As a member of the Codex task force on antimicrobial resistance, the United States helps to draft international guidelines used to monitor and surveil foodborne antibiotic resistance. The U.S. position is guided by officials at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which houses the U.S. Codex office.

In 2018 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and World Health Organization — the two groups that established Codex — published a scientific report recommending that agricultural crops be monitored for antibiotic use and resistance, a recommendation the Codex task force on antimicrobial resistance initially proposed for adoption into its guidance.

Documents obtained by the Center through the Freedom of Information Act show the USDA scrambling to get feedback and approval from pesticide and grower industries on the U.S. position documents.

In March 2018 a USDA official emailed CropLife America to get its approval for new language developed by the agency to push back on the proposed recommendation: "I also wanted to be sure you saw the new proposed text insertion from the US on page 8 regarding crops and are ok with it." A CropLife America official replied, "I'm copying here my grower and registrant colleagues."

At first these groups balked at having any language regarding crops covered under the international guidance. In reply the USDA said "…that only seems to be the opinion of the US and we will be isolated. So completely removing references to crops is a failing option."

The focus then shifted to limit what the industry saw as "radical international forces" seeking to upend the U.S. regulatory approach. The president of the California Citrus Quality Council stated: "Meanwhile, I think we should try to have as much influence as we can in the Codex process without calling too much attention to the horticultural sector."

After the USDA's official position was reviewed and approved by companies that sell antibiotics for use on crops, as well as by the grower groups that use them, the agency opposed language that would recommend a national surveillance system to monitor for antimicrobial resistance and use in food crops and the environment (link, pages 10-11).

The U.S. position was opposed by multiple member countries (link, page 6), resulting in no consensus being reached. And no language recommending monitoring for antimicrobial resistance in food crops was adopted into the 2018 draft of guidelines.

The Codex task force also proposed to broaden the definition of "antimicrobial agent" to include antifungals as well as antibiotics. Worried about the increased scrutiny of agricultural fungicides, industry sought to reverse this proposed definition.

A CropLife America official emailed the USDA: “My crop protection industry contacts have emphasized the need to keep the bactericide and fungicide issues separate in discussion of antimicrobial resistance.”

Following up one week later, the same CropLife official emailed: “I want to make certain I am correct in assuming that this document and associated comments do not address fungicide use.”

In the 2018 draft of the task force guidance, the USDA opposed broadening the scope of the guidance to include antifungal resistance (link, page 17). No consensus was reached on the scope and the language on antifungals was not finalized (link, page 3). Language that broadened the definition of “antimicrobial agent” to include antifungals was deleted (link, page 4).

In 2019 the task force guidance draft ultimately adopted language recommending monitoring for antimicrobial resistance in crops and the environment (link, page 5) and broadened the scope of the guidance to include antifungals; however, the definition of “antimicrobial agent” still does not specifically mention antifungals (link, page 23).

Read the full FOIA productions here and here.