

What's being done about the farm animal vet shortage? - Dr. Lance Males

In the fall of 2020, Beef Farmers of Ontario (BFO) and the College of Veterinarians of Ontario (CVO) established a working group to identify the issues associated with the beef farming sector and access to veterinary services in rural and remote areas, and to collaboratively work toward solutions in addressing the problems. The group included representatives from the Ontario Association of Bovine Practitioners (OABP), Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA), Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians (OAVT), Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) and the Designated Area Veterinary Association (DAVA).

In 2021, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) commissioned a study by the University of Guelph and ACER group. Their paper "Examining the need, capacity, and barriers to accessing food animal veterinary service in underserved areas of Ontario" reinforced many of the challenges identified by the working group.

After extensive discussions, three primary themes emerged. Each was further broken down into both short- and long-term objectives, and stakeholders assigned to conduct additional review with the goal of implementation.

Theme 1: The Right Sized Veterinary Work Force.

One objective was to expand Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) and Registered Veterinary Technician (RVT) training opportunities.

OMAFRA initiated a partnership with the Ontario Veterinary College and Lakehead University to expand the DVM program by an additional 20 seats. The development of admission strategies that favor applicants wishing to work in underserved areas was also a component of this solution. The first intake is scheduled for September 2024.

Another objective of this theme was to optimize the full utilization of the veterinary team. Vital to this was the creation of accessible training materials to enable registered veterinary technicians to improve their knowledge base, skills, and confidence in working with livestock. The Ministry of Colleges and Universities provided funding for Northern College to develop 7 separate farm animal micro credentials, 3 of which (beef cattle, dairy cattle production, and dairy calf) have been launched in January. Additional courses in swine, horses, small ruminants, and backyard poultry will open in the fall of 2024. The courses are aimed at RVTS, who will be able to complete the majority of the material online, while also incorporating an intensive "in person" training and assessment session. It is hoped that various commodity groups will assist in providing tuition assistance to students wishing to attend this training.

A final objective of this theme was to address the discrepancy in financial compensation and increased cost of service provision for large animal practitioners. Starting veterinary salaries have increased dramatically in recent years as practices compete for a dwindling number of new graduates. Large animal practices have less ability to generate the additional revenue to pay for these higher wages and are at a competitive disadvantage compared to small animal practice. Compounding the issue, many busy veterinarians have chosen to focus on the more lucrative small animal work, discontinuing or reducing farm animal services.

In 2023, OMAFRA has stepped forward with a new program providing up to \$50,000 in support spread over 5 years to recent veterinary graduates who agree to provide large animal services in underserved

areas. It will be interesting to see if that level of support will be sufficient to entice veterinarians to work in these communities.

Theme 2: Cooperative Business Models for Delivery of Veterinary Services in Rural Ontario.

Two goals were identified in this category. The first was to maintain and expand business sustainability incentives for veterinary medicine that promote full spectrum production management services. Central to this is to participate in a review of the Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP). This program has been available in northern Ontario since the 1940's to help recruit and retain veterinarians in this geographically diverse region. Unfortunately, funding to practices has remained at the same level since the 1990's – resulting in reduced efficacy in fulfilling its mandate. The program review has been long delayed but is hoped for in the early 2024 budget year. In anticipation, BFO, Northern Producer Animal Health Network, and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture have drafted letters to improve program funding support.

A second objective was the development of models for shared large animal veterinary service delivery. The CVO requires veterinary practices to provide emergency services to clients within a veterinarian-client-patient relationship. These services can be provided in person by the clinic, or by another clinic which agrees to provide coverage for the primary practice. Because of the distances between practices in some areas, this may mean that 2 or 3 practices sharing on call may need to drive 400-500 km round trip for a single call when covering for a “neighbour”.

One exciting new initiative has emerged under the CVO's Regulatory Sandbox Initiative in which 3 regional practices could share a central hub staffed by RVT locums. A producer would contact their veterinarian, and if they are unavailable to attend, a technician would be dispatched to examine the animal. After an initial exam, the RVT would discuss their findings with the vet, who may recommend additional examination/testing, or potentially treatment of the condition by the technician while they are still on farm. If the condition does require immediate veterinary attention, the RVT may be directed to stabilize the animal for transport to the nearest “haul-in” facility. All the participating practices have such a facility at their disposal, which would be within a 2-hour trailer ride.

This model has been developed with extensive input from CVO, OAVT, Northern Ontario Farm Innovation Alliance (NOFIA) and participating veterinary practices and local producers. If successful, it will provide the opportunity for smaller mixed animal practices to be able to share the large animal on-call commitment. This improves the likelihood that these practices will continue to provide livestock services.

Theme 3: Promote Beef Herd Health and Production Programs through Veterinary and Producer Partnerships.

Among the goals of this category was the creation of multi-level incentives that promote quality assurance and producer education on progressive herd health. Additionally, stimulation of beef research interests and improving the channels to disseminate this information was a related topic. Both are being driven by BFO.

The final objective was to create and promote mentorship programs that support the herd health “family”– producer, veterinary team, on-farm team, etc. The individual requirements and make-up of each of these teams will be highly specific to each situation. Ideally a conversation occurs between a

producer (or group of producers) and their veterinarian(s). Both sides discuss their needs and limitations, attempting to collaboratively effect a strategy to best navigate them. Ideally there will be a program developed that helps to facilitate these discussions. It remains to be seen if such a program would be driven and funded by individual producer groups, veterinarians, industry initiatives, or government.

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