.

Suzi Shingler at the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics said: “This finding shows the huge advantages of British beef, which is often from grass-reared animals, whereas US cattle are usually finished in intensive feedlots.”

Nearly three quarters of the total use of antibiotics worldwide is thought to be on animals rather than humans.



▲ Cattle raised for beef in the United States receive at least nine times the rate of antibiotics that their British equivalents get PHOTOGRAPH: JACQUELINE NIX/GETTY