



Meat wagon: pork superbug!

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria thrives in CAFO pork, and Wall Street gobbles up Big Meat shares

Posted by [Tom Philpott](#) at 10:33 AM on 23 Mar 2008

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In [Meat Wagon](#), we round up the latest outrages from the meat industry.

Back in December, [Michael Pollan](#) wrote a [important article](#) about the antibiotic resistant bacteria MSRA, which Pollan described like this:

... the very scary [antibiotic](#)-resistant strain of Staphylococcus bacteria that is now killing more Americans each year than [AIDS](#) -- 100,000 infections leading to 19,000 deaths in 2005, according to estimates in The Journal of the [American Medical Association](#).

Pollan writes that such strains have been around for a while, emanating from hospitals, where our medical experts quixotically drench patients with antibiotics, inevitably incubating resistant -- and virulent, for us non-antibiotic users -- bacterial strains.

Now, Pollan reports, "a new and even more virulent strain -- called 'community-acquired MRSA' -- is ... killing young and otherwise healthy people who have not set foot in a hospital." Evidence is mounting that the source is that other great center of antibiotic reliance: the concentrated-animal feedlot operation, or CAFO.

In CAFOs, conditions are so wretched that operators drench animals with antibiotics as a matter of course -- the unfortunate beasts' immune systems are so compromised that they'd likely die otherwise. Pollan's article points to mounting evidence of an MRSA/CAFO link; this edition of Meat Wagon brings you one more. From the Canadian [Standard](#):

Canadian researchers have found antibiotic-resistant Staph bacteria in pork products purchased in retail stores across the country -- a discovery that raises questions about how the contamination occurred, how frequently it happens, and whether it has implications for human health.

The researchers say MRSA dies when pork is "cooked properly," so contaminated chops don't pose a huge health threat. But ...

But [the researcher] wondered whether people handling meat with MRSA on its surface would end up inadvertently "colonizing" themselves. People who carry the bacteria on their skin or in their nostrils are at greater risk of going on to develop a Staph infection, which can range from a hard-to-heal boil to pneumonia to a potentially deadly bloodstream infection.

Like Pollan, the Canadian newspaper points out this:

Where MRSA infections were once mainly acquired in hospital, in recent years increasing rates of infections have been recorded in people who haven't been in hospitals and haven't been taking antibiotics.

Wall Street: pass the Big Meat

Over on Wall Street, they're evidently not worried that the few conglomerates that control the meat market might face liability issues over a definitive MRSA/CAFO link. Big Meat shares [rallied vigorously](#) after a JP Morgan Chase analyst issued a favorable report on the industry -- focusing mainly on poultry.

Two factors underpin the analyst's case for Big Meat. One is lower corn prices, which have tumbled from recent highs lately as hedge funds and other speculators have dumped commodities. Corn remains at historically high levels -- above \$5/bushel, versus under \$2 as recently as 2006. But lower corn prices equal cheaper feed equal fatter profits for Big Meat.

The second is this: The chicken industry has been shuttering plants and buying fewer chickens, boosting retail prices through scarcity. As the analyst put it:

The chicken industry has proven it can pass on higher feed costs by adjusting supplies, and we are starting to see signs of easing supplies.

Industry skills: Big Meat rocks!

"Study: Conventional beef production better for environment than grass-fed," screams the headline of a [news report](#).

Cool! Let's start buying beef from JBS, Cargill, and Tyson, the three mega-conglomerates that [own 90 percent of the U.S. beef market](#).

On second thought, let's not. Turns out the study comes from the father-and-son team of Dennis and Alex Avery, long-time shills for industrial food. They run a think-tank-like organization called the Center for Global Food Issues -- which (judging from its [website](#)) has lately been most concerned with denying human-induced climate change (a long-time fixation of Avery *père*.)

Their sponsor is the Hudson Institute, an institution [shot through with cash](#) and flacks from Big Food, among other dirty industries. Right-wing foundations like Olin also shovel cash into Hudson's maw. Few take it seriously, and the Averys' tireless work is so wrong and so tedious that I usually can't be bothered to comment on it.

But with the Meat Wagon already rolling just before quitting time on Friday, I'll have a go.

First, the study referenced by the news story doesn't appear on the Averys' website, and a Google search of the title -- "The Environmental Safety and Benefits of Pharmaceutical Technologies in Beef Production" -- only turns up another news account. One wonders who reviewed it, outside of the family circle.

The news account tells us that the Averys delivered it at a "webinar for beef industry stakeholders." Must have been thrilling.

Here, I guess, is the nut:

According to the Averys' research, more than five acre-days are needed to produce a pound of beef from cattle raised and finished on grass in an organic system compared to less than 1.7 acre-days needed in a conventional feedlot system.

The reason for the difference, they say, is that industrial beef producers feed their cows copious lashings of synthetic growth hormones -- and that's not just a good thing, **it's awesome**. According to the Averys:

Growth promoting pharmaceuticals are a key component of North American beef production. Their use over the past 50-plus years has proven beneficial not only to beef producers, but to consumers and to the environment, all of which benefit from lower costs and more efficient use of scarce natural resources.

Right. To prove the safety of these hormones, the researchers (I've held myself back from using quotation marks) point to their approval by the FDA -- a group nearly as shot through with industry hacks as Hudson.

Okay, let's say the Averys are right -- that grass-fed beef is much more land-intensive than industrial meat. (Of course, one would like to see their numbers and vet their assumptions before taking anything they say seriously.) But what happens to the land in question?

Industrial beef relies on land that's lashed heavily with fertilizers and pesticides to grow corn. I've rehashed the vast ecological calamities associated with conventional corn production way too many times to get into it on a pretty Friday afternoon.

Then there's the titanic mountains of manure, shot through with the hormones adored by the Averys, that concentrates at feedlots.

Properly pastured beef cows, meanwhile, munch grass and deposit manure into the soil that's taken up by more grass, a closed system.

Even if the Averys are correct -- a highly dubious assumption -- "environmentally conscious consumers" (ostensibly the Averys' target here) should reject feedlot beef and eat modest amounts of the grass-fed variety.

I would make a mean crack comparing the Averys' "research" output and the hormone-laden waste that comes out of industrial cows' asses, but it's quitting time.

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