food&waterwatch
Food & Water Watch • 1616 P St. NW, Suite 300 • Washington, DC 20036
www.foodandwaterwatch.org • T: +1.202.683.2500 • F: +1.202.683.2501

April 27, 2009

Honorable Edward Kennedy, Chairman
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Tom Harkin, Chairman
Senate Agriculture Committee
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Collin Peterson, Chairman
House Agriculture Committee
2211 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable Henry Waxman, Chairman
House Energy and Commerce Committee
2204 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Kennedy, Chairman Harkin, Chairman Waxman and Chairman Peterson,

I am writing to urge you to conduct hearings into a matter of serious importance to public health – industrialized pork production. The international race to head off a dangerous strain of swine flu is only the latest example of the ways that pork production intersects with human health.

The emerging crisis of a human-to-human transmissible swine flu strain that has now been detected in people in several countries should trigger long-overdue attention to the potential for disease transmission from intensive livestock production. The potential for hog production to put human health at risk has been noted in medical literature, with one 2007 study in a Centers for Disease Control journal noting that "protecting swine workers from human and zoonotic influenza makes good public health sense."[i]

This topic is worthy of the attention of your committees. Specifically, I urge you to look into:

- the source of the virus;

- the pathway for transmission between hogs and humans; and

- conditions inside hog confinement operations that could foster the growth and mutation of the influenza virus into more virulent strains.

Swine flu is not the only impact on public health impact from pork production that is worthy of examination by your committees. Another crucial topic is the discovery of Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) in U.S. hog facilities,[ii] a finding that follows on the discovery of these antibiotic-resistant bacteria on hog farms in Canada[iii] and the Netherlands.[iv] A growing body of research is establishing the link between the trend of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and the use of antibiotics in livestock production. In fact, recent studies of *E. coli* bacteria on operations using non-therapeutic antibiotics find that anywhere from 30 to 80 percent of bacterial samples are resistant to one or more antibiotics.[v] These bacteria can be transmitted from livestock to humans through direct contact between animals and workers or farm families;[vi] through human contact with animal waste, which can leach into water sources[vii] or be carried by flies;[viii] or on the meat that consumers purchase in retail stores.[ix]

A third topic related to pork production that is worthy of your committees' attention is an illness suffered by pork processing plant workers in several states. Workers in pork plants, specifically the parts of the plant where hog brains were removed with compressed air, suffered a rare and debilitating neurological condition.[x] The connection between conditions in meat plants and worker health should be further studied so that regulations and plant practices can be updated to better protect workers who are faced with many risks to their health and safety.

Finally, I urge your committees to prioritize these topics for credible research that is funded and performed by public entities, not the pork industry or its trade associations. The public health issues of disease transmission, antibiotic resistant bacteria and worker health are critically important to rural communities, workers, and consumers and any research into these issues must be done in a way that is independent of any industry pressure. This is not possible when the studies are financed by the industry. These issues must be high priorities on the research agenda of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Centers for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Please contact Tony Corbo at (202) 683-2500 if you have questions or need further information on this topic.

Sincerely,

Wenonah Hauter
Executive Director

Cc:
Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Health and Human Services-nominee Katherine Sebelius

---

[i] Gray GC, McCarthy T, Capuano AW, Setterquist SF, Olsen CW, Alavanja MC, et al. (2007) Swine workers and swine influenza virus infections. Emerg Infect Dis [serial on the Internet]. Available from http://www.cdc.gov/EID/content/13/12/1871.htm

[ii] Smith TC, Male MJ, Harper AL, Kroeger JS, Tinkler GP, et al. (2009) Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) Strain ST398 Is Present in Midwestern U.S. Swine and Swine Workers. PLoS ONE 4(1): e4258.

[iii] Khannaa T, Friendship R, Dewey C, Weese JS. Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus aureus Colonization in Pigs and Pig Farmers. (2008) Veterinary Microbiology 128, 3-4, Pages 298-303.

[iv] Huijsdens XW, van Dijke BJ, Spalburg E, van Santen-Verheuvel MG, Heck M, Pluister GN, Voss A, Wannet WJB and de Neeling AJ. (2006) Community-acquired MRSA and pig-farming. Annals of Clinical Microbiology and Antimicrobials 5:26

[v] Stinea, OC, Johnson JA, Keefer-Norrisa A, Perrya KL, Tignoa J, Qaiyumib S, Stineb MS, Morris Jr. JG. (2007) Widespread Distribution of Tetracycline Resistance-genes in a Confined Animal Feeding Facility. Int J Antimicrobial Agents, 29 (3): 348-352. Carson CA, Reid-Smith R, Irwin RJ, Martin WS, McEwen SA. (2007) Antimicrobial Resistance in Generic Fecal Escherichia coli from 29 Beef Farms in Ontario. Can J Vet Res. 72(2):119-28.

[vi] Levy S, Fitzgerald G, Macone A. Changes in Intestinal Flora of Farm Personnel After Introduction of a Tetracycline-supplemented Feed on a Farm. (1976) N Engl J Med. 295:583-588. Akwar TH, C Poppe, J Wilson, RJ Reid-Smith, M Dyck, J Waddington, D Shang, N Dassie, and SA McEwen. (2007) Risk Factors For Antimicrobial Resistance Among Fecal Escherichia coli from Residents on Forty-three Swine Farms. Microb Drug Resist. 13(1):69-76. Price LB, JP Graham, LG Lackey, A Roess, R Vailes, and E Silbergeld. (2007) Elevated Risk of Carrying Gentamicin-resistant Escherichia coli Among U.S. Poultry Workers. Environ Health Perspect. 115(12):1738-42. Khanna T, R Friendship, C Dewey, and JS Weese. (2008) Methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus Colonization in Pigs and Pig Farmers. Vet Microbiol. 128(3-4):298-303. Smith, TC, MJ Male, AL Harper, JS Kroeger, GP Tinkler, et al. (2009) Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) Strain ST398 Is Present in Midwestern U.S. Swine and Swine Workers. PLoS ONE 4(1): e4258.

[vii] Kumar, K., SC Gupta, Y Chander and AK Singh. (2005) Antibiotic Use in Agriculture and its Impact on the Terrestrial Environment. Adv Agro, 87:1-54.

[viii] Graham, JP, LB Price, SL Evans, TK Graczyka, and EK Silbergeld (2009). Antibiotic-resistant Enterococci and Staphylococci Isolated From Flies Collected Near Confined Poultry Feeding Operations. Sci Total Env, Article in Press.

[ix] White DG, S Zhao, R. Sudler, et al. (2001). The Isolation of Antibiotic-resistant Salmonella from Retail Ground Meats. N Engl J Med. 345:1147-1154; de Boera, E, JTM Zwartkruis-Nahuisa, B Wita, XW Huijsdensc, AJ de Neelingc, T Boschc, RAA van Oosteromb, A Vilaa and AE Heuvelinka. (2009) Prevalence of methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus in meat. Int J Food Microbiology, Article in Press.

[x] Gever J. AAN: Pork Worker Nerve Illness Has Autoimmune Cause. MedPage Today April 16, 2008. http://www.medpagetoday.com/MeetingCoverage/AAN/9147