

**Presentation to the North Dakota Legislature's
Interim Health Services Committee
Regarding the Availability of and Need for
Large, Food-Animal Veterinary Services**

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Animal Health Committee Chairman*

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Good afternoon, Chairman Lee and members of the Interim Health Services Committee. My name is Robert Tweeten. I am a cow-calf producer and a cattle feeder from the Hensler, N.D., area. I am proud to serve on the North Dakota Stockmen's Association's Board of Directors and to chair one of its six policy committees, the Animal Health Committee.

The Stockmen's Association is an 85-year-old trade organization representing nearly 3,000 cattlemen and cattlemen and is the only organization of its kind in North Dakota.

Our association appreciates the chance to discuss the availability of and need for large, food-animal veterinary services in our state. Julie Ellingson, our association's executive vice president, is out of state for meetings this week, but sends her greetings.

The need for more large, food-animal veterinarians has been an important issue for our organization and other animal agriculture species groups for many years. The NDSA adopted its "Availability of Food-Animal Veterinarian Graduates" resolution nearly a decade ago in the Animal Health Committee. The resolution speaks to the shortage of food-animal veterinarians to service many livestock production areas in North Dakota and across the country and supports colleges of veterinary medicine to vigorously recruit and train students with the aptitude and desire to fill these critical voids.

A survey conducted by BEEF magazine in Fall 2012 indicated that 53 percent of livestock producers are concerned about a future shortfall of large-animal vets in their community, while 15.1 percent believe there is already a shortage.

Why are there shortages in areas? There are several factors, of course, that play into this. Not only does it cost a lot of money to go to vet school, but food-animal veterinary work often involves hard, physical work and long hours and generally pays less than small-animal veterinary work, which woos many veterinary graduates.

As cattle producers, we need good food-animal veterinarians, and we regard them as critical partners in our operations. They help us maintain healthy herds and profitable businesses and provide a safe, wholesome food supply for consumers around the world.

The role of veterinarians in our operations has expanded in recent years, with the increased complexity of pharmaceutical and biological product use requiring vet supervision and as federal programs, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Animal Disease Traceability program, have launched and now require additional steps to be taken by people at every step in the production cycle.

Additionally, over the years, herds have become larger and operations have become farther apart, adding longer travel distances to service livestock operations.

The Stockmen's Association polls its members on almost an annual basis to determine the need for food-animal veterinarians in North Dakota. We do this in order to provide feedback to the state veterinarian, who submits applications for a federal program aimed to provide support for underserved areas. This federal program and North Dakota's own Veterinary Loan Repayment Program are helping us make strides in filling in some critical gaps. We are grateful for the North Dakota Legislature's continued support of the latter program, which has helped place food-animal vets in some of the most desperate areas and made a huge difference to our industry and the communities in which they serve.

In our scoping, however, our members continue to identify several shortage areas that still exist and several areas that likely will suffer a shortage crunch once area veterinarians who are approaching retirement exit the industry. These shortage areas exist in pockets in several places around the state. The most consistent, however, appears to be in southwestern North Dakota.

As an example, one large-animal veterinarian, who is well past retirement age, has tried to recruit another veterinarian to take over his practice, but to no avail. Despite his desire to retire and his diminishing ability to get around – and get out of the way of mean cows and sassy horses – he has stuck to his work, not wanting to leave his livestock-producing clients and their herds unattended.

The biggest concern for cattle producers is having a qualified veterinarian available to provide emergency service. Because so many veterinarians are engaged in day-to-day herd work, ranging from bangs vaccination to breeding soundness exams and ultrasounding, there isn't always someone available at the clinic to give a laboring cow a C-section or to stitch up a life-threatening uterine prolapse.

In short, it is our organization's assessment that the state and nation are making some headway in addressing food-animal vet shortages. Your support of programs like North Dakota's Veterinary Loan Repayment Program, which incentivizes food-animal vets to practice in precisely the most needed areas, has helped make a dent in that problem. Still, shortage areas exist in pockets around the state. Responding to these shortages with qualified food-animal veterinarians will be critical in keeping the state's livestock industry – one of North Dakota's economic pillars – viable for years to come.

Thank you for this chance to talk about this issue. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.