

Summary Opinion of the American Association of Bovine Practitioner's Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Veterinary Practice

Background

In the late 1990's rural veterinary practitioners from across the United States began to speak out about difficulties hiring associates in rural mixed animal veterinary practices. Many of these practices served the food animal industries. There were also increasing reports of USDA-FSIS having difficulty hiring veterinarians for food safety positions. In response to these complaints, the Food Supply Veterinary Medicine Coalition (FSVMC) was formed in May 2004. The mission of the coalition was to maintain an abundant, safe and wholesome food supply by ensuring that veterinarians are appropriately involved throughout the food supply system. Besides AABP, FSVMC members included the following organizations: Academy of Veterinary Consultants, American Association of Avian Pathologists, American Association of Food Hygiene Veterinarians, American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners, American Association of Swine Veterinarians, American Veterinary Medical Association, Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, and USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. Each member of the coalition contributed financial resources as did Bayer Animal Health to fund a marketing study to better quantify the demand for, and the availability of, food supply veterinarians. As part of this study, student recruitment and retention of practicing food animal veterinarians were also addressed.

The detailed report from the FSVMC marketing study can be found at <http://www.avma.org/fsvm/fsvmc/default.asp>. While the projected shortages varied somewhat depending on the particular area (poultry, swine, bovine, federal government, academia, etc.), an average increase in demand of about 4% was forecast for the years 2004-2016.

The study also listed possible solutions to this projected shortage including student debt repayment and scholarship programs and student recruitment and training opportunities. This study was widely publicized and veterinary organizations, academia, industry and local and federal governments responded. Recruitment was intensified, and scholarships and loan forgiveness programs at both the state and federal levels were instituted. These efforts had a major positive effect on the number of students entering and graduating from veterinary schools seeking employment in food supply medicine.

For several years AABP worked under the premise that a shortage of food supply veterinarians existed. Then, in the past few years, AABP student members started to indicate that they could not obtain jobs in food supply veterinary medicine. This trend concerned the leadership of AABP and led to the formation of the AABP Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Veterinary Practice (RVP). The committee was formed under the direction of AABP Past President Roger Saltman in the fall of 2010. The members were mostly from private practice from different regions of the United States. Both beef and dairy practices were represented. The purpose of this committee was to re-evaluate the perceived food supply veterinarian shortage so that AABP could educate and prepare its members, including student members, to respond to changes in job markets while continuing to serve the veterinary needs of the beef and dairy industries. The focus was on rural mixed practice with a component of food animal service, although food animal exclusive practice was also to be considered. After several web discussions, the committee convened for a face-to-face strategy session in February 2011. The summary of that meeting follows.

Assessment of the Situation

It was the opinion of the RVP that **there is not currently a shortage of veterinarians for rural food supply veterinary private practice**. Efforts to increase interest in rural practice among graduating veterinary students have been successful, so lack of available veterinarians is no longer an issue for the US as a whole. However, there remain underserved rural areas across the country that may not be able to sustain a veterinary practice and absorb these new veterinarians entering the job market. High input costs for all producers, a collapse of milk prices and the severe downturn in the overall economy likely influenced the rural veterinary job market from 2008 thru the present time. In instances where rural jobs are still available, these jobs remain unfilled because the economics may be undesirable for an experienced practitioner and, in small clinics, there may be a lack of mentorship and support for graduating veterinary students.

The committee is extremely concerned that the perception by veterinary schools and the public that there continues to be a shortage of rural practitioners is leading to increased class sizes at veterinary schools and the creation of new veterinary schools. Continuing to increase the number of veterinarians interested in serving rural areas will not solve this problem. In fact, creating an “over supply” of food supply veterinarians will lead to widespread unemployment or underemployment of food supply private practitioners and will have a significant detrimental effect on salaries for all veterinarians.

The following is a list of the major trends that the RVP believes is affecting rural veterinary practices now and that will continue to affect them in the future.

Consolidation of Livestock Systems vs. “Locavore” Movement

Undoubtedly the consolidation of animal agriculture has a tremendous effect on the need for veterinary services. There are multiple reasons for this.

First, there is a vacuum left in some rural areas that at one time had large numbers of livestock. While some small livestock producers remain in these areas and need veterinary services, there is not enough business to sustain the livestock portion of a practice. In addition, high input costs have tightened producer profit margins, leaving producers either unable or unwilling to afford veterinary services. This leads to competition for services with lay people, further driving away veterinary businesses.

Second, expansion and consolidation of the livestock enterprises means fewer potential clients. While livestock numbers may be the same, these larger operations have dedicated care-givers with sufficient training to administer to the needs of sick animals that were traditionally served by the local veterinarian. Preventive health programs are commonly in place and reduce the need for casual sick cow services that formed the mainstay of traditional veterinary practice. While these larger livestock units have an increased need for preventive health consultation services, veterinary practices have not always responded to this need by altering the services they provide. These outdated business models eventually fail, leaving a void that may be filled by other professions or businesses.

On the positive side, there are opportunities for those practices that are innovative and respond to the changing needs of the livestock industries. There may also be non-traditional job opportunities for veterinarians in corporate businesses that will also be responding to the changing needs of these food supply industries.

A competing trend to consolidation is the consumer's increasing desire for locally grown food. This may lead to some slowing of consolidation or potentially an increase in livestock production in some rural areas. Possible contributing factors are increased transportation costs leading to the need to produce food closer to the consumer and a rapidly rising human population that may drive agriculture production back to areas where it has left. These factors may have a positive effect on rebuilding rural communities, and hence the need for veterinary services. However, these potential changes will take some time to occur.

If the US cannot increase efficiency or rebuild rural communities fast enough to supply food for a growing population, competition from foreign markets may further erode infrastructure and the ability for veterinary practices to survive in rural communities. However, if we do respond in a timely manner, export markets may increase opportunities for veterinarians.

Increasing Cost of Veterinary Education and Student Debt

The increasing student debt-to-salary ratio is a crisis for the entire veterinary profession. However, it has major effects on rural practices that offer livestock services. Raising fees to subsequently raise salaries has particular limits in rural environments. The hourly rates veterinarians need to charge to service high debt load may not be affordable for commercial livestock operations. This forces veterinarians to eventually stop offering these services.

Gender and Generational Expectations and Lifestyle Choices

Many rural practices are staffed by solo practitioners. Younger generations of veterinarians and female veterinarians (who increasingly contribute to this younger generation) are less likely to want to practice solo, therefore, rural practices that are have trouble hiring, are hard to sell and eventually close. Younger and female veterinarians want mentorship, closer proximity to amenities found in larger towns and cities, shared emergency duty, and more flexible work schedules that are often difficult to provide in solo or small practices. Additionally, dual career families require employment for spouses or significant others that may be limited in rural areas.

Summary

There are many trends and competing influences affecting the current and future viability of rural practices. While some are out of the control of the veterinary profession, some are clearly in our control. A void of veterinary involvement in rural communities has negative implications for animal welfare, public health and food safety. Simply increasing the number of available veterinarians will not solve this problem. The RVP is currently working on developing tools for AABP members to use for addressing the challenges of serving the beef and dairy industries and protecting public health in a changing environment.