

RURAL VETERINARY

ACTION PLAN



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Animal health threats, foodborne illnesses, and increasingly complex trade barriers underscore the need for highly qualified food animal veterinarians; however, veterinary schools and associations across the nation have publicly recognized a growing shortage of veterinarians, particularly in rural areas.

Further, the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspect Service (APHIS) and the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) rely on veterinarians to carry out their mission of protecting livestock and poultry from diseases such as Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) and the New World Screwworm (NWS) and protecting public health by preventing illness from meat, poultry, and egg products.

These shortages are partly due to the amount of debt veterinarians incur in veterinary school—with the average debt for graduates in 2024 being \$202,647—and the alarmingly high amount of veterinary school graduates entering companion animal practices that offer more competitive pay and benefits.

This inability to fill veterinary positions in both rural areas and the Federal government is alarming and threatens our supply chain. Today, USDA is issuing the Rural Veterinary Action Plan that initiates the following bold actions to tackle this challenge.



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1. Enhance and Streamline Veterinary Grant Programs

The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) implements the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) which is a grant that helps qualified veterinarians offset a significant portion of the debt incurred from receiving their veterinary medicine degrees in return for their service in certain high-priority veterinary shortage situations.

Additionally, NIFA implements the Veterinary Services Grant Program (VSGP) that is designed to relieve veterinarian shortage situations and support veterinary services. Education, Extension, and Training grants under this program help develop, implement, and sustain veterinary services through education, training, recruitment, placement, and

retention of veterinarians. Additionally, Rural Practice Enhancement grants help establish or expand veterinary practices in rural areas.

Action: While there were 170 applicants for VMLRP in FY2024 that were willing to serve in these high-priority veterinary shortage situations, USDA is only able to make around 65 awards to private and public practicing food animal veterinarians each year with the funding currently available. To ensure more veterinarians are serving ranchers in rural areas, USDA is making up to an additional \$15 million available in funding for VMLRP to fund additional qualified applicants.

Action: The application process for both VMLRP and VSGP is burdensome for applicants, with the VMLRP application still being submitted to USDA by email and requiring information that is not needed to complete the merit review process. When USDA issues the Request for Applications (RFA) for VMLRP in December that covers both FY2025 and FY2026 funding, there will be a streamlined application process that requires less information and can be submitted via an online portal. Additionally, USDA is considering streamlining the annual reporting requirements for veterinarians once they receive a VMLRP or VSGP award.



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2. Analyze Rural Veterinary Shortages to Better Understand the Need

The veterinary shortage situations that are used in VMLRP are released by NIFA each year based on nominations from all State Animal Health Officials and appropriate Federal Animal Health Officials. Because these veterinary shortage situations are based on nominations from these officials, they do not fully reflect the lack of veterinarians in rural areas across the country. These veterinary shortage situations are usually designated once the existing veterinarian has either moved away or retired and do not forecast where potential shortages may be in the next couple of years.

Action: To make informed policy decisions, Federal and State governments need better data about the scope of the rural veterinary shortage. The USDA Economic Research Service will study this issue and produce a report to be used by policymakers seeking to address this crisis, including ways that veterinary shortage situations can be more forward-looking.



3. Recruit and Retain USDA Veterinarians

The rural veterinarian shortage has been building for over a decade. Rural posts, port inspections, and export certification roles are particularly hard to staff, especially when the pay offered by private practices in urban and suburban areas is more competitive than government pay.

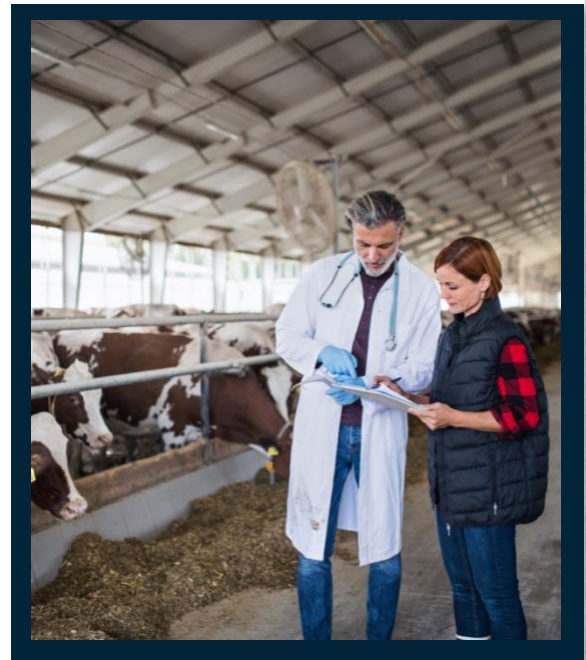
To address this, USDA is pursuing strategies to make Federal service more attractive to create a direct pipeline into public service for veterinarians. These steps represent an investment to ensure APHIS and FSIS have a mission critical veterinary workforce needed to safeguard animal health, public health, and U.S. trade.

Action: USDA will explore opportunities to increase pay and career advancement opportunities for federal veterinarians, including exploring the establishment of special rates of pay for veterinarians.

Action: USDA will revitalize existing internship and scholarship programs including the Saul T. Wilson, Jr. Internship Program (VS), the Chester A. Gipson Internship Program (AC), and the Adel A. Malak Scholarship Program (FSIS). This will include increasing the tuition reimbursement for each program up to \$20,000 for undergraduate scholars and up to \$40,000 per person per year for graduate scholars beginning in 2026.

Action: USDA will explore the implementation of a recruitment bonus for federal veterinarians. Current recruitment incentive programs allow Agencies to offer employees in difficult-to-fill positions up to 25 percent of basic pay multiplied by the number of years in the service agreement (up to 4 years); however, Agencies may request a waiver of the normal requirement, relocation, and retention incentive payment limits.

Action: USDA seeks to partner with universities, state and local communities, farmers, and youth groups to recruit the best and brightest next generation of talent and bring more jobs to America's countryside.

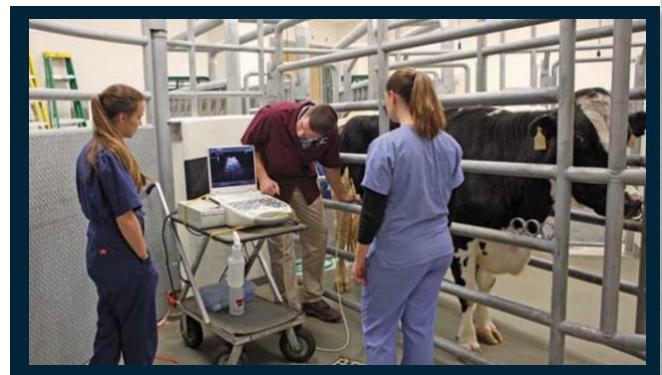


4. Catalog Federal Resources Available to Veterinarians for Starting a Practice

Opening a veterinary clinic in a rural area often requires significant capital to purchase or build the necessary facilities or equipment. For many recent graduates of veterinary school, this significant investment is difficult after incurring a significant amount of debt to pursue the higher education needed to become a veterinarian.

Action: The USDA Rural Development Mission Area has numerous programs that help small businesses across rural America by providing financial assistance, technical support, and resources to help them expand, become more competitive, and promote community development.

To better educate veterinary schools and recent veterinary school graduates about programs available to help finance clinics, USDA will catalog relevant USDA programs, including Rural Development programs such as the Business & Industry Loan Guarantees and the Community Facilities Program.



5. Work with and Listen to Stakeholders including Vet Schools to Understand the Barriers to Entry and Increase Recruitment from Rural Areas

Data from the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges estimates that only 20% of first-year students come from rural backgrounds with a similar percentage expressing interest in rural practice. Further, estimates from the American Veterinary Medical Association show that 72.9% of veterinary school graduates in 2024 entered into companion animal practice while 3.3% went into production animal practice, 5.9% into equine practice, and 9.6% into mixed animal practice.

Action: A low percentage of veterinary school students coming from rural areas or expressing interest in rural background and the even lower percentage of recent veterinary school graduates entering into production animal practice are concerning trends and only exacerbate the rural veterinary shortage. To address this issue, USDA will hold listening sessions between now and October 1, 2025 to hear from key stakeholders including the vet schools to determine what additional actions can be taken to reverse these trends and recruit food animal veterinarians to USDA and rural areas.