

TESTIMONY OF

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Concerning the
Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act of 2007
(H.R. 1232)

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Subcommittee on Health of the United States
House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for giving the American Veterinary Medical Association the opportunity to speak in support of the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act.

I am Dr. Ron DeHaven, executive vice president of the AVMA. Prior to joining the AVMA, I served nearly three decades with the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, most recently as APHIS administrator. In that capacity, I was responsible for the protection of U.S. agriculture and natural resources from exotic pests and diseases, administering the Animal Welfare Act, and carrying out wildlife damage management activities.

The American Veterinary Medical Association represents more than 76,000 American veterinarians engaged in every aspect of veterinary medical science. Among other things, we ensure the well-being of our nation's companion animals, we protect human health through the control of zoonotic disease, we conduct research into animal and human health, and we help preserve endangered species. Many of us are working to ensure the health of our nation's livestock, and ultimately our food supply.

As you can see, veterinarians do much more than take care of our beloved family pets. They also play a vital role in preserving our country's public health by protecting humans from diseases spread by animals and assuring the safety of our food, from poultry to pork and beef.

These veterinarians have their work cut out for them. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, foodborne diseases, such as *Salmonella* and *E. coli*, are responsible for an estimated 76 million human illnesses, 300,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths each year in the United States. Food safety and the risk of illness from eating contaminated food items remain on the nation's collective conscience, as we just saw January 12 with the recall of nearly 200,000 pounds of ground beef because of concerns of *E. coli* contamination.

As our nation continues to rely on protein-based diets, the number of food animals needed to meet that need will rise proportionately with population growth. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the United States population will grow to more than 335 million by 2020 and to more than 419 million by 2050. This population growth will put increased demands on our food supply system and those who are responsible for its safety and quality. Veterinarians will play a critical role in that regard.

Animals and humans are inextricably linked when it comes to disease. Veterinarians have been working on diseases of public health significance, such as tuberculosis and brucellosis, for more than 100 years. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), monkeypox, West Nile Virus, Lyme disease, avian influenza and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) are more recent examples of zoonotic diseases that have had significant public health implications. Veterinarians have played a pivotal role in the identification, diagnosis, treatment, control and surveillance of each one of these diseases.

This connection between animals and humans is truly an issue of “one health.” That is, as goes the health of our nation’s animals, so goes the health of its people.

The veterinarians working in food safety and public health can be found in both the public and private sectors. At the Centers for Disease Control, veterinarians work in areas such as bioterrorism, environmental health, viral and bacterial diseases, and food safety.

At the Food and Drug Administration, veterinarians working in the Center for Veterinary Medicine help regulate the manufacture and distribution of food additives and drugs that are given to animals, including those animals from which human foods are derived. At the United States Department of Agriculture, veterinarians work in food safety and animal health. In the private sector, food supply veterinarians are involved in keeping food animals healthy and their environments free of contaminants.

Simply put, all of these veterinarians serve as guardians of our nation’s food supply, and they will be the first medical professionals to diagnose and contain diseases in animals that may spread to humans.

Unfortunately, the number of veterinarians available to serve society in these key roles does not meet demand. A recent study conducted at Kansas State University projects this shortage to worsen by 4 percent to 5 percent annually for the next several years. This shortage is being felt across the board. Reports indicate that 50 percent of U.S. Public Health Service veterinary medical officers are now eligible for retirement. The USDA, which is already underserved, is predicting a shortfall of several hundred veterinarians. A

survey of the AVMA membership shows that the mean age of food supply veterinarians is around 50 and nearing retirement, placing an even greater burden on the profession and our society.

Added to the mix is the fact that the country's veterinary colleges lack the capacity to produce more food supply and public health veterinarians. Our nation's 28 accredited veterinary colleges are currently at or above capacity, graduating about 2,600 veterinarians each year. According to a recent report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, veterinary medicine ranked 9th in the list of the 30 fastest-growing occupations for 2006 through 2016. It is estimated that jobs for veterinarians will increase by 35 percent in the next several years. And it is our joint responsibility to fill them.

While some of that growth will be met with the addition of new graduates into the workforce, there are national concerns that many jobs in food supply and public health will go unfilled. There are about 8,850 U.S. veterinarians working in the food animal field. Around the turn of the 20th Century, virtually every veterinarian was a food animal veterinarian. Today, only about 17 percent of veterinarians work in food supply and more than 70 percent of veterinarians work with companion animals. This trend is likely to continue as veterinary school graduates enter the workforce.

Apart from the workforce issues I have highlighted, fiscal concerns also are playing a role in this shortage. Only 27 states currently share the cost of producing the veterinarians who protect the entire nation's food supply and public health. There has also been a

dearth of federal funding for veterinary colleges. According to a 2005 report by the National Research Council of The National Academies, titled, “Critical Needs for Research in Veterinary Medicine,” the last major federal program to support construction of facilities for colleges of veterinary medicine ended more than 40 years ago.

Our country’s ability to protect its food supply, and its capacity for zoonotic and food animal disease research is insufficient, and these realities could have devastating consequences.

Food animal production generates about \$124 billion annually to the U.S. economy. A single, highly infectious disease that is not rapidly diagnosed could destroy much of our livestock, resulting in shortages of dietary proteins and significant economic losses. In addition, the CDC estimates that 80 percent of potential bioterror agents are infectious diseases that spread from animals to humans. Failure to diagnose these diseases in animals before their spread to humans could result in a catastrophic loss of human life. Additionally, as food animal operations become more centralized, there is even greater risk of a single disease spreading throughout an entire herd that could easily number in the tens of thousands, prompting an outbreak of enormous proportion that would require veterinarians’ talent, experience and expertise to contain and eliminate.

There are ways of addressing this problem, however, and we need look no further the promise behind the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act. This Act would create a competitive grants program designed to produce more veterinarians working in

public health practice and enhance our capacity for research on diseases that threaten public health and food safety.

Mr. Chairman, the AVMA fully supports the Veterinary Public Health Workforce Expansion Act.

The shortage of veterinarians working in food supply and public health positions poses a threat to our country's security. Though the federal budget is strained, national investment in our veterinary colleges and our capacity in zoonotic and food animal disease research is necessary. The potential costs of failing to make this investment far exceed the cost of the investment itself.