By Rep. Steve King

Chances are you may have heard about antibiotic resistance and the “threat” it poses to public health. Antibiotic resistance is a serious issue. However, finger pointing and meritless attacks on America’s farmers as the culprit for declining human health is misguided at best, and at worst, a travesty.

During a recent briefing on Capitol Hill, old misconceptions and half-truths were resurrected about production agriculture and the use of antibiotics used to keep farm animals healthy. Under the guise of protecting human health, the briefing was billed as a discussion about the economics and public health effects of antibiotics in food animal production.

The briefing also was held to support H.R. 1549, the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act of 2009, introduced by Rep. Louise Slaughter on March 17, 2009. Rep. Slaughter’s bill would prevent farmers from introducing antibiotics to livestock for purposes of disease prevention.

Proponents of this legislation would lead one to believe that we can save money and reduce resistance in humans by banning uses of antibiotics in animals. Of particular concern is their claim that the use of antibiotics in food animals leads to diseases in humans that cannot be treated.

While human antibiotic resistance is a public health issue, the biggest resistance problems cited arise in hospitals and community settings, problems not related to antibiotic use in animals. There is no scientific evidence that antibiotics used in food animals have any significant impact on the effectiveness of antibiotics in people. In fact, an Institute of Food Technologists expert panel report revealed that correlating the risk of antibiotic use in animals and antibiotic resistance in humans is not possible.

The FDA and the United States Department of Agriculture, along with the veterinary community, animal health companies, food producers and other stakeholders, have put in place several layers of human-health protection to reduce the resistance risks associated with antibiotic use in animals. These measures begin with a stringent FDA approval process that requires that antibiotics used for animals meet all the requirements as those used for humans – and then some.

Post-approval government food-safety monitoring programs help ensure that marketing restrictions are working. Pathogen-reduction programs have successfully led to documented reductions in pathogens on meat and poultry, contributing to a decrease in foodborne illness. And the government closely tracks antibiotic resistance through the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System, a cooperative program among the FDA, CDC, and the USDA's Agricultural Research Service.

Farmers, veterinarians and drug sponsors also shoulder responsibility. The veterinary community works with FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to craft judicious use guidelines to ensure proper use of antibiotics.

When Europe decided to ban one use of antibiotics, more animal deaths and disease outbreaks that required additional use of antibiotics to treat diseases ensued. At the same time, no evidence has been produced showing benefits to human health in the form of reduced antibiotic resistance.

The American Veterinary Medical Association said that Denmark's voluntary ban on the use of antibiotics for growth promotion "has not resulted in a significant reduction of antibiotic resistance in humans," while disease and death in hogs increased. Ultimately, animals suffered and humans did not benefit. Growth promotion is a benefit of disease prevention, proving again the American axiom that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

In September, I had the opportunity to visit Denmark and meet with hog producers. Their overriding message was that they hoped the U.S. Congress would pass legislation that would phase out the use of seven classes of antibiotics. They supported the measure because they realized they were at a competitive disadvantage as a result of the ban implemented in their own country.

The root of antibiotic resistance deserves a more thoughtful approach than making animal agriculture the scapegoat. By banning products that have been demonstrated to be safe and effective, we will harm animal health, fail to improve human health – and have no impact on antibiotic resistance. As the Representative for the largest swine producing district in the United States, I know that farmers care about their livestock and neighbors and would not risk harming either one.

Farmers need the proper tools to care for their animals just as a mother needs the proper tools to care for her children. Outlawing antibiotics to prevent diseases in animals would take away a powerful tool from our farmers.

American consumers will pay the price if we let Washington meddle with our producers to take tools away from our farmers.