

**Submission  
No 193**

## **INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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**Australian Government**

**Department of Agriculture,  
Fisheries and Forestry**

**NSW Legislative Council  
Portfolio Committee No. 4 –  
Regional NSW – *Inquiry into  
the veterinary workforce  
shortage in New South Wales***

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# Introduction

The Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) has a vision for a more sustainable and prosperous Australia through biosecurity, agricultural production and trade. DAFF has a diverse role and function - working to:

- enhance Australia's agricultural, fisheries and forestry industries.
- create new and maintain existing agricultural export opportunities, to provide gains for Australian agriculture, fishing and forestry.
- manage biosecurity risks to Australia to protect our multi-billion-dollar agricultural industries and our way of life.
- engage with international counterparts to reinforce Australia's role in shaping how the global agriculture and fibre sector addresses food security, productivity, trade, sustainability and the impacts of climate change.

DAFF is the largest public sector employer of veterinarians in Australia. DAFF veterinarians are engaged in a range of roles including in developing national policies and strategies, providing scientific advice to minimise the potential impacts of diseases on Australia's animal population, negotiating market access, conducting scientific risk analysis, regulating the import and export of live animals and animal products and as On Plant Veterinarians (OPVs) based at abattoirs registered to export meat to Australia's trading partners.

DAFF recognises the value and contribution of veterinarians across numerous aspects of Australian life. Veterinarians are engaged across a spectrum of roles within the profession including provision of primary care for animals (small and large animal clinical practice), government, academia, research and industry.

In addition to providing services as a business, veterinarians provide a public good in relation to animal welfare and health, food security, farm productivity, wildlife health and managing biosecurity threats - including emergency animal disease surveillance and response.

DAFF also recognises that there are ongoing challenges within the veterinary profession, including in retaining veterinarians in private practice, the escalating veterinary shortage in rural and remote areas, and mental health. These issues are not isolated to NSW, nor indeed to Australia. The challenges facing the veterinary profession are complex, and a multifactorial and a collaborative approach is required to address the issues.

The department is engaged on the issues raised within the profession in relation to veterinary workforce attraction and retention, working with the veterinary industry, academic institutions, other government departments and through international networks to understand the issue and how this may impact on the achievement of the department's objectives, agricultural productivity and on the broader biosecurity system as part of its shared responsibility.

DAFF considers the content of this submission is sufficient such that providing evidence at a hearing is not required.

# Response to Terms of Reference

This submission will address some of the Terms of Reference as they relate and are relevant to the work of the department.

*a) the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry and pathology*

DAFF has a particular interest in the strength of Australia's veterinary industry given the contribution this makes to biosecurity and agricultural productivity. There is national interest in ensuring a functioning veterinary industry to support biosecurity preparedness and response and maintain critical regulatory functions that underpin agricultural trade.

The Australian Chief Veterinary Officer, as a representative of the department, regularly meets with the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) to discuss opportunities to strengthen the veterinary private sector, including their engagement with government activities. Through this engagement and from internal consultation, DAFF understands factors that contribute to the challenge of retaining veterinarians in rural practices and keeping private practices profitable include:

- relatively poor remuneration compared to other professions or comparable roles in urban locations and the ability to readily find alternative employment.
- long work hours (including after-hours on-call duty).
- social and professional isolation - particularly in regional, rural and remote areas and the lack of infrastructure to support veterinarians in rural areas.
- demanding clients and other work stressors
- the changing demographics of veterinary graduates.
- high levels of educational debt.
- financial viability.
- expenses of maintaining a veterinary practice, with no Medicare-equivalent government subsidisation.
- a 'mismatch' between work-place expectations of new graduates and what employers can provide.

Additionally, a survey conducted by Professionals Australia of 510 veterinarians in August 2022 revealed that 77% of veterinarians were dissatisfied with the industry, with 30% planning to leave the industry within five years.

Further analysis of the listed factors and the cause of this dissatisfaction is warranted to inform effective, sustainable intervention strategies to ultimately achieve greater retention of veterinarians in the industry.

*b) the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates*

DAFF is the largest public sector employer of veterinarians in Australia, with 323 officers employed in designated veterinary roles as of 30 June 2023. 41 DAFF veterinarians are based in NSW, with 30 employed as OPVs at export abattoirs across NSW.

The public sector has traditionally been seen as an attractive career option for veterinarians for a range of reasons including diverse and meaningful career options, no or minimal after-hours duties, attractive remuneration and superannuation packages, leave entitlements, career progression and training and development opportunities.

For these reasons, it has historically not been difficult to attract veterinarians to work for DAFF and retention rates are high, with many veterinarians staying with DAFF for the remainder of their career. However, in recent years the numbers of applications for veterinary officer roles have been decreasing. This decrease extends to applicants to DAFF's Graduate Development Program which includes a specific veterinary stream. It is unclear why this is but based on anecdotal discussions with potential candidates and a review of recent advertisements for private practitioners, public service remuneration packages have not kept up with those in the private sector. However, this does not align with reports that one of the major reasons veterinarians leave private practice is due to the relatively low salaries on offer, although the problem is complex and there are a number of other confounding issues. This is an example where more information or research would provide greater clarity of the factors that cause veterinarians to leave certain roles and attract potential applicants to others.

A veterinary role that DAFF finds particularly challenging to attract candidates for are OPVs. OPVs have a critical role as they are required by certain importing countries to be present while meat is being produced for export to that country. The business imperative is high for DAFF to provide an OPV to ensure the abattoir has market access and, more broadly, to support the multi-billion-dollar meat export industry. Many of these abattoirs are in remote rural locations, which is a key challenge in attracting candidates to these roles, as well as the demanding working conditions faced by OPVs. There are similar challenges with recruiting veterinarians to regional positions to support exports and imports of other commodities, including live animals.

DAFF utilises a range of means to attract and retain staff. Measures specific to veterinary officers include: improving graduates' knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of government veterinarians by hosting veterinary undergraduate students on placements and delivering presentations at universities, offering a higher salary than non-veterinarian qualified employees at the same APS classification level, paying for veterinary registration, providing support for involvement with professional associations and training and development including support for opportunities specific for accruing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points and maintaining veterinary registration.

*c) [the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession](#)*

DAFF recognises the significant mental health crisis faced by the veterinary profession - which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic - and the vital need to address these issues.

[Research conducted by the AVA in 2021](#) found that 66.7% of survey participants had reported experiencing a mental health condition at some stage, and of those, 60% reported their condition has been diagnosed by a medical professional. There are many contributing factors to the mental health challenges faced by the veterinary profession such as long hours and fatigue, professional and social isolation, unique

lifestyle challenges experienced in rural settings, and managing increasing client expectations.

While many department veterinarians may have previously been employed in the private sector and also have exposure to the challenges being faced by colleagues through professional networks, not all typically face the same potential stressors in their roles within the department, as veterinarians in clinical practice. However, some DAFF veterinary roles, such as OPVs and regional veterinarians, do face significant stressors such as working in isolation, dealing with demanding clients and making decisions under pressure that may impact people and businesses. DAFF offers a range of mental health and wellbeing information, tools and resources to promote good mental wellbeing. As well as a range of support services for staff experiencing mental health issues, including those that are not directly related to the workplace.

e) *the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians*

In order to conduct 'acts of veterinary science' as defined under state/territory legislation, it is a legal requirement for a veterinarian to maintain primary registration with the veterinary practitioners' board within the state/ territory they reside. National recognition of veterinary registration (or equivalent) allows veterinarians to move and practise across state borders.

The Australasian Veterinary Boards Council Inc (AVBC) publishes a list of 'Qualifications Generally Recognised by AVBC' that Australian state/territory veterinary boards will refer to when considering whether to register a veterinarian. This list includes qualifications from a range of universities in Australia and a limited number of overseas universities.

Veterinarians with qualifications that do not appear on the 'Qualifications Generally Recognised by AVBC' are required to undertake the Australasian Veterinary Examination (AVE). The AVE is designed to assess, for registration purposes, the veterinary knowledge and clinical competencies of overseas qualified veterinarians whose veterinary qualifications are not recognised by State or Territory Registration Boards in Australia or the Veterinary Council of New Zealand.

DAFF understands the AVE offers a range of challenges or barriers to completion. This includes only offering the multiple-choice exam (MCE) once a year, a broad syllabus required for the MCE which is challenging to study for while potentially working and manage other responsibilities e.g., family commitments. Additionally, the cost of the examination of approximately \$14,000 can be prohibitive.

One overseas veterinary qualified departmental officer who is employed in a non-veterinary role, offered the following insight:

*"I have already been at university for seven years of vet school and it was difficult trying to assess the pros and cons for deciding whether to study further for my vet degree qualification in Australia or to just join the non-veterinary workforce. Many factors were involved in the decision not to pursue a veterinary qualification in Australia, but the main ones included: the need to sit and pass the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to a given level to prove my English language proficiency despite having attended English-speaking schools through my younger schooling years, the cost of the AVE and the difficulty to logistically (and financially) continue to study for the examinations in Australia as I was living in Canberra (and the*

*exams are to be taken in person in Sydney) on top of working, financial constraints, and family life.”*

When recruiting for veterinary officers, DAFF has a general requirement that candidates must possess a degree that is recognised and registrable with an Australian state/territory veterinary practitioners' board. However, due to the aforementioned challenges in attracting veterinarians to work in certain roles in rural and remote locations, DAFF utilises some limited concessions to employ overseas trained veterinarians who have qualifications that are not fully registrable in an Australian state/territory. This includes obtaining limited or specific registration from the relevant veterinary practitioners' board to undertake employment as an OPV at an export registered abattoir. DAFF also faces unique challenges regarding the requirement for ongoing Australian Public Servants to be Australian citizens. Again, DAFF must make some limited concessions, in accordance with provisions in the *Public Service Act 1999*, for veterinarians who don't yet have their citizenship. For example, they may be employed in non-ongoing roles only, until such a time that they gain their citizenship.

DAFF supports the intent of the AVBC in ensuring veterinarians who are eligible for registration in Australia meet a minimum standard. Considering the national veterinary workforce shortage, a review of the framework and processes for recognition of international veterinary qualifications, may be warranted.

*h) the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural and remote New South Wales*

Many of the challenges facing the veterinary profession in NSW have been discussed in a broader context throughout this submission. However, it is worth noting the particular challenges faced by veterinary students or those contemplating enrolling in an undergraduate veterinary degree course. For example, the large amount of unpaid practical work in veterinary courses limits educational accessibility. There is already a limited availability of casual employment opportunities and students required to undertake unpaid placements find it extremely difficult to find and maintain casual employment throughout such a degree. Additionally, few students are immune from spiralling cost of living pressures, the limited rental accommodation market and increasing higher education loan program (HELP) debts. All of these factors can be a severe barrier to students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds or those from rural areas who may not have support networks near universities. Again, these issues are not limited to veterinary students with other professions e.g. nursing, citing similar challenges for their students.

*i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations*

DAFF has a particular interest in the nation's ability to detect and respond to an outbreak of an emergency animal disease (EAD). EADs either do not exist or occur rarely in Australia. An outbreak of an EAD in Australia could cause significant social and economic harm. They can affect the health of animals, humans and the environment. Wildlife can be an important source of valuable surveillance data for EADs. So, the impact of veterinarians being unable to care for injured wildlife has a broader impact, beyond the individual animal or population level.



Veterinarians employed in private practice or some industry roles will play a key role in any EAD event, as they are likely to be one of the first groups to identify an outbreak and will be an important resource for any response. National guidance exists for the engagement of private veterinarians during an EAD response. These conditions are undergoing review by a national taskforce, to ensure they are up to date and fit for purpose. Australia also has the ability to access additional veterinary expertise, for example through the International Animal Health Emergency Reserve (IAHER). This is a formal arrangement that provides participating countries access to additional human resources in the event of an EAD outbreak. Signatory countries are Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Australia's veterinary workforce shortages may impact our ability to offer emergency support to IAHER signatories in the future and in light of more frequent and compounding disasters.

The impacts of an EAD outbreak are felt at the local, regional and national level. Any limitations on Australia's ability to respond to an EAD, including a lack of available veterinarians, will have a significant impact on Australia economically. Including the ability to regain market access and resume trade for animal commodities impacted by the outbreak. However, impacts will also be felt socially and psychologically within local communities who may be directly affected by an EAD event.

DAFF also provides veterinarians to support states and territories during emergency situations such as during and after bushfires or floods. This impacts resourcing, can be a stressful role and increases the workload on those remaining in their usual roles. It also usually requires veterinarians to have appropriate skills and training, which may pose an additional cost to veterinarians to gain and maintain these skills.

- j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others*

Veterinary resourcing in DAFF is important to support national animal welfare priorities and to manage animal welfare of imported and exported animals, in accordance with legislative requirements.

Importantly for the economy, trade in some export consignments of animals and animal products require veterinary certification to meet importing country requirements.

- l) strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practising veterinarians particularly in regional, rural and remote New South Wales*

DAFF would encourage the veterinary shortage issue be approached at a national level, as well as at a state level, as it is a nationwide issue. Veterinarians may be registered and work across states.

The AVA has been advocating for an Australian Government rural placement incentives scheme for graduate veterinarians to assist in managing the shortage of rural veterinarians. DAFF has engaged with the Department of Education, which manages HELP debt policy, on this issue, and encourage further investigation to establish evidence for the range of sustainable intervention strategies that could be considered to address this complex and multifactorial issue.

Rural workforce challenges are not unique to the veterinary sector. Labour and skills shortages are a significant issue facing many industries across Australia, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the current tight labour market. DAFF works across government to ensure agricultural issues and concerns are considered in broader government policies, initiatives and programs, including on issues in relation to agricultural workforce development more broadly.

DAFF is aware of schemes for teachers, doctors and nurse practitioners in Australia for those living and working in rural, remote or very remote areas of Australia. Rural placement incentive schemes are unlikely to resolve all issues, and represent one element in addressing the challenges faced by veterinarians in rural and remote areas.

Likewise, veterinary workforce challenges are unfortunately not unique to Australia. For example, there is Voluntary Bonding Scheme for graduate veterinarians in rural New Zealand. DAFF continues to discuss these challenges with counterparts, including from New Zealand and other like-minded Animal Health Quadrilateral Alliance countries – Canada, USA and the UK.

More data, information and analysis are required to understand the contributing factors to the veterinary workforce shortage. This will be critical to inform any government intervention measures at either state or national level. It will then be important to analyse what interventions may work, as a single solution is unlikely to be effective. Rather, a holistic and sustainable approach is required to address the complex and multifactorial issues underpinning veterinary shortages and the sustainability of the profession and its services. Improving this situation will require a range of interventions based on qualitative research, and a unified approach that includes employers, employees, universities and government. DAFF will continue to engage with individuals and organisations to contribute to collective solutions that encourage and support veterinarians across Australia, particularly those that work in rural and remote areas.

*n) any other related matter.*

As touched on above, the veterinary degree course plays a role in the current veterinary workforce shortage. Further analysis of the interactions between the university course and the industry crisis is warranted. Ensuring graduates are equipped with skills, knowledge, resilience and aptitude to effectively engage with current and future challenges is critical. Provision of adequate support to graduates is also critical. Animals are significant components of some of the most complex and multidisciplinary challenges facing global society, such as climate change, food security and antimicrobial resistance. Veterinarians possess unique knowledge and perspectives to contribute to solutions, however this requires complementary skills that are broader than medicine and surgery. Improving the foundation that vets have in areas like policy development and economics would provide improved capability and confidence to contribute beyond a narrow technical frame and serve to increase the profile of the importance of veterinarians in solving these global challenges.

# Conclusion

As already stated, the challenges facing the veterinary profession are complex, and a multifactorial and collaborative approach is required to properly understand and address the issues. A clearer understanding of the factors contributing to the current veterinary workforce shortage is essential to develop strategies that will have a meaningful impact. Areas that DAFF consider warrant more research or analysis include:

- factors that contribute to students choosing whether to pursue a degree in veterinary science, including accessibility for students from diverse rural and regional backgrounds.
- factors that contribute to veterinary graduates choosing which field of veterinary science to enter vs choosing not to commence a veterinary career at all.
- factors that contribute to veterinarians leaving roles within the same field (moving between veterinary practices), changing fields of veterinary practice (e.g. moving from clinical practice to academia) or leaving the veterinary profession altogether

Potential areas for intervention may include:

- a review of the framework and processes for selecting candidates accepted into veterinary science programs at universities, including improving accessibility and incentivising those more likely to return to veterinary employment in rural and regional areas.
- balancing the financial need for universities to attract full fee-paying international students vs the national need to produce veterinarians who are capable and willing to work in Australia's regional, rural and remote areas.
- a review of the framework and/or processes for recognition of international veterinary qualifications.
- a review of the veterinary curricula including ensuring graduates are provided opportunities to develop skills beyond the technical including in communication, judgement and strategic thinking.
- analysis of the different educational models operating in Australia (e.g., under vs postgraduate) and the impacts they have had on the retention of veterinary graduates within the profession.