

Critical Shortage of Food Animal Veterinarians
Written testimony submitted by Clint Peck
Montana Legislative Services – State of Montana
Economic Affairs Interim Committee
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Members of the Committee and Chair. My name is Clint Peck. I live in Billings, Montana.

I was born in Billings and was raised in Yellowstone and Treasure counties. I attended Flathead Valley Community College, and later I graduated from Montana State University (MSU) with a B.S. degree in Agricultural Production/Ag Engineering Technology.

After college I worked as a ranch manager, agricultural seed plant manager, and MSU agricultural Extension agent. The bulk of my professional career has centered around agricultural journalism, focusing on U.S. and international beef cattle production. I was on the faculty of the Animal Sciences Department of MSU from 2003-2010—as instructor, teaching classes in Global Beef Production and the Beef Cattle Practicum. My MSU appointment also included Montana director of Beef Quality Assurance—held jointly with the Montana Beef Council and Montana Stockgrowers Association.

In October 2025 I returned to agricultural journalism as contributor to BEEF Magazine and Farm Progress Companies.

1: Introduction

It is well documented that the United States is currently experiencing a significant shortage of food animal veterinarians. Nearly every state in the Union is facing this issue that's been developing for several years due to a combination of factors such as an aging workforce, low recruitment in rural areas, the financial burden of veterinary education, and the soaring cost of new practice establishment.

The role of food animal veterinarians has never been more important to providing high-quality animal care through sustainable livestock systems. Despite the shortage of food animal veterinarians, the number and diversity of animals being raised for food has increased. A strong veterinary workforce is foundational for a resilient healthy and sustainable food system.

While food animal veterinarians serve on the frontlines for infectious disease surveillance, they also help alleviate poor preventive care and infection control in poultry and livestock and help with the proper use of antibiotics, vaccines, and other animal health products.

The veterinary workforce shortage does not end at the farm gate. State and federal agencies report increasing difficulty in recruiting experienced public health veterinarians. Those veterinarians play critical roles in tracking infectious (zoonotic) diseases. They are needed for meat and poultry inspection, animal trade inspection, pharmaceutical industry oversight and ensuring compliance with animal health and welfare regulations at institutions like university research facilities, zoos, wildlife preserves and animal exhibitions.

Academia is also facing veterinary workforce shortages—teachers, researchers and outreach personnel. Private industry also needs a pipeline of well-trained and qualified veterinarians to fill positions in research and development, animal health services, consultation, and product distribution and sales.

2: In Montana

In 2023 USDA declared 237 rural veterinary shortage areas in 47 states across the U.S. The national Institute of Food Agriculture Veterinarian Shortage Situations map lists 17 Montana counties as being critically short of food animal veterinarians.

The veterinary workforce shortage is not just about the numbers. Because of the notable demographic and technological trends in the food-animal producing community, the concept of high-quality care is being redefined. It is critical that representation across the veterinary profession adequately reflects the emerging diversity of food animal producers in Montana.

And to meet the needs of Montana producers, our rural veterinarians especially need to know the lay of the land; geographically and socially. They need to know how to interact with producers as well as understand their roles in rural communities. Rural veterinarians need to be aware of the logistical and physical challenges of operating across large swaths of the landscape, under oftentimes less than ideal weather and operational conditions.

Montana food animal producers—farmers and ranchers—across the board will welcome novice veterinary practitioners as long as they show a willingness to adapt to and accept the challenges of the landscape. They must also show flexibility in the type of care they provide and demonstrate some horizontal understanding of ranching and farming in Montana.

3: From 30,000 feet

Federally funded loan repayment programs and scholarship opportunities provide various solutions and incentives to expand the veterinary workforce. However well the federal programs might be working, they are not enough. This is demonstrated by the dozen or more states that have instituted similar financial initiatives to alleviate food animal veterinarian shortages (see Appendix A) in their states.

With increased attention to things like food safety, “natural” food production, organics, and animal welfare, veterinarians are on the front line in helping food producers meet the demands of an increasingly aware consuming public downstream from their clientele.

While there’s no short-term solution to the food animal veterinarian shortage, early student recruitment and tuition forgiveness are key to getting boots on the ground.

4: Demands placed on food animal veterinarians

A: Increased oversight

Topping the list of growing demands is the federally mandated Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR) rule. Under VCPR, veterinarians must formally “agree to engage” with the animal producer in making clinical judgements about the animal treatment based on physical examinations—and conduct follow-up care in a timely fashion.

Increased oversight includes the Veterinary Feed Directive (VFD) and judicious antibiotic usage directives that make the VCPR even more critical. The VFD requires producers to obtain veterinary approval for all therapeutic antibiotics used on the farm.

B: Hobby/backyard farmers

Hobby farmers and backyard livestock and poultry owners in suburban and peri-urban areas have increased greatly over the last 10 years and their needs cannot be discounted. Unfortunately, backyard producers and hobby farmers often have a hard time receiving or affording proper and timely veterinary care.

It is reasonable to assume that most of these small operations yield products that enter the food supply. Therefore, in-person veterinary care for these small-scale farms is vital to animal health and welfare, and the assurance of safe and efficacious use of animal health products to protect the safety and wholesomeness of the food chain.

The diagnosis and control of infectious and/or zoonotic diseases is particularly important among small-scale and backyard livestock premises. A case in point is the emergence of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in Montana in 2026. The first case of the year was identified in a Carbon County backyard flock of chickens and ducks in late January 2026, marking the continuation of the outbreak since 2022

Finally, companion animal veterinarians in suburban and peri-urban areas may not have adequate experience handling food animals or dealing with things like drug withdrawal periods or food safety regulations.

C: Organic/natural/sustainable

A growing number of consumers are demanding organic, ethical, and sustainably produced meat and poultry products. Animal health care can be a significant challenge for any scale of organic food production. Third-party auditors and oversight organizations claim inadequate attention to serving the veterinary needs of organic food animal producers.

Some veterinarians in turn are concerned that overly stringent organic guidelines create a disincentive to allow the treatment of sick animals, leading to decreased animal welfare since once those animals are treated, they often lose their organic status and value.

Disease prevention is one of the most effective ways to improve the sustainability of livestock production. Healthier animals produce more meat, milk and eggs, allowing farmers to meet demand with fewer animals and outside resources.

D: Animal welfare/quality assurance

As public concern for animal welfare grows, veterinarians play an important role in meeting this societal demand through education, training, and consultation. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) provides veterinary practitioners with a list of animal welfare guidelines and expects them to promote animal well-being at all phases of the animal's life.

Further, the AVMA considers it the responsibility of veterinarians to report suspected cases of animal cruelty. Depending on the jurisdiction, veterinarians may be legally mandated to report suspected cases of abuse, neglect, or animal fighting to an appropriate authority.

With an estimated 85% of the U.S. beef supply now sourced from operations with Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certified management, veterinarians are critical to teaching and sharing these production principles with their clients.

E: Controlled substances

Controlled substances play a critical role in veterinary medicine. However, these substances are heavily regulated due to their potential for abuse and misuse. Therefore, the issue of controlled drugs can be one of the most confusing components of a veterinary practice.

Veterinarians must follow the rules outlined in the Controlled Substance Act (CSA) enforced by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), register with the DEA and have a DEA number to prescribe controlled substances. This includes careful storage, handling, recordkeeping, and high levels of security.

Failure to adhere to DEA regulations can result in serious consequences for veterinary practices, including fines, loss of DEA registration, and even criminal charges.

5: Gender and race disparities

Sensitive issues of gender disparity and race equality exist in veterinary medicine and need to be examined.

The American Association of Veterinary Colleges predicts that 83% of the 2027 veterinary medical graduates will be women. But a 2017 report by the AVMA showed female veterinary associates and practice owners earn less than their male counterparts at almost every level of experience and across most practice types, confounding the veterinarian gender disparity scenario.

Shaping large animal/food animal medicine to make women feel accepted, respected, and financially supported is an important factor in recruiting and retaining veterinarians.

Further, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 93.3% of veterinarians are white, 5.6% are Asian, 4.7% are Hispanic or Latino, and only 1.2% are Black or African American. The number of veterinarians of Native American descent were not even enough to be statistically significant.

As veterinary programs expand and new programs are created, the profession should make a conscientious effort to attract people of color. Doing so will broaden the pool of talent from which veterinary programs can draw and foster a profession that more closely resembles the client population.

6: Avoiding practice burnout

One way to address the veterinarian demand constraint—in addition to easing the strain that can lead to burnout—is to continue to infuse technology into animal care. The use of telehealth/telemedicine gained ground in animal medicine during the COVID pandemic, thanks in part to the USDA relaxing restrictions on telemedicine in veterinary care.

The appropriate application of telemedicine can enhance animal care by facilitating communication, diagnostics, treatments, client education, scheduling, and other tasks. Typically telemedicine may only be conducted within an existing VCPR with the exception for advice given in an emergency care situation until a patient can be seen by or transported to a veterinarian.

Veterinary researchers are also using artificial intelligence (AI) to improve efficiencies in diagnosis and treatment and ease the burden on veterinarians. AI can assist in identifying disease abnormalities and detecting, predicting, and classifying diseases.

Paraprofessionals can relieve a veterinarian's workload by assisting with non-surgical tasks and acting as first responders to help manage after-hours demands. These services may also be more affordable for producers.

7: Conclusion—Leveling the playing field

Some factors that could level the playing field for food animal veterinarians as students go through their college training:

- Veterinary schools should make a more concerted effort to expose all students to various food animals in the first year of veterinary school.
- Expose veterinary students to different types of production systems and engage them in various health management practices.
- Increase on-farm opportunities throughout the education process, especially for students with little prior knowledge or experience about food animals.
- A more holistic understanding of their role in sustainable food animal production may encourage students to pursue large animal or mixed-animal practices.

End of report

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Appendix A—State Programs Addressing the Food Animal Vet Shortage

The federally funded Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program and the Health Professions Scholarship Program offer various solutions and incentives to expand the veterinary workforce across rural America. Although the federal programs might be working, they are not enough. More than a dozen states have passed or are working on similar financial initiatives to alleviate food animal veterinarian shortages:

- **Arkansas** - Enacted in 2023 created the Rural Veterinary Student Scholarship Program and Agri scholarship program funded by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture.
- **Colorado** - In 2023 the Colorado legislature updated the Veterinary Education Loan Repayment Program by increasing the number of qualified applicants per year. The law allows for an increase in the total amount an applicant is eligible for over four years and increases the yearly repayment amounts for successful applicants.
- **Florida** - Pending legislation will create the “Veterinary Workforce Innovation Act”; authorizing certain individuals to use the title “veterinary professional associate.” The law would authorize veterinary professional associates to perform certain duties only while under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian.
- **Georgia** - In 2016 the Georgia Veterinary Education Loan Repayment Program was established to award students/graduates \$20,000 per twelve-month service period provided they commit to delivering veterinary services for a minimum of 20 hours per week, over at least one year, in designated rural Georgia counties facing shortages in food animal care.
- **Iowa** – In 2020 the Iowa legislature established a rural veterinarian loan repayment program for veterinary students and certain licensed veterinarians through the Rural Veterinary Care Trust Fund.
- **Kentucky** - In 2024 the Kentucky Rural Veterinary Medicine Student Loan Repayment Program was established to provide student loan repayment for a livestock veterinary practitioner who engages in veterinary medicine in an underserved rural area or in a veterinary shortage area in Kentucky.
- **Maine** - Enacted in 2022 the Maine Veterinary Medicine Loan Program provides for the award of up to eight loans annually up to an aggregate of 32 loans. At least half, and no fewer than two, of the annual loans must be awarded to applicants who have demonstrated a likelihood to practice livestock veterinary medicine in the state.

- **Mississippi** - A 2024 law established the Dr. Elton Mac Huddleston Rural Veterinarians Scholarship program. It provides scholarships to students pursuing a degree in veterinary medicine, who will then commit to practicing in rural areas of the state.
- **Montana** – A pending law will establish the Rural Montana Veterinary Workforce Act, a veterinary training loan program providing incentives for students pursuing a veterinary medicine degree to practice in underserved rural Montana communities.
- **New Hampshire** - Enacted in 2024 the Scope and Role of Veterinary Technicians law established a committee to study the scope and practice of veterinary technicians with a focus on large animal veterinary services.
- **Ohio** - A 2020 law created the Veterinary Student Debt Assistance Program allowing the state veterinary medical licensing board to agree to repay all or part of any educational loans taken out by a veterinarian for educational expenses.
- **Utah** - Created in 2023 the Veterinarian Education and Loan Repayment Program provides payments toward a qualified veterinarian's education loan balances.
- **Virginia** - Adopted by the 2025 state legislature a resolution directs the Virginia state veterinarian to complete a two-year study of the shortage of large animal veterinarians with technical assistance provided by relevant stakeholders.

End of Appendix A