

For the Record

Straight talk about antibiotic use in food animal production presented by ALPHARMA Inc., Animal Health

WHAT THE PEW COMMISSION LEFT OUT

The Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production [unveiled its manifesto](#) this spring advising U.S. agriculture to return to 1950s farming. Politicians, activists, newspaper editorial boards and Internet conspiracy theorists queued up immediately to me-too the need to protect the public from agriculture by legislating more farms, smaller farms, less productive farms, costlier food and harder work on less pay for farmers.

The old system of specialized, confined animal raising, according to the commission, creates too many risks to public health, the environment and animal welfare.

BUT WHERE IS THE SCIENCE?

What you no doubt didn't hear were the voices warning that the commission's recommendations to ban safe and effective technologies, impose heavy-handed, top-down regulations on family owned farms that would drive many out of business, and raise the price of food in the middle of a global food crisis presents its own set of risks.

Rhetoric notwithstanding, what Pew failed to do was employ good science to quantify and contextualize those risks in order to give

consumers a meaningful basis to assess the [commission's value judgements](#). Concerning the use of antibiotics in animal production, for instance, the commission ignored virtually all the public research that disputes the theory that it contributes in any significant degree to human disease. The commission:

- Over-relied on decade-old European data.
- Ignored European studies suggesting the ban on antibiotics there has [made no impact](#) on bacterial resistance to human antibiotics.
- Cited no U.S. data from the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System (NARMS)—dismissing it as “too difficult” to discern trends from.
- Ignored most of the [key scientific reviews](#) and risk assessments that don't support removing antibiotics from U.S. use.
- Failed to even consider the growing body of literature finding organic meat, milk and eggs could pose higher risk than conventional products for bacterial contamination.

SOME HONEST RISK ASSESSMENT

The fact is that the real risk assessment is being done every day by the current regu-



latory system which tightly controls animal drug use, along with voluntary control measures put in place by farmers themselves and their professional organizations. Antibiotics meant for use in farm animals go through a strict approval process, including risk assessments to measure and quantify their risks. In fact, risk assessments on the likelihood a drug could contribute to the kind of human drug resistance the Pew commission so shrilly warned against have been a mandatory part of the drug approval process for many years.

Johns Hopkins' Center for a Livable Future, which spearheaded the Pew Commission, also uses its public health school affiliation to coordinate [Meatless Monday](#), a national campaign to persuade Americans to cut their “wasteful” meat consumption.



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YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT HIDDEN COSTS?

Modern farming has benefited the public by lowering the cost of high-quality foods for all. But according to Robert Martin, Pew Commission executive director, the “large hidden price tags” of that food make it no bargain.

But consumers are deluding themselves if they believe going organic will save those costs, according to agricultural economist Thomas Elam. Old-school farming is [vastly wasteful](#) of resources compared to the resource-sparing nature of modern technology.

The technological improvements in virtually all farming practices—from biotech seeds that save water to barns that help animals waste less feed simply keeping warm—have wrought nothing short of an efficiency miracle. They allow

today's farmer to grow one consumer's meat, milk and eggs on less than half the land it required in 1961— from 0.6 acres then to 0.27 acres today. That improved capability has allowed farmers to return 47 million acres to native forests and grasslands during that half century.

In contrast, because organic farming produces at roughly the same level of productivity as that 1960s agriculture, feeding the world organically would require re-enrolling those salvaged acres—and more—into farming.

“Where would that land come from?” Elam asks. “Forests? Swamps? Meadows? The Conservation Reserve Program? Unfarmed hillsides? Deserts? Biofuel production? Our parks?”

Just as they have the right to pay

over \$150 to gas up their SUVs, consumers have every right to pay at least twice as much for organic food that hogs twice the total resources of conventionally produced food, Elam says. But in a world where over half the people must live on less than \$2 per day and 12 children under age 5 die of malnutrition [every minute](#), they should simply understand the consequences of organics' hidden costs.

OF VALUES AND DOG DOO

Most press reports didn't ask whether the Pew farm animal commission's recommendations against modern farming relied on facts. But they freely quoted those involved like Executive Director Robert Martin, who proclaimed today's livestock producers pose "an unacceptable level of risk..."

An obvious point of order went for the most part un-noted: Remarks like Martin's are not statement of fact. They are opinion, loaded with value judgements like "unacceptable" and "unnecessary."

Let's be frank: Farming does pose risk—as virtually all human activity does to some degree. It's not the "risk" in Martin's pronouncement that's at issue. Instead, it's the "unacceptable."

Every day, consumers stubbornly insist on freely accepting those minor risks, often against the learned advice of those like the Pew commissioners who would make those decisions for them. Case in point: Dog doo.

This country's 74 million dogs and 90 million cats generate an estimated 24 billion pounds of waste every year. The Environmental Protection Agency deems it a hazard, capable of polluting waterways and carrying disease. And unlike waste from large farms, with the exception of inconsistently enforced pooper-scooper laws, it's virtually unregulated and untreated before entering the environment.

Yet few consumers would consider that environmental risk "unacceptable." Why? Because they consider the benefits price-

less. And they affirm their free acceptance of the risks through the great clarifying mechanism of the free market, spending over \$38 billion yearly on those pets.

Ultimately, the Pew commission was less about scientific risk assessment than about an intellectual class asking regulators to impose its value judgements about farming. Absent regulation's heavy hand, consumers will see through the false disaster-mongering, continuing to vote their confidence in the system by spending their money for meat, milk and eggs.



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Why food retailers should take a recent commission's call to return to 1950s-style farming with a grain of salt

□ The Pew-funded commission on animal farming claims modern farming is "too risky" to continue supplying food cheaply and abundantly. See inside for some facts the commission missed.

□ Heirloom agriculture may buy your customers good feelings about their consumption habits, but the unspoken secret about organic and "all-natural" animal production is that it's a resource hog. See inside.

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For the Record is a regular publication designed to present facts to balance today's debate over the safe, effective, economical methods farmers use to produce your milk, meat and eggs.

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For the Record

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FAQs about authentic farmers and real-world farming

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Q Why shouldn't we go back to having food raised by small, local—*real* farmers? That's what the customer seems to want, isn't it?

A The image of tiny, diverse family farms is comforting and makes good marketing, but what the packaging doesn't show is that today's family farm supplying you has grown far beyond that image. Independent does not equal small.

Take pork production, for example. Ninety-nine percent of all hogs now come from farms selling more than 1,000 animals yearly—fully 64 percent from farms selling at least 50,000 annually. All giant corporations? Hardly. More

than 60 percent of hogs in that 50,000-plus range come from farms owned by a U.S. farmer. For farms smaller than 50,000 head, it's been estimated that more than 90 percent are owned and operated by farm families.

It's also important to remember 55 to 66 percent of U.S. pigs—and a huge portion of U.S. chickens—are now raised under contract with farmers. That means a corporation may supply the animals, but it's still typically a local family farmer who owns the farm itself, as well as conducts the day-to-day management of it. "Authentic" farming may have grown in size, but its spirit is alive and well.