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When Wastewater Becomes Farm Water: The Hidden Risks to Livestock and Food Safety

*Raja Farhan Bin Bashir

PhD Scholar (Veterinary Medicine), FVSc and AH, SKUAST-K, India

*Corresponding Author's email: farhanbashirfb219@gmail.com

Water is essential to livestock production. Cattle need it for drinking, milk production, digestion and temperature regulation, while farms use water for cleaning equipment, washing animal housing and irrigating fodder crops. As freshwater supplies become increasingly pressured, treated wastewater is being considered for agricultural reuse in many parts of the world. Reuse can conserve freshwater, but it also raises important questions about microbial contamination, chemical residues and the suitability of water for different agricultural purposes. The central issue is not whether wastewater can ever be reused. It is whether the water has been treated and monitored appropriately for its intended use.

Why is this a One Health issue?

Wastewater may contain microorganisms originating from human sewage, animal waste and other sources. Depending on its origin and treatment, it may also contain antimicrobial-resistant bacteria, antibiotic residues, metals and industrial chemicals. The World Health Organization and partner organizations have specifically highlighted wastewater management as an important component of efforts to reduce infections and the spread of antimicrobial resistance. Their 2020 technical brief considers risks across human health, animal production, agriculture and environmental systems.

For livestock farms, potential exposure routes include:

- Drinking water contaminated by sewage or untreated effluent.
- Fodder irrigated with inadequately treated wastewater.
- Mud and contaminated soil around watering points.
- Equipment washed with water that is unsuitable for food-contact surfaces.
- Indirect exposure through contaminated feed and the farm environment.

These pathways vary according to water source, treatment quality, local drainage and farm management.

What does the evidence show?

There is no single worldwide concentration that describes wastewater contamination on all farms. Results vary according to the type of wastewater, the organisms or chemicals measured, and the efficiency of treatment. The WHO and FAO's 2023 report, Safety and Quality of Water Use and Reuse in the Production and Processing of Dairy Products, addresses water use across the dairy sector. It examines the potential for reuse and the importance of assessing water according to its intended purpose. A useful way to assess wastewater-related risk is to measure several indicators rather than relying on appearance or smell alone.

Indicator	What it helps assess
E. coli and other microbial indicators	Possible faecal contamination
Antimicrobial-resistant bacteria	Presence of organisms resistant to particular drugs
Antibiotic residues	Possible chemical exposure and selection pressure

Indicator	What it helps assess
Lead, cadmium and other metals	Potential long-term chemical contamination
pH, electrical conductivity and salinity	General suitability for different agricultural uses
Turbidity and suspended solids	Water clarity and aspects of treatment performance

A clear-looking water sample may still contain microorganisms or dissolved chemicals. Conversely, the presence of a contaminant does not by itself establish the size of the health risk; concentration, exposure and relevant standards must also be considered.

Antimicrobial resistance: A concern beyond the farm gate

Antimicrobial resistance occurs when microorganisms develop or acquire mechanisms that allow them to survive exposure to medicines that would normally inhibit or kill them. If wastewater contains resistant bacteria or antimicrobial residues, poorly managed discharge and reuse may contribute to the environmental circulation of resistance. However, the presence of resistance in wastewater does not establish that a particular infection in a person or animal originated from that source. Demonstrating transmission requires stronger microbiological and epidemiological evidence.

How can farms reduce risk?

A practical water-safety plan should begin by identifying each water source and its intended use. Drinking water for livestock, water used for cleaning milk-contact equipment and water used for irrigation may require different treatment and monitoring arrangements. Recommended measures include:

- Avoid using untreated sewage for livestock drinking water or cleaning food-contact equipment.
- Use appropriately treated water and verify that the treatment process is working.
- Test microbial indicators and relevant chemical contaminants at risk-based intervals.
- Protect wells, storage tanks and troughs from manure, sewage and surface runoff.
- Maintain records of water testing, treatment failures and corrective actions.
- Follow applicable national requirements and relevant WHO, FAO and Codex guidance.

Conclusion

Wastewater reuse can help conserve scarce freshwater resources, but reuse without appropriate safeguards may transfer contamination into agricultural systems. The most effective approach is to assess water quality scientifically, select treatment according to intended use, monitor the results and intervene when standards are not met. Protecting water quality ultimately protects livestock productivity, food safety, farm livelihoods and public health.

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