

Addressing the Persistent Shortage of Food Animal Veterinarians and Its Impact on Rural Communities

FARMJOURNAL
FOUNDATION



A new report commissioned by the Farm Journal Foundation and authored by Dr. Clinton Neill of Cornell University examines how high levels of student debt, lack of business development support, and limited educational pathways are contributing to shortages of veterinarians in agricultural areas across the country.

CHALLENGES

- More than 500 counties across the U.S. have shortages of veterinarians available to treat and care for livestock and poultry – creating risks for the food supply chain, human and animal health, and economic growth in rural communities that depend on farming businesses.
- Nationally, the median level of student debt taken on by veterinary graduates is \$189,000, encouraging many young professionals to specialize in companion-animal practice areas (e.g. working with household pets) in urban and suburban areas where income prospects are higher. Today, only about 3-4% of veterinary school graduates pursue livestock or other food-animal practice areas, a stark decline from 40 years ago when about 40% of graduates focused in this area.
- High levels of student debt and veterinary shortages affect all sectors of the livestock industry. In particular:
 - In 2021, the majority of rural veterinary shortage areas, as designated by the USDA, showed the need of veterinarians to serve swine and cattle populations in rural counties.
 - Other small ruminant industries, including sheep and goats, were also shown to have a prevalent need.
 - A recent report by the American Veterinary Medical Association estimated that 50% of bovine veterinarians still have education debt 29 years after graduation.
- Veterinary shortages apply to both the private sector, where practitioners work with individual farming businesses, as well as the public sector, where veterinarians are needed for animal disease surveillance, food safety inspection, and ensuring animal welfare. Many U.S. government agencies employ veterinarians, but high levels of debt, as compared to potential income, are a major barrier for new graduates as they consider entering the field.
- On a national level, livestock and other food animal veterinarians contribute almost \$1.5 billion in direct economic impact. A decline in the number of private rural practices results in large losses in employment and economic output for veterinary services, but also has modest spillover declines into the real estate, restaurants, and wholesale trade sectors of the economy.

This report was authored by Dr. Clinton Neill, Assistant Professor in the Department of Population Medicine and Diagnostic Sciences at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine and was commissioned by Farm Journal Foundation.

To address this challenge, policymakers should prioritize the following actions, which fall under three categories:

1. Strengthen existing debt repayment programs that address veterinary shortages in rural communities. Tactics for increasing the impact of these programs should include:

- **Expanding funding for the VMLRP.** Currently, the program's impact is limited because it is unable to fill positions in all of its designated shortage areas, and awards to veterinarians are comparatively small, only alleviating a fraction of an individual's debt on average. Increasing funding for the program would enable more veterinarians to participate, helping bolster livestock sectors and economies in more rural communities, and keep pace with the current trend of rising educational debt. The scope of the VMLRP should also be expanded to increase resources around educating and retaining food animal veterinarians, which would help address shortage issues over the long term.
- **Overhauling the application criteria for the VMLRP to enable more veterinarians to participate.** In particular, the program should allow individuals to qualify for VMLRP funds before and during completing commitments to state, federal, and other entities. This would help increase the number of applicants and accelerate the impact of the program in the short term.
- **Providing loan repayment awards to veterinarians who agree to work in the public sector and rural areas on a tax-free basis.** Because salaries in public food animal practices are limited by strict civil service requirements, there are few incentives to pursue such a career path. Even assistance in the form of loan repayment may not be enough to ease the education debt burden. Tax-free loan forgiveness after a number of years of service would be a better incentive and aligns with similar federal debt relief programs for human health medical school graduates like the Public Health Services Act. In addition, for the VMLRP, providing awards to private-sector rural veterinarians under a tax-free designation would add approximately 37% more funding direct to awardee debt repayment and not simply return a portion of the VMLRP funding to the Treasury.
- **Improving methods for consistent identification of veterinary shortage areas to better target rural communities in need.** The VMLRP's current nomination process is limited to a set number of shortage areas per state, based on livestock numbers and land area, which undercounts the overall need for food animal veterinarians. By expanding the definition of a shortage area and analyzing the factors that lead to a shortage, a more accurate measure of need can be established. Moreover, a more quantitative approach based on livestock operations/farms and access to veterinarians would provide nuance to the depth of need, so the most critical shortage areas can be proactively identified for the future. To address this issue, the next farm bill should require the Secretary to establish a task force to define a consistent, quantitative approach that also allows for input from state animal health officials.

2. Expand programs that offer business support for veterinary practices that serve rural communities. Tactics for this should include:

- **Expanding funding, increasing programmatic scope, and decreasing application barriers for the VSGP.** If the financial costs of starting, acquiring, or expanding a private practice in the food animal veterinary sector could be reduced, then veterinarians could better balance their educational debt along with business debt. Currently, the VSGP is underutilized due to the limited scope of its grant program and the complexity of its application process, which is difficult to navigate. Increasing funding, creating a more streamlined application process, and expanding the scope of the program to encourage mentoring with the a community of applicants and awardees would help address veterinary shortages both in the short and long term.
- **Establishing low-interest business loans for food animal private practices.** Many young and early career veterinarians are unable to start businesses due to a lack of business loan options, which often disqualify individuals with high levels of education debt. Partnering with the USDA Rural Business Development Grant program and setting aside a portion of its funds for veterinary businesses could be a relatively easy policy fix, given the existing programs and structures. Less stringent rules regarding existing education debt when applying for government-backed business loans would increase the ability of younger veterinarians to qualify despite large education debt.

3. Fund and establish programs to support a strong pipeline of veterinary students committed to working in rural areas and in the food animal sector. Tactics for this would include:

- **Supporting schools by enhancing training opportunities and actively recruiting students from rural backgrounds.** This would encourage more young people to specialize in food animal practices and help alleviate shortages over the long term.
- **Targeting students in post-secondary education to increase retention.** One option may be to provide funding to create a cohort program that would support and train veterinary students within each state. These cohort programs could offer appropriate financial literacy, business and legal education, lifestyle support, and mental health awareness. These cohort programs could be combined with government-backed initiatives to encourage veterinary programs to actively recruit and target veterinary school applicants from rural and diverse backgrounds. This initiative would seek to mirror successful medical school programs that recruit applicants from rural communities.