

Submission
No 209

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: NSW Farmers Association

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Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW
Legislative Council
Parliament of NSW
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee Chair

Re: Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in NSW

NSW Farmers welcomes the opportunity to provide input through this submission to the Legislative Council Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in NSW. NSW Farmers is Australia's largest state farming organisation, representing the interests of its farmer members in the state. We are Australia's only state-based farming organisation that represents farmers across all agricultural commodities.

Agriculture is an economic 'engine' industry in NSW. Farmers across the state produce more than \$21 billion worth of food and fibre every year, or around 25 per cent of total national production, and contribute significantly to the state's total exports. Agriculture is the heartbeat of regional communities, directly employing almost two per cent of the state's workers and supporting roles in processing, manufacturing, retail, and hospitality across regional and metropolitan areas. The sector hopes to grow this contribution even further by working toward the target of \$30 billion in economic output by 2030.

NSW Farmers is supportive of the review and highlights key concerns from our members, including the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, particularly for the treatment of large animals, the challenges in maintaining and retaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, the challenges facing the veterinary profession in regional and rural NSW, the current veterinary shortage impact on animal welfare and during emergency situations. We provide strategic recommendations to support the current and future veterinary workforce including allied and support service workers across the veterinary sector.

Current workforce shortages

In NSW there are approximately 4396 registered veterinarians, 61% of which are located within metropolitan areas, 31% in inner regional areas, and 8% in rural and remote areas with a total of around 1000 private veterinary businesses in operation across NSW. Veterinary shortages are observed across the profession in NSW including clinical practice, government, academia, research, industry, and pathology. 75% of registrants work in clinical practice and of those, 10% work in large animal practice. This is currently not meeting the demands of the agriculture industry as there are no operational large animal veterinary practices in some parts of the state such as Parkes and Narromine. In rural and remote areas in Western NSW, that cover almost half of the state, there are no permanent Local Land Service vets, and their services are provided on contract from other regions. There are less than 10 operational vets in the far western region of NSW, with only a few operating on a full-time basis.

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The National Skills Commission Skills Priority List has formally recognised that the whole veterinary sector has workforce shortages. Of particular concern, a recent survey by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) demonstrates that over 40% of veterinary job vacancies took more than 12 months to fill with the issue being more acutely felt in regional areas. 77% of respondents indicated that the practice they currently worked in had advertised for a veterinarian to fill a vacancy in the past year, and of those 61% were advertised to replace a veterinarian leaving a practice.

Recommendation 1: Invest in incentive-based programs for graduates in Veterinary Science for regional and rural NSW to overcome the shortage of practicing veterinarians.

Education, training, and graduate outcomes.

Education and training places are limited and highly competitive in the state of NSW, with two tertiary institutions delivering programs for veterinary science, one being regional. The high academic barriers of entry to the profession are currently excluding rural high school students from farming backgrounds that have a willingness and interest in large animal care, including livestock, from accessing programs.

It is acknowledged that veterinary science is an expensive university program to operate and budgetary constraints over the past decade have increased virtual learning and decreased hands-on experience, decreasing the job readiness amongst new graduates. This may impact students understanding of the reality of veterinary clinical work and the challenges faced on the job. There are few current graduates that have an adequate understanding of large animal medicine, herd health and the role of livestock in sustainable food and fibre production in Australia, including the production of sustainable animal-sourced food.

The long timeframe for training veterinarians, the high cost of servicing Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees, and below average starting salaries, and continuing education requirements, act as a significant deterrent. This is exacerbated when taking into consideration the declining numbers of mixed and large animal veterinarians in rural and regional areas, which has been an issue for Australian agriculture over many decades. Evidence suggests that a significant number of trained veterinarians leave the profession within 5 years of graduating. A study conducted by the AVA suggests that a high proportion of those removing their veterinary practicing registration in NSW move overseas (31%) or move interstate (52%) to more favourable jurisdictions.¹ The NSW Government acknowledges that approximately 14% of those removing themselves from the register were unlikely to return to the Register in NSW.

Recommendation 2: Review the barriers of entry to veterinary science programs for regional and rural high school students and whether existing entry requirements are adequately addressing the shortage of entrants from this cohort.

Shortage of large animal practice practitioners

Approximately 80% of new graduate registrations are female and 60% of all veterinarians are female, yet there is a high attrition rate of females in the veterinarian workforce for large animal clinical practice. The disproportionately higher number of female graduates means that workplaces require greater flexibility to accommodate for a range of working hours and greater support for maternity leave entitlements. The physical nature of the work associated with large animal practice, means registrants may exit due to the inflexible and extended working hours that are not in keeping with lifestyle factors. The AVA employee survey found that 36% of respondents never receive overtime remuneration.² With a further 32% describing the workplace culture as average to poor.³

Recommendation 3: Support training or extension programs in the treatment of domesticated livestock to encourage more students to consider a future in rural large animal practices.

¹ <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>

² <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>

³ <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>

Recommendation 4: Invest in mentoring programs for new graduates, particularly women, to address workplace challenges and to support the retention of newly trained veterinary professionals in the industry.

Incentives to attract and retain graduates in regional areas.

In a survey conducted by the AVA, 100% of respondents indicated that they would consider working in a regional or rural practice if their HECS debt was wiped.⁴ AVA's policy to fund a Rural Placement Incentives Scheme to promote early-career veterinarians practicing in regional and rural areas is a cost-effective program that is likely to yield high returns to industry for every government dollar invested.

The proposed scheme would provide HECS fee forgiveness for veterinarians who work in regional and rural areas. Some key elements of the proposed scheme include:

- Participants must be an Australian citizen or permanent resident, registered to practice in Australia.
- Employment must be with a practice that has a majority focus on production animals.
- Employment must be in a Rural or a Remote area (using the Australian Government's Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification)
- Available to all graduates (up to 5 years after graduation).

Whilst attracting entrants to the industry is critical, retention is an equally important factor in ensuring a continued flow of trained professionals stay with the industry for longer. Retention issues stem from a lack of adequate remuneration, flexibility, burnout, and unaddressed mental health challenges. These issues are exacerbated by continuing education requirements that are expensive and difficult to access from rural areas. Veterinarians have displayed concerns with the lack of code of conduct and ethics in the workplace, that has created difficulties in dealing with difficult clients. Raising awareness and or implementing a standard code of conduct or ethics could act to raise the standards and expectations of community engagement with veterinarians.

Building a better understanding of the issues facing past and present veterinarians is critical to ensuring that solutions are fit-for-purpose and industry tailored to provide the highest quality support and value back to the industry. This may include gathering better quality data and developing mentoring opportunities where valued experiences can be exchanged and shared amongst new and incumbent professionals. A tailored mental health program may also assist with some of the sector specific issues being experienced by the current workforce.

Recommendation 5: Adopt the Rural Placement Incentives Scheme, that waives HECS-debt for veterinary science students displaying interest in working in regional and rural areas.

Recommendation 6: Review continuing education requirements to ensure they are fit for purpose and meet the needs of regional, rural, and remote veterinarians.

Recommendation 7: Consider a code of conduct or ethics to raise the standard of professional care and interaction between the community, support workers and clients from the broader community.

Shortage of allied support workers are driving the attrition of veterinarian professionals

Veterinarians require the support of a holistic range of services including those provided by nurses and assistants that enable the effective delivery of veterinary practice. In a study conducted by the AVA, 57% of respondents stated they had experienced workplace conflict, with the majority reporting that the lack of nurses or support staff, had created conflict between vets and the limited resources who take priority, driven also by a lack of workforce numbers and severe traditional undercharging that limits profits and adequate remuneration for allied support workers.⁵ Attrition and lack of financial and related incentives for these workers, leads to high stress and burnout of veterinarians. It is critical to acknowledge that the lack of workers supporting the effective delivery of veterinarian practice are a casual factor leading to the high

⁴ <https://www.ava.com.au/media-centre/media-releases/hecs-debt/>

⁵ <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>

attrition of veterinarians across the sector. Adequate training, remuneration and retention of veterinary nurses and assistants is necessary to provide adequate support to veterinarian professionals.

Recommendation 8: Invest in incentives to attract and retain workers in allied and support services, such as veterinary nurses and assistants, to improve the effective delivery of veterinary care in regional and rural areas.

Veterinary businesses are financially vulnerable

Cost of delivering services of veterinary care have substantially increased in the past several years. Veterinary businesses have experienced great difficulty in their ability to recoup the full value of services that are provided for the public good. The overall sustainability of the veterinary profession is at risk due to years of underinvestment from government, particularly in the provision of public services. Some solutions to improve sustainability may include tax or other incentives to improve the financial viability of veterinary businesses, that would effectively change the business model to ensure that all veterinary services that deliver public benefits do not come at an out-of-pocket cost to veterinary businesses. Investment in planning for, and funding veterinary services in areas of public need such as animal welfare, biosecurity (surveillance, testing and control of disease outbreaks through vaccination delivery), animal population control, care of animals owned and managed by the crown (i.e. wildlife), and emergency care of owned animals in the event of natural disasters requires further investment from government. Strategies to support businesses to develop co-sharing of resources to establish and maintain out-of-hours services is also critical, as some regions now lack after-hours service delivery.

Recommendation 9: Consider incentives to improve the financial sustainability of veterinary businesses that deliver public benefits such as biosecurity surveillance, testing and control of disease outbreaks, care of animals owned and managed by the crown and emergency care of owned animals in the event of natural diseases.

Recommendation 10: Work with the veterinary sector to develop strategies to support businesses to effectively co-share resources to maintain critical out-of-hours services.

Concerns for animal welfare and management of emergency animal disease outbreaks

NSW Farmers expresses concerns for the effect management of an emergency animal disease (EAD) outbreak as there are limited number of veterinarians with the skills, knowledge, and experience to effectively manage a significant outbreak. For instance, AUSVETPLAN requires a range of overseas workers to assist in the event of an outbreak, however, there are technical and language barriers that would hinder the potential success of the response. The registration of overseas vets to work in Australia is a key area of concern that needs to be addressed. Potential for reciprocal agreements that allow for a more seamless exchange of experienced professionals may require further consideration. The administrative burden and regulatory barriers for local registration is a key factor as well as the excessive costs of accessing public indemnity insurance that is creating a significant barrier for local and international entrants. Expediting processes during an animal disease outbreak to enable the effective management of the disease is critical.

There are also concerns with the limited number of vets in key locations across farming communities in regional areas particularly, Dubbo and Parkes region and Albury and Wodonga which currently have no afterhours services available. Callouts for emergency services are expensive and limited in certain circumstances. Some emergency calls out to farms are not being responded to and/or responded within extended timeframes leading to livestock casualties and further complications at a significant cost to primary producers.⁶ The lack of services is driving animal welfare and biosecurity concerns in regional and rural areas.

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2023-03-03/vet-shortage-nsw-pets-livestock-farm-call-outs/102045538>

Recommendation 11: Expedite processes for the registration of overseas veterinarians wanting to work in NSW, with particular emphasis on streamlining the administrative burden and regulatory barriers in the event of an animal disease outbreak.

Recommendation 12: Audit and plan the state's capacity to respond to an emergency animal disease outbreak including the existing veterinary workforce and resource constraints and access to insurance and adopt necessary solutions to ensure its effective delivery.

NSW Farmers is of the view that the current veterinary shortages present a real and present threat to the viability of the agricultural industry, including the ability of the NSW Government and industry to adequately respond to a biosecurity incursion and to address animal welfare concerns. Greater incentives are required to attract and retain registered veterinarians, particularly for those specialising in large and mixed animal clinical practices. The critical need for tailored support and investment across the veterinary industry is necessary to ensure that the needs of the agricultural industry are met with confidence.

NSW Farmers will continue to engage with the Committee on further consultations pertaining to the inquiry findings. Should you wish to discuss our submission further, please contact Kathy Rankin, A/g Head of Policy and Advocacy, via email at _____ or by phone on _____ or Daniel Popovski, Director of Agricultural Industries (Intensives), via email at _____.

Yours sincerely

Xavier Martin
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