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Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales

NSW Farmers opening statement – 29 July 2023

NSW Farmers applauds the establishment of this inquiry into the shortage of veterinarians and thanks you for reading the Association's submission.

Over the past three decades, the relative decline in veterinary and other frontline personnel associated with animal health, welfare and biosecurity in rural areas has been presided over by governments of all stripes and we believe that this situation requires bipartisan support to achieve sustainable solutions.

Having said this, we also recognise that shortages of veterinarians in rural areas is not unique to NSW or to other Australian states. Indeed, it's a challenge facing many countries, including many high-income countries. Therefore, we would like to briefly explore three approaches being employed internationally that may help to ensure that the NSW Government is better able to ensure appropriate access to veterinary services in rural areas.

Firstly, lobby the Federal Government to incentivise new graduates to practice in underserved rural areas by waiving student loans. This is done in a number of high-income countries, e.g., in the USA¹. However, when implemented in isolation, this approach does not solve the retention problem with veterinarians moving away to higher paying positions on the completion of the required minimum period. It can also lead to over reliance on a less experienced veterinary workforce in rural areas which can directly impact on animal welfare as well as the mental health of newly graduated veterinarians and animal owners and carers.

Secondly, implement government initiatives that ensure the availability of appropriate, affordable veterinary services to livestock producers. In Canada, livestock producing areas such as the Provinces of Manitoba² and Ontario³, governments are supporting a range of initiatives to ensure the availability of appropriate, affordable veterinary services to livestock producers. These initiatives include rolling out televeterinary medicine, grants to equip mobile veterinary clinics and travel subsidies to reduce the cost of call outs incurred by clients.

¹ <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/personal-finance/student-loan-forgiveness-repayment-programs>

² <https://news.gov.mb.ca/news/index.html?item=59946&posted=2023-06-22>

³ <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1001439/governments-increasing-veterinarian-capacity-for-ontario-farms>

Thirdly, enter into public-private partnerships. The World Organisation for Animal Health, of which Australia is a member, emphasises the potential to improve the Veterinary Services overall through greater partnership between the public and private sectors.⁴ In fact, recognising the lack of surge capacity within Australian veterinary services, the DPI in line with national guidelines, has approved the involvement of private veterinarians in emergency animal disease (EAD) responses.⁵ Given the dire shortage of veterinarians in some rural areas, we would like to suggest that the NSW Government consider extending the engagement of private veterinary services to cover key veterinary functions such as disease investigation and preventive medicine activities. Here's an example as to why such an approach is required. As a result of the ongoing government veterinary services response to repeated biosecurity incursions and natural disasters, Local Land Services veterinarians have been called in to provide relief to the DPI veterinarians who have been overstretched. During these secondment periods, livestock producers have been left without access to local government veterinarians meaning that timely disease investigations, including post mortems and sample submission are compromised. By entering into routine contracts with private veterinary practices operating in rural areas, the Government would help to ensure improved access to the services required to support animal health and welfare and disease surveillance and provide additional financial support to these private practices for a sum less than that required to add fulltime government personnel.

In conclusion, the importance of having efficient and sensitive animal disease surveillance has been highlighted recently in relation to the outbreaks of FMD and Lumpy Skin disease in neighbouring countries. Such surveillance systems depend on much more than sample submission and laboratory diagnosis. The key to rapid detection and response is the quality of the relationship between the animal owner or carer and government veterinary services. Put simply, trust between livestock producers and veterinarians is essential and must be maintained over time.

⁴ https://rr-asia.woah.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/oie_ppp_handbook.pdf

⁵ <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/biosecurity/animal/info-vets>