

Food safety: additive in feedingstuffs and in drinking water for animal nutrition

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Provisions set out in Regulation (EC) No 1831/2003 on additives for use in animal nutrition require the Commission to prepare a report on the use of coccidiostats and histomonostats as feed additives with a view to a decision on the phasing out of these substances as feed additives by 31 December 2012. In presenting this report to both the Council and the European Parliament the Commission is fulfilling its obligations. As well as considering the phasing-out of coccidiostats and histomonostats as feed additives, the report addresses what alternatives may be available. It is accompanied, where appropriate with legislative proposals.

To recall, coccidiostats and histomonostats are chemicals, either obtained by synthesis or produced by micro-organisms, which inhibit or destroy protozoan parasites which cause coccidiosis or histomoniasis in farmed animals. Coccidiostats may also have a secondary and residual activity against the micro flora of the gut, but they are different from antibiotics as growth promoters, which have their primary action on the gut micro flora. The use of those antibiotics as growth promoters has been forbidden in the European Community since 1 January 2006.

The condition, coccidiosis in farmed animals has been controlled in the Community by adding substances to feed. As a feed additive it is regulated under Directive 70/524/EEC on additives in feeding stuffs. Regulation (EC) No 1831/2003 is a major overhaul of the existing EU legislation on feed additives. Coccidiosis affects all wild and domestic birds. It is widely acknowledged that the parasites are present in all commercial herds. The nature of the parasitic infestation is such that coccidiosis is present on all poultry farms, even in the presence of high sanitary standards and good management, with a high potential impact on animal welfare. The disease histomoniasis is also caused by a protozoan parasite – the most severe effects are seen in turkey (black head) although a broad spectrum of birds can be affected.

At present there are 11 different coccidiostats which have been granted 28 different authorisations for different species and under certain conditions of use. Generally coccidiostats inhibit reproduction and do not fully eliminate the parasite from the intestine of the animal. The authorised synthetic chemicals play a vital role in conjunction with ionophores. In order to minimise immunity to the parasite the products are switched from production cycle to production cycle in order to use them in so-called “shuttle” programmes. Thus, the availability and the continuous preventive use of coccidiostats have contributed significantly to the development of poultry production with a high level of health and welfare of the animals. As regards histomonostats, although no products belonging to this category are currently authorised in the EU, the mechanism exists for authorising them if an application for authorisation of a product were to be submitted with enough data supporting its safety for the animals, the consumer and the environment.

More recently the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has assessed extensively the safety of coccidiostats. In preparing this report the Commission requested information from both Member States and operators. A number of organisations responded to the report including the International Federation for Animal Health Europe, the European Feed Manufacturers' Federation, the European poultry producers and traders associations and the Association of Veterinary Consultants – as did fifteen EU Member States. All have indicated that, at present, there are no better alternatives to the current regulatory and inspection system in place namely MLRs, feed hygiene rules, registration and approval of establishments handling coccidiostats and traceability.

Based on the above analysis and the responses from stakeholders and Member States, the Commission concludes that at present, the use of coccidiostats as a preventive measure for the control of coccidiosis in modern poultry production is essential. The practice contributes significantly to the protection of both animal health and animal welfare by preventing a disease that is present on all farms. Alternatives, such as vaccines or herbal remedies do not offer the same advantages as the use of coccidiostats as feed additives. As regards histomoniasis, since there are currently no alternative treatments, the specific category should be maintained under the Regulation to open the option of authorising future products for the prevention of the disease, on condition that they meet high safety and efficacy criteria. The Regulatory framework established by Regulation 1831/2003 is effective and the Commission is of the view that it would be inappropriate to change the existing situation at present.