



UNITED STATES ANIMAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Resolution

114th Annual Meeting ~ November 11-17, 2010

Minneapolis, MN

RESOLUTION NUMBER: 16 APPROVED

**SOURCE: COMMITTEE ON DIAGNOSTIC LABORATORY AND
VETERINARY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

SUBJECT MATTER: VETERINARY MEDICINE LOAN REPAYMENT PROGRAM

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) was established by Congress in 2003 by the National Veterinary Medical Service Act (NVMSA) and is a student loan repayment program for veterinarians who practice in underserved areas. This loan repayment program is to be administered by the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), an agency within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Secretary of Agriculture can determine veterinary shortage areas in rural practice, urban practice, federal and state government agencies, and discipline areas. Recently highlighted awareness of bioterrorism and foreign animal disease threats to public health and food safety has heightened the urgency for a fully-funded and implemented program. The VMLRP also creates a reserve corps of veterinarians available for mobilization in the event of an animal disease emergency or disaster.

USDA published interim final regulations to govern the program in the July 9, 2009 Federal Register. Veterinarians participating in the program will be required to practice in designated areas of veterinarian shortages which will be published in the Federal Register. Out of the 85,000 practicing veterinarians in the United States only 8,850 veterinarians practice food supply medicine and less than 4,000 are in public veterinary practice. Every state in the United States has shortages of food supply veterinarians. There is a similar shortage in public veterinary practice areas. The average starting salary of a 2009 graduate was \$65,185. Veterinarians entering food supply and public practice were compensated below that average. The average educational debt for veterinary school graduates in 2009 was \$129,976. Therefore, loan repayment is essential to address shortages of veterinarians in food animal medicine and public health practice.

USDA-NIFA published a final rule for the VMLRP in April, 2010. This regulation established the process and procedures for the solicitation, identification, and designation of veterinarian shortage situations (i.e., geographic and specialty) and the administrative provisions for soliciting applications from potential participants, the review process, the award process, and the terms and conditions of the agreements. NIFA solicited nominations for veterinarian shortage areas from State Animal Health officials and appropriate federal animal health officials in March, 2010. An expert review panel evaluated and recommended classification of each shortage area. Loan repayment awards were made on a competitive basis using a peer-review process evaluating the quality of the match between knowledge, skills, abilities and experience of the applicant relative to: 1) the specific needs of the veterinary shortage situation, 2) the criticality of the shortage situation, and 3) available funding. The application process closed in June of 2010 and offers were completed by the end of September, 2010.

The VMLRP will pay up to \$25,000 each year towards qualified educational loans of eligible veterinarians who agree to serve in a NIFA designated veterinarian shortage situation for a period of three years. However, this loan repayment is also subject to income tax which lowers the actual amount applied to the loan reimbursement program. During the fiscal year (FY) 2010 solicitation for veterinary shortage area nominations, NIFA received 249 nominations from across the country and the panel recommended 181 to be designated as shortage situations.

Congress awarded the VMLRP modest appropriations in fiscal years 2006 (\$495,000), 2007 (\$495,000), 2008 (\$868,875) and 2009 (\$2,950,000). The President recommended \$3 million for fiscal year 2010. Congress appropriated \$4.8M for the VMLRP in the fiscal year 2010 Agriculture Appropriations Bill.

At the current funding level only 64 veterinarians per year would be eligible to receive loan repayments. The average age of food supply veterinarians is over 55 years. This means that even more replacements will soon be needed. At the rate VMLRP is currently funded, the shortage of veterinarians will continue to increase. This will eventually impact animal and public health in the country because these food supply and public health veterinarians are essential in combating zoonotic diseases – there are more than 800 such diseases that can spread from animals to humans. Adequate funding for VMLRP should be \$20 million annually to effectively resolve the shortage.

RESOLUTION:

The United States Animal Health Association (USAHA) requests that the United States Congress fund the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) (PL 108-161) at \$20 million per year for fiscal years 2011 through 2016 and then reevaluate the progress made. USAHA also urges Congress to exempt VMLRP awards from taxation.