

# Wanted: New Vets Willing To Live And Work In Rural America

## Shortages Threaten Farmers And Ranchers, Food Supply

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

**W**anted: Young men and women who are willing to respond to your late night phone calls, drive through winter snow storms, and sludge through the ice or mud to reach some remote barn and care for your animals. Must be willing to spend at least 8 years in colleges and \$120,000 to get a veterinary medicine degree and then earn a starting annual salary of about \$60,000. Plus, must be willing to live in rural areas where a spouse, if he or she can find one, may or may not be able to find a job.

Interested? At one time, hundreds of young people were attracted to practicing veterinary medicine on farms and ranches. But while the interest in veterinary medicine is growing, about 70-80 percent of the new students are focused on small animals and specialty medicine. The numbers are declining for those pursuing work in rural America – especially those willing to work with large animals and multiple species. The days when your local all-around vet would do everything from pull a stubborn newborn calf to give your dog a rabies shot are slowly fading away.

Today, only about 17 percent of veterinarians work with food animals, including work on food

the Farm Service Agency, have experience in delivering loans. But for some reason, USDA officials decided that the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES) should be put in charge of this new program.

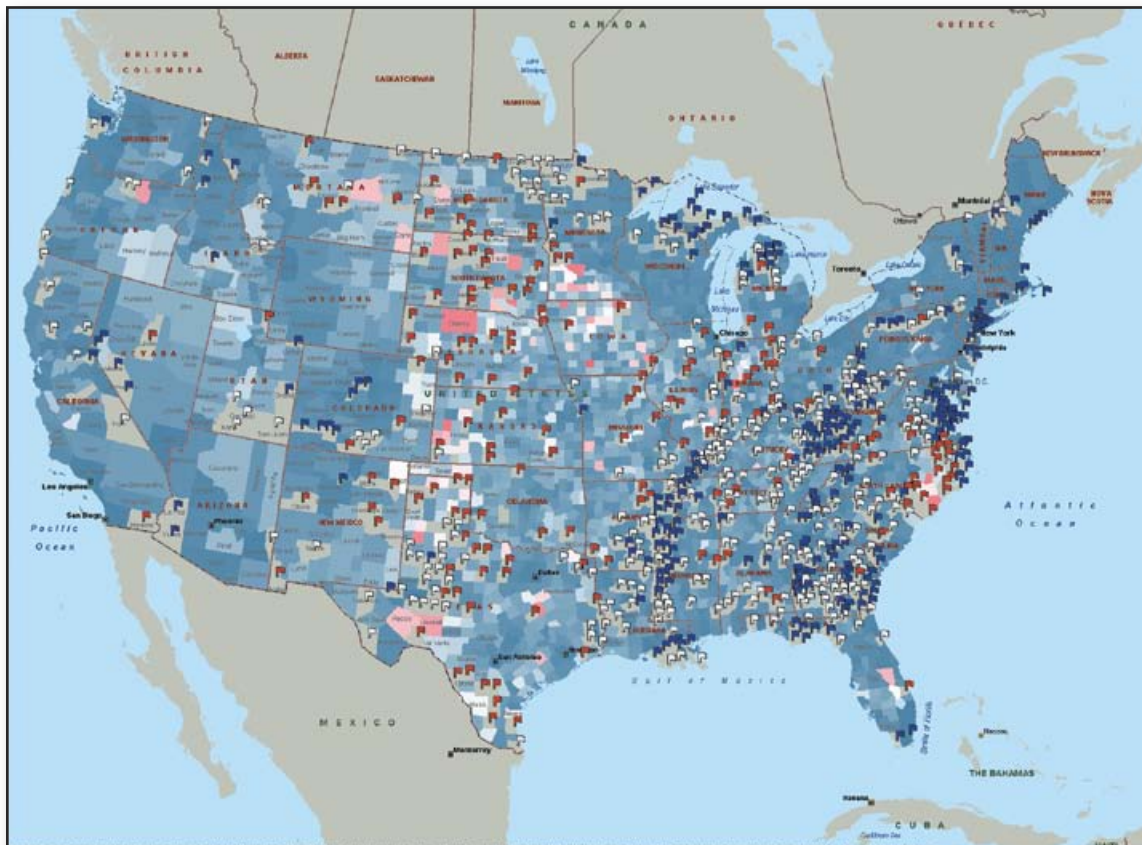
Little surprise then, that this agency testified during a hearing earlier this year that they lacked the capability to administer the loan repayment program, saying that “such programs have never been the function” of the agency. The only surprise to some members of Congress was that it took four years for CSREES to figure out what they didn’t know.

“In crafting this Act in 2003, the Committee worked closely with USDA to ensure proper implementation of a simple and straightforward program that would allow USDA to offer incentives to large animal veterinarians to practice in underserved rural communities,” said Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Leonard Boswell (D-IA). It is frustrating that four years later, USDA is now bringing concerns to our attention.”

The new farm bill provided an ultimatum: it gives USDA 270 days from when the bill was signed into law to implement the NVMSA program. Officials within CSREES have started the process and may have it in place by the spring of 2009 – 6 years after it became law.

### Next steps

Helping students repay huge student loans associated with becoming a vet and then moving to underserved areas can help, says Lutschau-



safety and security, bioterrorism and emergency preparedness, environmental health and regulatory medicine. Research conducted on behalf of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) forecasts a shortfall of four to five percent per year over the next 8 years in the ranks of food supply vets.

That means farmers and ranchers could find good veterinary services lacking in the future, says Dr. Mark Lutschauig, director of governmental relations for the American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA). But the potential impact of these shortages could be felt much more broadly beyond the farm gate, he explains, because veterinarians are usually the first medical professionals to diagnose animal diseases that may spread to humans or to identify potential bioterror disease agents.

“The geographic absence of veterinarians in many rural areas constitutes a significant threat to our country’s public health and to our nation’s food supply,” adds Lutschauig. Of the current 77,237 members of AVMA only 1,703 are in practices that exclusively focus on food animals. Another 4,459 are in practices that predominantly treat food animals.

### Reverse the trend?

The AVMA has been working to reverse this trend in recent years with mixed results. They lobbied hard for the National Veterinary Medical Service Act (NVMSA) which was signed into law by President George Bush in 2003 and which received funding in Fiscal Years 2006-2008. Basically, this is a loan repayment program for veterinarians who pledge to practice in a variety of underserved areas of veterinary medicine, including food supply veterinary medicine.

USDA agencies, like Rural Development and

nig, but a more comprehensive approach is needed.

“We have to look at quality of life issues. Can the spouse find a job? Are the schools good in the area? How far do I have to drive for other services?” explains Lutschauig.

“And as we see fewer kids growing up on farms, we need to do better outreach to connect with them about the opportunities associated with this career.”

Capacity for training more vets is also an issue, which is why the AVMA backed the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act (S.746/H.R. 1232) last year, introduced by Senator Wayne Allard (R-CO) and Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI).

Currently, there are 28 colleges/schools of veterinary medicine in the U.S., graduating approximately 2600 new veterinarians each year. All of these schools are at their maximum capacity of students they can accept for the professional program due to space limitations for diagnostics, research, laboratories, and teaching. The Act would establish a competitive federal grants program to build research, diagnostic and training capacity in the nation’s veterinary medical colleges. The measure, which would provide \$1.5 billion over the next 10 years to expand and build new facilities, languished in committee and will die at the end of the 110th Congress.

“Despite the increase in demand, veterinary medicine schools have been graduating about the same number of students for the last 30 years,” says Lutschauig. “If we are going to keep animals safe and keep our food supply safe, we need more people in this field.” Δ