



CHRISTIAN FARMERS FEDERATION OF ONTARIO

ACCREDITED FARM ORGANIZATION

April 26, 2024

Attention: Veterinary Assistance Program Review
Ontario Ministry of Northern Development
Strategic Programs Unit, Northern Development Division
810 Robertson St.
Kenora, ON
P9N 4J2
Delivered via email: katrina.laurent@ontario.ca

Re: Veterinary Assistance Program Review

Dear Ministry,

The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO) is an Accredited Farm Organization representing the interests of over 4,000 farm families in Ontario who are called to the vocation of farming. CFFO policy promotes economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable farming, advocating that farmers receive fair return for their production and stewardship efforts.

The CFFO is concerned about access to veterinary care for livestock farmers in Ontario. Many farmers are already challenged to access veterinary services. The long-term outlook indicates that this may increase, rather than improve.

The Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP) has been in place for many decades and fills a vital role in providing a structure to encourage food animal veterinary services in remote and underserved areas, and funding, including to cover travel costs for on-farm veterinarian services.

In reviewing the VAP, the CFFO asks that the Ministry of Northern Development specifically consider both improvements to the program itself and the context in which the program operates.

Within the scope of the VAP review, the CFFO recommends that:

- Total current funding to the VAP needs to be put to full use.
 - Ensure that contracts are filled in all VAP defined areas.
 - Allow clinics which have hit their “maximum” to access more funding, if it is available.
- Veterinary professionals, including both veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians (RVTs), should qualify for VAP travel funding.

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- The rate per km travelled for veterinarians should be increased to better reflect costs and professional time.
- A rate per km travelled for registered veterinary technicians (RVTs) should be determined, as appropriate for costs and professional time.
- Consultation needs to include farmers served by a Veterinary Service Committee (VSC) who do not currently have access to a veterinarian, and veterinarians who have left the program.

Outside of the scope of the VAP review, the CFFO further recommends that government:

- Identify other incentives or supports to ensure communities can *fill and retain* veterinarian contracts. These need to address both the financial and social viability of rural food animal practices.
- Increase access to telehealth veterinary professional advice. To facilitate this, equipment and training for both veterinary professionals and livestock owners should be available.
- **Ensure Ontario successfully graduates and attracts more food animal veterinary professionals to serve Ontario farmers.**

In Scope of VAP Review

The VAP program currently does not spend the full budget allocated to the program. This is in part because some of the regions who participate in the program do not have veterinarians filling contracts. At the same time, other clinics may hit the maximum funding per year, but could be using more to serve the farms in their area.

Total current funding to the VAP needs to be put to full use. There should be a greater onus of responsibility within the program to ensure that all Veterinary Service Committee defined areas have a veterinarian serving the farming community. While it may take some time to fill a vacancy, more focus needs to be paid to understanding why a community may have lost a serving veterinarian, and what supports will be effective in keeping a post filled.

There also needs to be a process in place to allow clinics which have hit their “maximum” funding to apply to access more funding, if it is available, past a certain date in the financial year of the program.

Currently, only veterinarians can access travel costs through the VAP. With the proposed changes in legislation to recognize both veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians (RVTs) as “veterinary professionals,” **modernization of the VAP should allow both veterinarians and RVTs, as appropriate to the needs of the call, to qualify for VAP travel funding.**

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The rate paid for veterinarian travel has not changed in many years. Inflation in both the costs of travel and the cost of professional time need to be addressed in the rate that is set for veterinarians. At the same time, calculation on the appropriate rate set for RVTs should fairly reflect the costs of travel and professional time as well.

It is important that all parties involved in overseeing, delivering, and accessing the program (OMAFRA, MND, vets, and farmers) have an opportunity to contribute to the review. The Ministry of Northern Development indicated it plans to speak directly with farmers who have received services from a VAP funded vet in the last year. It is important to also consult with farmers, served by a VSC, who have been without access to a veterinarian. Consultation should also include veterinarians who formerly served under VAP who have left the program. It is vital to discuss how to make this program more effective in ensuring these farming communities have the veterinary services they need, and that veterinary practices serving these areas continue to be viable, socially and financially.

VAP in a Broader Context

The problem of access to food animal veterinarians is not unique to rural Ontario, or even within Canada. Veterinary practices are businesses just as farm operations are. Each desires to operate efficiently and sustain the livelihoods of those working in the business. Market factors have contributed to the shortage of food animal veterinarians. Beyond market forces, differences in working conditions from small animal clinics make it challenging to keep mixed or large animal rural practices viable.

Other incentives or supports need to be identified to ensure communities can *fill and retain* veterinary contracts. These need to address both the financial and social viability of rural food animal veterinary practices.

The VAP is one form of support for livestock farming in underserved areas. That being the case, it is important in this review to also consider what other incentives are in place, how they can work effectively together, and what new incentives may be needed to support livestock farming.

The CFFO appreciates current incentive grants for Ontario-trained veterinary graduates to work in underserved areas of the province. We hope this will help to fill vacancies that have been highly detrimental to farmers.

The financial viability of veterinary services is being undermined by the buyout of local clinics by larger companies and pressures to focus on small animal veterinary care. Beyond these, supports to social viability need to be considered, including access to peers and student trainees, time away from on-call duties, and cultural fit into rural communities, especially for newly graduated vets.

Telehealth access to veterinary professional advice also needs to increase. This will allow access to professional advice at lower cost and to a much broader area. This

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is important for farmers and small-scale livestock owners. To facilitate this, suitable equipment and training for both veterinary professionals and livestock owners should be made available.

Ultimately, **Ontario needs more food animal veterinary professionals.** Ontario needs to successfully graduate more food animal veterinarians and food animal focused RVTs. Ontario also needs to attract more internationally trained veterinary professionals to serve here. This is important in the long-term to ensure livestock farming continues to be viable across the province.

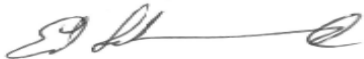
Conclusion

In undertaking this review of the Veterinary Access Program (VAP) the CFFO recommends that total current funding to the VAP needs to be put to full use, veterinary professionals should qualify for VAP travel funding, and that the rate paid should reflect the costs of travel and professional time. Consultation needs to include farmers who do not currently have access to a veterinarian, and veterinarians who have left the program.

Beyond the scope of the VAP review, other incentives or supports are needed to ensure communities can *fill vacancies and retain* veterinarians. These need to address both financial and social viability of rural food animal veterinary practices. Telehealth access to veterinary professional advice needs to increase. Finally, Ontario needs more food animal veterinary professionals to serve livestock owners in the province.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide input and thank you for your consideration of our concerns and comments.

Sincerely,



Ed Scharringa, President
Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario

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