



## National Association of Federal Veterinarians

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### WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF

The National Association of Federal Veterinarians

Concerning

Protecting Animal and Public Health: Homeland Security and the  
Federal Veterinarian Workforce

Provided to the

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

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Michael Gilsdorf, DVM, Executive Vice President of the National Association of Federal Veterinarians (NAFV). NAFV represents the 3,016 federal veterinarians that work to protect animal and public health throughout the United States and internationally.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on the structure and function of our nation's veterinary workforce. I would also like to thank the Government Accountability Office for involving NAFV in the information-gathering process for its extensive report entitled, "Veterinarian Workforce, Actions are Needed to Ensure Sufficient Capacity for Protecting Public and Animal Health."

Prior to beginning my current position in 2007, I worked as a federal veterinarian for 33 years with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). I worked in several positions- at almost all levels of the agency and in multiple locations- ranging from a field Veterinary Medical Officer position, working directly with farmers and ranchers, to the Director of the National Center for Animal Health Programs position at agency headquarters- managing all the domestic animal health program activities. I have worked closely with federal and state veterinarians in multiple agencies both domestically and internationally.

As stated in the GAO report, veterinarians are a small but vital part of the federal workforce, playing important roles in protecting people from zoonotic and foodborne diseases, ensuring the health and humane treatment of food animals, and helping to keep America's meat and poultry safe to eat. Veterinarians receive training in multiple disciplines including: microbiology, bacteriology, virology, mycology, clinical pathology, anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, physics, animal and zoonotic diseases,

and disease prevention- including disinfection and sanitation procedures. All of this knowledge and experience provide veterinarians with a uniquely qualified background and understanding of animal health and public health procedures and concerns.

Federal veterinarians are on the front lines; ensuring food safety, promoting public health, preventing animal disease incursions into the United States, and eradicating major animal/zoonotic diseases from the United States, such as brucellosis (Undulant fever in humans), tuberculosis, and highly pathogenic avian influenza. Many federal veterinarians are often faced with major challenges, such as maintaining an adequate veterinary workforce with inadequate program funding. Federal program funding shortages cause disruptions in comprehensive disease surveillance and control procedures. These shortages result in the nation not being adequately prepared to complete animal disease eradication efforts in a timely manner nor being prepared for catastrophic events. The other major challenges to federal agencies in maintaining an adequate veterinary workforce are recruitment, retention and continuing education (CE) issues.

The GAO report vividly highlights the increasing shortage projections for veterinarians in food supply medicine and public health and identifies many of the reasons for those shortages. NAFV strongly agrees with the causes for the shortage as identified by the GAO. Recruitment and retention of highly qualified veterinarians for federal service are critical issues for our nation. In one of the NAFV surveys (attached), more than 90% of the federal managers surveyed identified that increased flexibility in starting pay would enhance many federal agencies' ability to recruit veterinarians. Additionally, in my communications with federal veterinarians, they overwhelmingly

indicated that significant increased access to incentives like; student loan repayment (The National Veterinary Medical Services Act, enacted in 2003, has not been adequately funded or administered), recruitment bonuses, scholarship programs, internship programs, direct hiring authority, re-hiring retired federal veterinarians as part-time employees under a contract or as re-hired federal annuitants without penalty, and increased base salaries, would be necessary for future recruiting efforts.

Additional non-monetary recruiting incentives identified by federal veterinarians include; treating personnel as professionals and not as technicians, providing appropriate and timely training and continuing education opportunities, providing official approval to attend professional meetings related to their official duties, improving leadership from management with decision-making based on science, and improving management support when difficult veterinary decisions are based on science versus public perception.

Retention challenges are similar to recruitment challenges. One of the most significant challenges for both recruiting and retention of veterinarians in federal agencies is the low average-base-salary levels. NAFV is working with the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) to improve the salary levels for all federal veterinarians. The salary for the average federal veterinarian when compared to the salaries offered in the private sector are \$37,000 less than the average private veterinarian that owns their own practice. When compared to academic and industrial veterinarians the average salary differences are even higher.

There needs to be additional methods within federal agencies to pay higher salaries in order to recruit and retain an adequate veterinary workforce in the future. Other federal medical personnel in the federal government (physicians, dentists, and

nurses) are eligible for special pays above and beyond their base salaries. There is only one federal agency that I am aware of that has authority under Title 42 to offer a small number of federal veterinarians special pay. However, the other federal agencies do not have the statutory authority to offer special salaries to federal veterinarians, even though federal veterinarians are also medical personnel. These special statutory authorities are needed for veterinarians as well. All medical personnel in the federal government provide medical services that are essential to sustaining and improving public and human health.

Over the past several decades, federal veterinarians have eradicated a number of major animal diseases and zoonotic diseases from the United States (see attachment 2). As a result, the human and livestock populations of the United States are healthier and livestock production costs are lower. Veterinarians in some agencies are on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week in order to protect animal and human health and ensure humane treatment of livestock. This constant workload, with no breaks or backup, has been identified as a detriment to retention of veterinarians. Other federal veterinarians work long hours (9 to 12) each day to manage their normal assignments because of existing veterinarian shortages. Many federal veterinarians are expected to serve on emergency animal-disease-outbreak task forces for long periods of time or in rotations every 3-6 weeks and these rotations put a tremendous stress on their family life. These are also retention issues for some veterinarians that could be resolved if more veterinarians were employed in these agencies.

Another retention issue for federal veterinarians in many agencies is the lack of a scientific, non-supervisory, career ladder for veterinarians. It is recommended that all

**Comment [mjpg1]:** Veterinarians are expected to respond on extremely short notice and deploy to the site of the disease outbreak which often is in a state which may be far away from their home and family.

federal agencies offer a non-supervisory career ladder to veterinarians to take advantage of their experience and expertise while also providing them with promotion opportunities.

For increased retention of federal veterinarians in some agencies, there needs to be increased use of retention bonuses and board certification bonuses, especially for highly skilled veterinarians in research. For example, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) has lost at least five highly-skilled and credentialed veterinarians in the last 24 months because the retention pay bonus was discontinued by the agency for veterinarians in 2006.

Significant retention issues also include the opportunity for additional training, CE, and assistance in obtaining an advanced degree within a federal agency. In several federal agencies, existing veterinary staffing shortages and/or other reasons prevent opportunities for obtaining CE and advanced training by many federal veterinarians. Often these CE courses and advanced degrees assist the veterinarians in improving the performance of their duties and could lead to advancement/promotion opportunities within the agency. It is recommended that all federal agencies be directed to invest in their professional personnel by supporting them and increasing their professional and/or management credentials (e.g. board certification, Master of Public Health, Masters in Epidemiology, Masters in Public Administration, leadership/management training, diversity training, communication skills, etc). This not only benefits the individual it also raises the professional capabilities and expertise of the agency.

Another issue that faces the federal veterinary workforce is the workforce's capacity to perform essential routine activities and respond to catastrophic events at the same time. According to NAFV members, there are not enough federal veterinarians in

the federal government to adequately respond to a large catastrophic event, let alone multiple events occurring at the same time in multiple locations.

The Army does provide additional veterinarians for catastrophic events. For example, the Army has an agreement with Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to assist in emergencies. However, there is a limit to the number of veterinarians the Army can provide depending on other national defense priorities.

Most veterinarians within the FDA, Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), and ARS, are not adequately prepared, do not have the proper skill-set, and/or would not be available to respond to major catastrophic events involving many major livestock diseases, especially foreign animal diseases. In addition, there is not a well-defined, coordinated system that identifies how veterinarians from various federal and state agencies would be utilized in cases of catastrophic events. Most federal agencies feel the current federal veterinary workforce is stretched to complete its routine duties. In some agencies, especially FSIS and ARS, there are not enough veterinarians currently employed to complete all routine activities, even though veterinarians are considered critical to their mission.

Federal agencies also need to improve general public understanding of the important duties that federal veterinarians perform. This may help in recruiting veterinarians. It is recommended that Veterinary Colleges re-emphasize the public health and large animal medicine aspects of veterinary medicine to their students. We strongly emphasize the need for additional information and education be provided to students on the scope of veterinary activities within the federal government, including catastrophic/zoonotic event awareness and preparation for response.

Another necessary action, as identified in the GAO report, is a comprehensive federal veterinary workforce assessment. NAFV strongly agrees that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the federal agencies need to conduct a government-wide assessment of the veterinary workforce and establish the minimum number of veterinarians needed for routine animal health and public health work and for major emergency catastrophic events. This assessment needs to be reevaluated every 2-3 years to ensure the number is still valid based on expanding priorities.

An improved system of cross-training veterinarians in all agencies is recommended in order to develop the skill-set needed to better respond to catastrophic events. The agencies need to train all federal veterinarians in emergency management procedures, provide them with appropriate supplies, and ensure they are ready to serve and made available to USDA/ APHIS/ VS when needed. In other words, a government-wide system for training all federal veterinarians as potential emergency responders is essential to protecting animal health and the nation's food supplies.

Some of the federal veterinarians that were called upon to work on previous task forces were not adequately trained, did not have the skills or knowledge in incident command structure, and did not have the large animal handling skills needed to safely complete their assigned tasks. The lack of available, effective and differentiable vaccines for some animal and poultry diseases was also a limiting factor and allowed for increased spread of the disease before other control measures could be adequately implemented.

Zoonotic disease infection in wildlife is an increasing concern for federal veterinarians. Transmission of livestock diseases to wildlife species is also an increasing concern for domestic animal disease control and eradication program efforts.

Predetermined plans are needed to ensure that wildlife and livestock disease control efforts are better coordinated between state and federal animal health officials and wildlife officials in cases where a zoonotic disease or domestic animal disease is encountered in wildlife.

It is recommended that a surge-capacity system, that provides a significant number of additional well-trained veterinarians, be developed. One suggestion that needs to be explored, in addition to increasing the number of federal veterinarians based on a workforce assessment, is employing private accredited veterinarians and academic veterinarians as part-time federal veterinarians. These individuals could then be used to supplement the numbers of federal veterinarians when catastrophic events occur. Most private veterinarians cannot leave their practices for very long and stay in business. This surge-capacity system might include the creation of a “National Guard-like” system for veterinarians. They would be paid as part-time federal veterinarians and train on a regular recurring basis; this would provide more incentive, both financially and professionally, for veterinarians to leave their practices for short periods of time when emergencies occur and they would be trained and ready to serve. (Note: Federally accredited veterinarians are not considered federal employees).

Thank You.

Attachment 2

Animal Diseases eradicated from the United States

- 1892 -- Contagious bovine Pleuropneumonia
- 1929 -- Foot-and-mouth disease
- 1929 -- Fowl plague
- 1934 -- Glanders
- 1942 -- Dourine
- 1943 -- Texas cattle fever
- 1959 -- Vesicular exanthema (VE)
- 1959 & 66 -- Screwworms (southeast & southwest)
- 1971 -- Venezuelan equine encephalitis
- 1973 -- Sheep scabies
- 1974 -- Exotic Newcastle disease
- 1978 -- Hog cholera (Classical swine fever)
- 1985 -- Lethal avian influenza
- 2004-- Pseudorabies
- 2008—Bovine Brucellosis