

STATEMENT
of
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before the

Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
UNITED STATES SENATE

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Protecting Animal and Public Health: Homeland Security
and the Federal Veterinarian Workforce
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Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as you examine issues affecting the Federal veterinarian workforce. Veterinarians are a mission critical occupation for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). As such, we appreciate your continued interest in the workforce capacity challenges of recruiting and hiring veterinarians for Federal jobs and in coordinating adequate veterinary resources as part of the Nation's Incident Response and Management Planning efforts. My comments today provide an overview of our actions, to date, and our continuing work in addressing these two areas of concern.

The USDA is the largest employer of the nearly 3,000 veterinarians in the Federal government. USDA veterinarians are critical to our core mission goals, specifically, protecting the Nation's food supply of meat, poultry, and certain egg products and protecting the health of U.S. livestock and the welfare of certain animals. This mission exists not only in relation to day-to-day agricultural activities, but also for ensuring preparedness against accidental or intentional introduction of disease agents which may threaten the food supply and/or public health.

Approximately 1,770 veterinarians work in one of three USDA mission agencies, providing critical service in the protection of our Nation's food supply.

- Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) veterinarians protect the health of American livestock and poultry during production (representing approximately 40% of USDA's veterinary workforce);
- Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) veterinarians are responsible for inspecting animals at slaughter plants, overseeing the humane treatment of animals during slaughter, and ensuring the safety of meat and poultry products (representing approximately 57% of USDA's veterinary workforce); and
- Agricultural Research Service (ARS) veterinarians research critical endemic and foreign animal diseases (representing about 1% of ARS' scientific workforce). Seventy percent of ARS veterinarians are assigned to research positions and are critical to the overall quality and scope of the agency's research program.

Veterinarian Workforce Capacity

Activities to Date

In order to ensure sufficient workforce capacity, USDA has taken a number of aggressive steps aimed at hiring and retaining veterinarians. This includes implementing the full range of workforce flexibilities currently available through the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Initiatives undertaken by USDA and its agencies include:

- development and issuance of *new qualification and classification standards* that raised the entry-level grade;
- recent achievement of *government-wide direct hire appointing authority* for veterinary medical officers (VMOs), which OPM just announced, on February 12, 2009;
- receipt of *delegated authority from OPM to hire a limited number of retirees at full salary*, instead of at the reduced salary required for those with annuity income;
- development of *partnerships with recruitment sources* such as academic institutions and professional associations. USDA has a long and beneficial relationship with the Colleges of Veterinary Medicine (CVM) in which we introduce veterinary students to an assortment of opportunities directly related to USDA;
- implementation of agency policies for *creditable service for annual leave accrual*, which allows the prior non-Federal or active military duty work experience of newly appointed Federal employees that relates directly to the duties of the position to which the employees are being appointed and are necessary to achieve an important agency mission or performance goal to be creditable in determining the amount of annual leave the employee will earn;
- utilization of the *Federal career intern program*, *re-paying student loans*, and paying *referral bonuses* to employees who refer candidates for employment, if funding permits;

- marketing and use of *flexible work schedules and family-friendly leave policies* to the extent possible;
- use of *program personnel with direct knowledge of the positions to recruit*, and issuance of agency directives on recruitment and retention flexibilities;
- offering of *recruitment incentives* to attract certain candidates; and
- providing *retention incentives* to some VMOs, as funding allows.

In addition to these multi-agency initiatives, USDA’s mission agencies have undertaken specific initiatives to enhance their veterinarian recruitment efforts. For example,

- APHIS uses competency surveys of their supervisory VMOs to build a comprehensive, competency-based employee development strategy geared at ensuring sustained effectiveness in key supervisory positions. APHIS has also instituted a Workforce and Succession Planning Group commissioned to identify innovative ways to enhance recruitment efforts and to develop and retain high quality veterinarians. The agency’s Saul Wilson Scholarship program attracts new veterinarians by offering up to \$5,000/year for undergraduate and \$10,000/year for graduate studies, paid employment during summer and school breaks as a veterinary student trainee, and the possibility of converting to a permanent full time employee without competition upon the successful completion of the program and graduation with a D.V.M. degree. And, in addition to providing veterinary personnel to help meet critical staffing needs during an emergency, APHIS’ National Animal Health Emergency Response Corps helps attract potential applicants to the agency to serve as temporary federal employees.
- FSIS uses recruitment incentives of 25% of base salary as an annual payment up to 4 years, higher entry salaries based on superior qualifications of job candidates, and payment of travel and transportation expenses to first duty station for those hired in shortage locations. They also use direct hire authority to employ Veterinary Medical Officers and Food Inspectors in shortage locations and an agreement with the Secretary of Health and Human Services for the detail of Public Health Service Commissioned Corps officers to FSIS to augment the veterinarian workforce and disciplines in delivery of the public health mission. Additionally, FSIS has initiated implementation of a pay-for-performance pilot project for non-bargaining unit employees, including veterinarians, to provide additional pay flexibilities, based on performance, and to increase the agency’s ability to compete for talent. FSIS has also implemented dual compensation waivers that allow retirees to return to work on a limited basis, without impact on their salary or annuity (thereby improving efficiencies in reemploying retirees, especially when faced with unusual circumstances).
- ARS uses the Veterinary Medical Doctoral Program to advertise and fill critical VMO positions while the individuals concurrently pursue a PhD. ARS also offers recruitment incentives to attract candidates and provides retention incentives to about 11% of its

current VMOs. In addition, ARS has implemented the Senior Scientific Research Service to enhance the ability to attract and retain leaders in research.

Next Steps

Notwithstanding our progress to date, challenges in recruiting and retaining veterinarians continue. These challenges include: issues of pay comparability with the private sector; difficult and stressful working conditions for slaughter house veterinarians; remote working locations that new veterinarians do not consider desirable; competition among agencies for the same talent; changing demographics within the profession with veterinarians seeking more flexibility in work hours; and the continuing challenge of supply and demand, reflected by the ongoing, limited supply of newly-graduated veterinarians (estimated at 2,500/year among the 28 veterinary schools). Finally, succession planning to address expected retirements also remains an ongoing challenge.

Recognizing the budgetary and staff resource implications at the Departmental level, USDA is in the process of undertaking several leadership activities, including:

- revamping the mission of our department-wide *Human Resources Leadership Council* (HRLC,) from its previous role as an information-sharing body to that of a *strategic, action-oriented board* of senior personnel officers representing USDA’s mission areas/agencies, charged with identifying and spearheading solutions to common challenges across mission agencies. For instance, USDA has identified 20 mission critical occupations, one of which is VMOs. Because veterinarians are a critical occupation in several mission areas and are directly linked to the attainment of USDA’s core mission, the Departmental HRLC will work to identify various trends identified through the individual agency workforce assessments (such as training, employee development, and recruitment/retention strategies), and develop solutions, leveraging resources where possible;
- working with our mission agencies and OPM to explore whether special rates are an appropriate pay flexibility to recruit and retain veterinarians;
- working with OPM to *streamline job announcements* and improve the job-application process, including exploring targeted recruitment efforts at specific demographic groups (such as retired veterinarians);
- pursuing whether veterinarians may be added to the list of occupations included in existing scholarship programs (similar to the National Science Foundation’s “Scholarship for Service-Cyber Security Program”);
- participating with OPM and other agencies, as possible, in an off-site, dedicated meeting to discuss additional ways of addressing shortages of veterinarians; and
- partnering with OPM and other similarly situated government departments/agencies, to explore the feasibility of establishing an automated candidate search and qualification screening tool, tailored specifically to attract and hire veterinarians in the Federal workforce.

Contingency/Incident Planning

USDA believes that the activities addressed above will also support ongoing efforts to ensure preparedness against accidental or intentional introduction of disease agents which may threaten the food supply and/or public health. Our capacity to recruit and retain veterinarians is a critical component of the Department's ability to respond to outbreaks.

Preparedness requires a "total force" approach, including coordination with veterinarian counterparts and resources throughout the Federal, State, Local, and private-sectors. To this end, some examples of departmental activities currently under way, include:

- *training National Incident Management Teams* in the Incident Command System, in order to incorporate veterinarians from other Federal agencies, State agencies, and private practice into the emergency response;
- *seeking expansion and improvements to the National Animal Health Emergency Response Corps (NAHERC)*, including development of the capability to initiate contract assistance for specific disease response tasks, such as the depopulation of animals, disposal of animal carcasses, and the decontamination of facilities affected by a disease outbreak. [The NAHERC recruits and trains private practice veterinarians and retired veterinarians who may then be called to service as temporary Federal employees, to respond, on short notice, to a disease outbreak. The contracting of services for disease response is accomplished through the National Veterinary Stockpile, created from the requirements of Homeland Security Presidential Directive-9.]
- updating continuity of operations plans for pandemic influenza, based upon guidance and checklists issued by multiple Federal agencies;
- issuing *contingency plans for the use of foot-and-mouth disease vaccine*, while concurrently supporting *development and application of new vaccine technologies*;
- developing and using a *resource ordering and status system* that allows for real-time management of resources, including trained personnel, to either support the response or to maintain regular functions; and
- continuing to *collaborate with agencies* (Federal, State, Local) listed in support of mutual goals, such as the requirements of Homeland Security Presidential Directives.

USDA will continue working with such Federal departments as Health and Human Services, Interior, and Homeland Security, and will continue to maintain our strong relationships with academic and professional organizations, and with our State and Local counterparts.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I will be glad to answer any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.