The use of antibiotics in livestock is receiving a lot of national attention. Now is a good time to consider some important facts about the antibiotics used in cattle.

Antibiotics are medications used to treat bacterial infections. A top priority of cattle producers is to maintain the health and well-being of their animals. Treating sick animals appropriately with antibiotics promotes animal health and well-being as well as human health, because healthy animals = healthy food = healthy people.

A common question from consumers is “Are antibiotics safe to use in cattle?” The answer is YES. Antibiotics go through a stringent Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval process. Both the safety and efficacy of antibiotics are tested. Furthermore, no meat sold in the United States is allowed to contain antibiotic residues that violate FDA standards.

FDA approval process
Antibiotics used in cattle undergo a thorough evaluation process before the FDA grants final approval for their use. The Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) within the FDA ensures that animal drugs are safe, effective, and manufactured properly. Human safety is also an important aspect of the animal antibiotic approval process. The FDA establishes withdrawal times for each product approved. Withdrawal time is the minimum number of days required between the last antibiotic treatment and the day the animal can enter the human food supply. Withdrawal times ensure that antibiotic residues are no longer present when the animal enters the food supply. Everyone that administers antibiotics to animals is required by law to adhere to all withdrawal periods.

Monitoring beef products for antibiotic residues
In addition to established withdrawal times, surveillance for antibiotic residues in beef helps prevent contaminated products from entering the human food supply. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) tests beef products entering the food supply to ensure they do not contain antibiotic levels that violate FDA standards. The testing protocol has been in place since 1967 and is continuously updated based on current information to provide the most thorough protection possible.
Key points to consider regarding the judicious use of antibiotics in cattle

1. Prevent problems: good animal husbandry (nutrition, hygiene, low stress handling, vaccinations, deworming, etc.) can prevent disease. Antibiotics should never be used in place of good husbandry.

2. Adhere to all antibiotic label directions or the written prescription from your herd veterinarian. This includes treating for the recommended time period and adhering to withdrawal periods.

3. Follow all Beef Quality Assurance guidelines with respect to antibiotic storage, administration, and record keeping.

4. Use an antibiotic that is labeled to treat the specific condition present. Do not use more than one antibiotic at a time.

5. Antibiotic use in cattle production is essential to maintain healthy animals.