

# The politics of meat safety

From the Editors in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue



[AttributionShare Alike Some rights reserved](#) by [jon smith.](#)

Last year, a study found that 47 percent of meat at U.S. supermarkets contains the pathogen *Staphylococcus aureus*—and that 52 percent of these bacteria are resistant to antibiotics. This resistance stems from the practice of giving healthy livestock daily doses of penicillin and tetracycline. It's cheaper to prevent disease by lacing animals' feed with antibiotics than by providing adequate space and sanitation; the drugs also make the animals grow faster. Eighty percent of the nation's antibiotics are consumed by this highly profitable industry.

The fact that the U.S. has a national meat industry—as opposed to regional systems of production and distribution—makes it harder to confine an outbreak and identify its source. And germs resistant to antibiotics are especially perilous. That's why the European Union moved in 2005 to ban the feeding of penicillin and tetracycline to healthy livestock, a practice the American Medical Association and other groups have long opposed. As for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, it announced plans for a similar ban in 1977, but the political clout of the meat industry has prevented it from acting.

Recently the FDA announced its decision to quit trying. Instead, it will rely on voluntary standards. The agency released this information in the standard fashion of announcing news the government isn't proud of: a small item was published in the *Federal Register* three days before Christmas. While the voluntary standards are still in draft form, industry groups have already come out against them.

On January 4, the FDA announced a ban on certain agricultural uses of cephalosporins, which among other things lead to drug-resistant salmonella infection among humans. This is a positive step but a small one: this class of antibiotics makes up a tiny and already declining share of the industry's overall consumption.

The larger issue is penicillin and tetracycline fed to healthy animals, and on this the FDA is punting. Why? It may simply be admitting defeat. The agency is perpetually underfunded, while the meat industry spends lavishly on lobbying officials and donating to campaigns. Money equals influence, and regulators of cash-rich industries are often rendered toothless.

But the FDA's statement does allow for future action if the voluntary standards do not yield "satisfactory results"—which they almost certainly will not. The timing of the announcement may be political: the FDA, an executive-branch agency, can avoid offending agribusiness (to which both parties are beholden) while President Obama is running for reelection. This interpretation points again to the need to reform the role of money in politics.

More effective regulators are crucial as well. Many Americans endorse the abstract notion that unfettered business benefits us all. But here is a concrete instance in which an industry's profit motive is pushing it to endanger public health. We can't expect the industry to prioritize altruism over profit, but we can change its incentives. That's done in part through consumer activism, but mainly through the power of federal regulation.

The meat industry's large private profits come at large public costs. Federal food regulators need the funding and political support to do more than draft voluntary standards that no one expects anyone to follow.