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Is “Antibiotic-Free” Meat Really Antibiotic-Free?

After USDA Discovered Dozens of Meat Companies’ Deceptions, Its Regulatory Failure Continued

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ISSUE BRIEF

Trusted beef brands have been deceiving consumers by selling meat products under Raised Without Antibiotics (RWA) labels that are not antibiotic-free. Using documents obtained under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, a Farm Forward investigation revealed that government **regulators detected antibiotics in supposedly antibiotic-free beef, including meat sold by three of the four largest meatpacking firms that dominate the American beef market.**¹ With deceptive labeling, these three companies—Tyson, Cargill, and JBS—sold RWA products containing antibiotics at a higher cost to consumers than conventionally raised beef, while government regulators have taken no public or punitive actions to stop them.

Simply put, consumers are being scammed by Big Beef, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is knowingly letting them get away with it.

USDA testing revealed that antibiotic residue was widespread in RWA beef, but USDA did not release the names of offending companies. This investigation uncovered how the meat industry's largest and most trusted brands drove this deception of consumers and how USDA's failure to regulate RWA labeling has made it impossible even now for consumers to make conscientious purchasing decisions.

This brief outlines two key findings:

- 1. Three of the beef industry's four largest companies deceived the public about claims that their beef is free of antibiotics, and some have continued to mark products RWA even after receiving USDA's notice that their products contained antibiotics.**
- 2. USDA has deliberately maintained labeling policies that allow meat companies to mislead consumers.**

BACKGROUND

Demand for beef raised without antibiotics has skyrocketed in recent decades. In 2022, the U.S. RWA meat market was valued at \$17.46 billion and is expected to grow into a \$35.6 billion industry by 2032.² The profits from charging a premium for RWA beef incentivize use of the RWA label

¹ James MacDonald, "[Concentration in U.S. Meatpacking Industry and How It Affects Competition and Cattle Prices](#)," USDA Economic Research Service, January 25, 2024.

² Market Research Future, "[Global Antibiotic-Free Meat Market Overview](#)."



regardless of whether beef is actually antibiotic-free (on average, RWA meat costs at least 20 percent more than conventional meat³). The demand for RWA meat is increasing, even as these products cost more: 87 percent of consumers say that buying antibiotic-free meat is slightly to very important to them, and 74 percent are willing to pay more to have testing data verifying the antibiotic-free labeling claims.⁴ Growth in demand has been fueled in part by consumers' concerns about eating meat from animals raised in overcrowded, filthy conditions, as well as public health concerns about the growing problem of antibiotic resistance. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, antibiotic resistance is "one of the greatest global public health challenges of our time."⁵ The industrial animal agriculture sector's use of antibiotics is a leading cause of antibiotic resistance and directly compromises the medical system's ability to treat virulent human infections.⁶

The growing demand for RWA beef results in substantial revenue for Tyson, Cargill and JBS, which sell beef under dozens of recognizable brand names such as Open Prairie, Certified Angus Beef®, Swift, and Just Bare—brands widely trusted by consumers who pay more for beef products that don't contain antibiotics. These are sold at major retailers, such as Walmart, Kroger, Albertsons, Fred Meyer, and IGA.

In August 2024, USDA announced the results of their exploratory testing of the accuracy of RWA beef claims.⁷ Through testing liver and kidney samples from 196 cattle at 84 slaughter establishments in 34 states, USDA found that **one in five samples of RWA beef contained antibiotics**. The drugs found in beef included those critical for human medicine, like tetracyclines and penicillin. The routine use of these kinds of drugs contributes directly to the problem of antibiotic resistance, leading to lower efficacy in the treatment of serious human diseases and threatening public health. USDA did not release the action the agency would take in response, if any, or the names of the companies that tested positive. Farm Forward was able to obtain these names through a FOIA request (see Appendix A: List of Companies with Positive Antibiotics Tests in RWA Beef).

USDA's failure to provide meaningful oversight of RWA labeling was originally exposed when, in 2022, *Science* published a study based on testing of RWA cattle that found that 15 percent of the samples tested contained antibiotic residues, including drugs critically important for human

³ Lance Price et al., "[Policy Reforms for Antibiotic Use Claims In Livestock](#)," *Science* 376, no. 6589 (2022): 130-132.

⁴ "[John Zogby Strategies Poll of US Adults](#)," January 29, 2021; Food In-Depth, "[FoodID and Antibiotic Testing: Fact Sheet](#)."

⁵ Centers for Disease Control, "[Antibiotic Resistance Threats in the United States 2019](#)."

⁶ World Health Organization, "[Stop Using Antibiotics in Healthy Animals to Prevent the Spread of Antibiotic Resistance](#)," November 7, 2017; Xu C et al., "[A Review of Current Bacterial Resistance to Antibiotics in Food Animals](#)," *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 12, no. 13 (2022): 822689.

⁷ USDA FSIS, "[Constituent Update - August 30, 2024: FSIS Announces Availability of Guideline on Substantiating Animal-Raising or Environment-Related Labeling Claims](#)."



medicine.⁸ Farm Forward also commissioned its own testing of RWA beef at Whole Foods in 2022, finding that RWA beef containing antibiotics was being sold by the retailer.⁹ The testing led to a consumer class action lawsuit against Whole Foods for deceiving consumers with false labeling (the suit is ongoing).¹⁰ In both cases, testing exposed USDA's failings at substantiating RWA claims prior to companies using RWA labels.

Following the release of the *Science* study, pressure by Food In-Depth, Farm Forward, and other advocacy organizations led USDA to conduct its own testing of cattle raised for the RWA market. The fact that antibiotics appeared in one of every five samples tested—and in meat from three of the top beef companies that dominate the market—suggests that no RWA meat label is guaranteed to be truthful. The testing revealed not only false marketing by industry but also the failings of USDA in its oversight—a fact that the agency itself admits, saying that “the study findings underscore the need for more rigorous substantiation of such claims.”¹¹

FINDINGS

1. THREE OF THE BEEF INDUSTRY'S FOUR LARGEST COMPANIES HAVE DECEIVED THE PUBLIC ABOUT CLAIMS THAT THEIR BEEF IS FREE OF ANTIBIOTICS, AND SOME HAVE CONTINUED TO MARK PRODUCTS RWA EVEN AFTER RECEIVING USDA'S NOTICE THAT THEIR PRODUCTS CONTAINED ANTIBIOTICS.

In December 2024, Farm Forward obtained through a FOIA request the names of the companies that tested positive for antibiotics in their RWA products, along with letters issued by the agency to the offending companies. USDA detected antibiotics in the RWA beef products of dozens of companies, including industry giants Tyson, Cargill, and JBS. Consumer trust in Tyson, Cargill, and JBS is high. In a nationwide survey, consumers familiar with the companies reported overwhelmingly positive associations with all three: 81% approval for Tyson, 73% for Cargill, and 70% for JBS.¹² Yet, each of these companies has increased profits through deceiving consumers by selling RWA beef products at a premium under false labeling.

⁸ Lance B. Price et al., “[Policy reforms for antibiotic use claims in livestock](#),” *Science* 376 (2022), 130-132.

⁹ Andrew deCoriolis, “[Farm Forward Finds Drugs in Certified Meat at Whole Foods](#),” Farm Forward, April 4, 2022.

¹⁰ Andrew deCoriolis, “[Farm Forward Sues Whole Foods for Deceiving Consumers About Antibiotic Use in “Antibiotic Free” Meat](#),” Farm Forward, August 23, 2022; Andrew deCoriolis, “[Judge Rules Lawsuit Against Whole Foods Can Proceed](#),” Farm Forward, July 26, 2023.

¹¹ USDA FSIS, “[Constituent Update](#).”

¹² Topos Partnership, “Final Report: No Plate is Safe,” August 2024.

Cargill and JBS continue to sell RWA meat, despite USDA finding that their RWA products contained antibiotics. For instance, JBS's Aspen Ridge brand marketing states, "Naturally raised Angus beef from family-owned, U.S. ranches with incredible tenderness and flavor. Our Natural Angus beef has no added hormones, has verified Angus genetics, and [is] raised without antibiotics. This is Natural beef at its most premium." There is nothing to indicate that any of these companies conduct testing to verify their claims, or have stopped using antibiotics in the cattle they raise. Similarly, nothing indicates that Cargill has done any independent testing or changed any of its procedures to ensure their products are free of antibiotics. According to the USDA testing results, Cargill's RWA beef included antibiotics listed by the World Health Organization as of high medical importance for humans, despite Cargill's claim that they have "committed not to use antibiotics that are critically important for human medicines."¹³ JBS continues to offer RWA beef under several brand names (e.g., Aspen Ridge®, Grass Run Farms®, and thinkpure® (for marketing examples, see Appendix B: False Marketing of RWA Beef).

Tyson very likely pulled RWA meat from the consumer market due to USDA testing. For decades, the company sold RWA beef under multiple brands. When USDA announced it would conduct exploratory sampling for antibiotics in June 2023,¹⁴ Tyson announced the following month that it would withdraw its RWA labels on some of its chicken products.¹⁵ After USDA began testing on cattle, likely knowing that increased transparency and testing would expose their false claims, Tyson also abandoned their RWA supermarket brands in July 2024. However, Tyson is trying to keep a foothold in the RWA market. When pulling RWA products from these brands, the company said: "We continue to offer antibiotic-free beef based on market demand, and our commitment to antibiotic stewardship has not changed."¹⁶ They did not state which brands or private labels would continue these offerings.

Other companies that tested positive for antibiotics continue to market their products as RWA, such as Home Place Pastures—a direct-to-consumer, "No Antibiotics Ever" grass-fed beef supplier¹⁷ that tested positive for penicillin, perhaps the best known and most widely used antibiotic in human medicine—as well as Fort Worth Meat Packers, LLC, and Emory's Little Store (see Appendix B).

None of these companies have announced any change in their procedures or any plan to do voluntary self-testing or submit to independent third-party assessments of their claims.

¹³ Andrew Wasley and Marlowe Starling, "[Cargill Cows Contaminated with Vital Antibiotics](#)," *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, September 27, 2024.

¹⁴ USDA, "[USDA Launches Effort to Strengthen Substantiation of Animal-Raising Claims](#)," June 14, 2023.

¹⁵ Patrick Thomas, "[Tyson Foods to Drop 'No Antibiotics Ever' Label on Some Chicken Products](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2023.

¹⁶ Simon Harvey, "[Tyson Foods to 'Reduce Antibiotic-free Beef Offerings'](#)," *Just Food*, July 2, 2024.

¹⁷ Home Place Pastures, "[Farming Practices](#)." Note: Penicillin is one of the oldest antibiotics and is medically important for the treatment of human disease.

2. USDA HAS DELIBERATELY MAINTAINED POLICIES THAT ALLOW MEAT COMPANIES TO MISLEAD CONSUMERS.

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)—the agency tasked with ensuring that food labeling is accurate and truthful—has played a critical role in beef companies' RWA-labeling deception. Before RWA labels can be used on products, USDA must approve their negative antibiotics claims. However, despite these test results, USDA's process for label approval has not changed and continues to allow inaccurate labels that harm consumers. Even after USDA's own test results revealed the presence of antibiotic residue in RWA-labeled meat, the agency still does not conduct routine testing to verify labels' truthfulness or require empirical testing from producers or third-party auditors. The agency instead relies on producers' self-reporting of antibiotic use and management, even though this reporting has often proven false.

Following its exploratory testing, USDA issued letters to the offending companies, stating that antibiotic residues were found in one or more sampled carcasses. Farm Forward obtained copies of these letters, including the names of the companies using demonstrably false RWA labels. In a Constituent Update published in August 2024, USDA reported that it “will take enforcement action against any establishments found to be making false or misleading negative antibiotic claims.”¹⁸ However, no public action or penalty has been issued. In fact, USDA explicitly stated in the letters they sent to companies that the agency would *not* take enforcement action based on this exploratory testing anytime soon, if ever:

Antibiotics are prohibited in products labeled with claims such as "Raised without antibiotics" or related claims. The sampling results are inconsistent with these claims. Therefore, FSIS advises that your establishment conduct a root cause analysis to determine how antibiotics were introduced into the animal and to take appropriate measures to ensure that future products are not misbranded. FSIS is not taking immediate enforcement action in response to individual test results stemming from this sampling project.¹⁹

In the Constituent Update, USDA also stated that the “sampling results *may* lead to additional testing by the agency [and] FSIS *may consider* future additional actions, including random sampling and rulemaking, to further strengthen the substantiation of animal-raising and environment-related claims” [emphasis added].²⁰

At the same time, USDA issued new guidelines for substantiating animal-raising or environment-related labeling claims.²¹ The guidelines detail the process by which producers can seek approval for negative antibiotics claims, consisting of a list of required documentation based on

¹⁸ USDA FSIS, “[Constituent Update.](#)”

¹⁹ USDA FSIS, “[Constituent Update.](#)”

²⁰ USDA FSIS, “[Constituent Update.](#)”

²¹ USDA FSIS, “[FSIS Guideline on Substantiating Animal-Raising or Environment-Related Labeling Claims.](#)” August 2024.



self-reporting by the producer about its practices. The guidelines *recommend*—but *do not require*—that producers either conduct regular sampling at their own premises or seek a third-party auditor to review their practices. USDA does not conduct in-person audits or sampling to substantiate RWA claims made by producers. Without independent, transparent testing to prove RWA claims are true, consumers should assume RWA-labeled beef may contain antibiotics.



APPENDIX A: LIST OF COMPANIES WITH POSITIVE ANTIBIOTICS TESTS IN RWA BEEF

- ❖ Cargill Meat Solutions Corporation
- ❖ Swift Beef Company (Owned by JBS)
- ❖ Tyson Fresh Meats, Inc.
- ❖ AEE Inc. dba Emory's Processing
- ❖ Appalachian Abattoir
- ❖ Caviness Beef Packers, Ltd.
- ❖ Colorado Custom Meat Company, LLC
- ❖ Detweiler Meats, LLC
- ❖ Double J Meat Packing, Inc.
- ❖ Fort Worth Meat Packers, LLC
- ❖ Green Bay Dressed Beef, LLC
- ❖ Home Place Pastures
- ❖ Intermountain Packing, LLC
- ❖ J.F. O'Neill Packing Co., Inc.
- ❖ Long Prairie Packing Company, LLC
- ❖ Musselman's Meats, LLC
- ❖ New Geneva Meats & Processing, Inc.
- ❖ P&N Packing, Inc.
- ❖ Phillips Processing Plant
- ❖ Piedmont Custom Meats, Inc.
- ❖ Ralphs Ranches, Inc.
- ❖ Responsible Transportation, LLC
- ❖ Trackside Butcher Shoppe
- ❖ Walke Brothers Meat Processing
- ❖ Wayne Mays Meat Processing
- ❖ Montshire Packing, LLC

APPENDIX B: FALSE MARKETING OF RWA BEEF

USDA released the results of its testing and contacted producers in August 2024. The following examples of marketing were all captured on April 14, 2025, well after companies were notified.

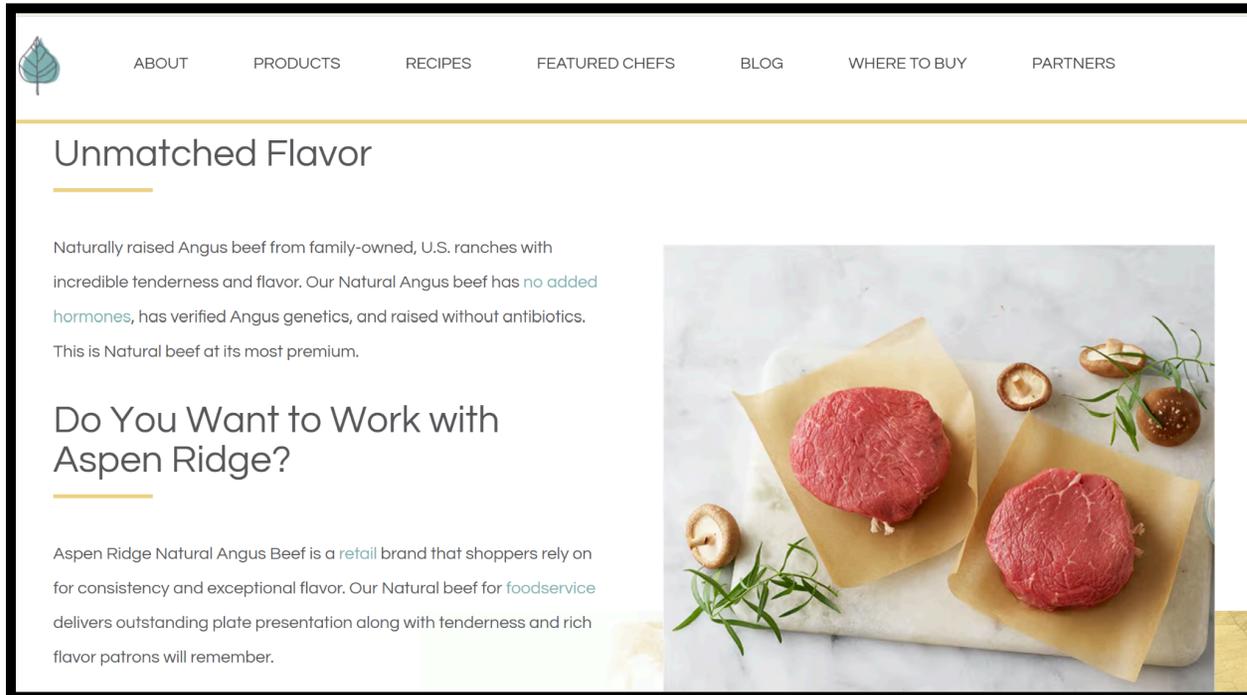


Figure 1. Aspen Ridge®: “Our Natural Angus beef has no added hormones, has verified Angus genetics, and [is] raised without antibiotics.”

100% Grass Fed and Finished Beef, Produced in the USA

Grass Run Farms is 100% grass fed and finished beef that is born, pasture raised†, and harvested in the USA. Grass Run Farms cattle never receive grain, animal by-products, antibiotics, or added hormones.

Simply put, it's good for you, the animals and our land™.

[Our Story](#)



Healthy, Nutritious Beef

Our 100% grass fed beef provides a nutritious, protein-packed choice for every meal.

[View Recipes](#)

Consistent, Flavorful Grass Fed Beef

Grass Run Farms offers a variety of grass fed beef products, including USDA Prime and Choice beef, to deliver a consistent, quality eating experience, every time.

[View Products](#)

Figure 2. Grass Run Farms®: “Grass Run Farms is 100% grass fed and finished beef that is born, pasture raised†, and harvested in the USA. Grass Run Farms cattle never receive grain, animal by-products, antibiotics, or added hormones.”

Organic

thinkpure USDA Certified Organic Beef

With no antibiotics or added hormones, thinkpure Certified Organic beef delivers a savory, delicious flavor for all to enjoy. Enjoy American organic protein that is pasture-raised**, fed no GMO feeds***, and, most importantly, doesn't leave you worrying about quality and taste.



Natural

thinkpure Natural* Beef

As a gluten-free option for your next family meal, thinkpure Natural Beef features no added ingredients or hormones and zero antibiotics. Our quality protein is sourced from cattle raised 100% vegetarian fed to provide a delectable, flavorful experience in every bite.

What's the Difference Between Organic and Natural Beef?

[learn more](#)

Figure 3. thinkpure® : “As a gluten-free option for your next family meal, thinkpure Natural Beef features no added ingredients or hormones and zero antibiotics.”



Figure 4. Home Place Pastures: “We raise grass fed beef, pastured pork, and pastured eggs without using synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, or antibiotics, and support a network of regional farmers who share our values.”

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PROVIDING ONLY THE BEST

Our focus is on the highest quality beef available. Choosing only angus cattle from the state of Missouri. Missouri has native grasses that provide the highest levels of proteins, resulting in the healthiest beef across the world. We never add any Hormones or Antibiotics. We are USDA inspected daily and American Grass-Fed and Halal Certified.

We provide our customers with personalized service. Our commitment to YOU and YOUR CUSTOMERS remains the most important part of our business.

Figure 5. Emory's Little Store: "We never add any Hormones or Antibiotics."

ABOUT US

We are a family owned business founded on **passion** for quality and attention to detail, dedicated to agriculture for **six generations**. Fort Worth Meat Packers is a USDA meat packer providing custom processing services and a meat purveyor of beef, bison, wild boar, pork, lamb, and goat in Fort Worth, TX.

QUALIFICATIONS

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

- Natural
 - No hormones
 - No antibiotics
- Organic
- Kosher
- Grass Fed
- Halal

INSPECTIONS AND AUDITS

- USDA Certified
- USDA Voluntary Animal Welfare
- BRC
- AIB International
- Merieux
- Organic Certifiers

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Figure 6. Fort Worth Meat Packers, LLC: “Natural: No hormones. No antibiotics.”