

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food animal veterinarians are vital to maintaining a safe food supply in the United States and they play a critical role in protecting public health. They also contribute to the economic prosperity of their communities. Yet the United States is facing an alarming shortfall of food animal veterinarians, especially in rural areas.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has identified over 200 shortage areas (unfilled veterinarian positions) in 2021 that cover over 500 counties, many of which are rural. Food animal veterinarian positions in two-thirds of these shortage areas have remained vacant in the past 5 years.

While this decline in rural food animal veterinarians is not new, it has now reached such a critically low point that urgent action is required. Only 3-4% of new veterinary graduates have entered food animal-related practice over the past 20 years. This does not bode well for the future, as food animal veterinarians currently make up about 5% of all veterinarians in the U.S. Without enough food animal veterinarians and reliable access to the services they provide, **3.7 million livestock jobs are at stake**, as well as overall public health and food safety.

Much of the decline in food animal veterinarians stems from three key shifts: A significant increase in education debt obtained by veterinary students, which has outpaced their potential earnings. A flat, if not slightly declining, trend in the number of veterinary students who pursue food animal veterinary practice after graduation. A rapidly growing companion animal sector that is outpacing the earning potential of other fields of veterinary medicine.

While there are several programs that address the issue of education debt, they are severely lacking. USDA's Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP), which provides debt repayments to veterinary graduates who practice in shortage areas, has not received sufficient funding to address the growing number of shortage areas and increased levels of veterinary student debt. Similar issues arise with programs such as the Veterinary Services Grant Program (VSGP), which provides funds to expand food animal veterinary businesses.

Opportunities exist at the intersection of federal, state, and higher learning institutions to address shortages. In the short term, providing solutions to the debt problem is paramount.

In the long term, policy interventions should focus on creating pathways for students from rural backgrounds and veterinary education programs to become food animal veterinarians.

Policy solutions should:

1. Strengthen existing debt repayment programs:

- Expanding funding for the VMLRP.
- Overhauling the application criteria for the VMLRP to enable more veterinarians to participate.
- Providing loan repayment tax-free awards to veterinarians who agree to work in the public sector and rural areas.
- Improving methods for consistent identification of veterinary shortage areas to better target rural communities in need.

2. Expand programs that offer business support:

- Expanding funding, increasing programmatic scope, and decreasing application barriers for the VSGP.
- Establishing low-interest business loans for food animal private practices.

3. Fund and establish programs to support a strong pipeline of veterinary students:

- Supporting schools by enhancing training opportunities and actively recruiting students from rural backgrounds.
- Targeting students in post-secondary education to increase retention.

Without creating tangible solutions to the growing issue of education debt, shrinking number of rural veterinary businesses, and the lack of interest from veterinary students to pursue food animal practice, the shortage situation – and its ramifications for the U.S. food system and public health – will only continue to worsen.