

My experience with the VMLRP and VSPG programs: They're not trying to kill you... it just seems that way

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Abstract

Over the past 50 years, cattle prices have remained relatively stable and the cost of ordinary consumer goods has increased moderately, but the price of a veterinary education has skyrocketed. The USDA's Veterinary Medical Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) and Veterinary Services Grant Program (VSGP) are well designed systems that incentivize veterinarians to practice food animal medicine in underserved, often rural, areas.

Key words: loan repayment, student debt, veterinary shortage, VMLRP

Historical context

In 1970, in-state tuition at Colorado State University for an entire 4-year veterinary education was \$456.00. That same year, a 700 lb. steer brought \$210.35 at auction.

If cattle prices had kept pace with educational costs, a 700 lb. steer would be worth \$58039.62 in 2017 and there would be a food animal veterinarian at every intersection.

Obviously, times have changed. Educational costs have gone on a meteoric rise while the value of agricultural commodities such as cattle has been slow to change. The exorbitant cost of a veterinary education has created a pool of heavily indebted veterinarians who must seek financial gain above all else in order to service their student loan debts. When compounded with the relatively low value of food animals, the agricultural veterinarian is often less compensated, and thus less able to pay their debts while making a living, than their companion animal counterparts. Furthermore, the arduous working conditions and high demands placed on food animal veterinarians only serve to further dissuade new veterinarians from pursuing this work. The ongoing inverse relationship between educational costs and commodity prices has affected many regions of the country. Today, it's not uncommon for large areas to have no access to food animal veterinarians.

Because food animals simply weren't profitable to treat and practitioners gradually stopped doing the work, the Veterinary Medical Loan Repayment Program (VLMRP) and Veterinary Service Grant Program (VSGP) were created. The goal of these programs is to alleviate the lack of access to veterinary services.

Veterinary Medical Loan Repayment Program

Shortage area nomination process

Each year, State Animal Health Officers (generally the state veterinarian) nominate the VMLRP shortage areas. Nominating officers are generally very knowledgeable about the status of food

animals and practicing food animal veterinarians within their regions. Often, they make their shortage nominations in consultation with local veterinarians and veterinary organizations. In short, if a region achieves shortage status, it more than likely needs veterinary assistance, sometimes quite badly.

Shortage area characteristics

However, areas that lack a veterinary presence often have invisible economic drivers that make them less profitable places to practice. Perhaps the geography is unforgiving. The density of animals may be low. Or the region may be economically depressed. These shortages occur for a reason and that means practitioners will be fighting an uphill battle to work in a shortage area and remain profitable.

The truth is areas with lots of centrally located profitable farms generally have plenty of veterinarians already. Low profitability in shortage areas translates into lower pay for the VMLRP practitioners and a lot more wear and tear on them, physically, emotionally and psychologically. It takes longer to hire associates. VMLRP practitioners often can't afford as much lay help as they would like, and the emergencies come hell or high water 24 hours a day in remote areas managed by under-equipped farmers. As a result, shortage practitioners work long hours, clean their own tools, restock their own trucks and probably need a therapist to make sure they can stay sane, sober and connected to the people they love.

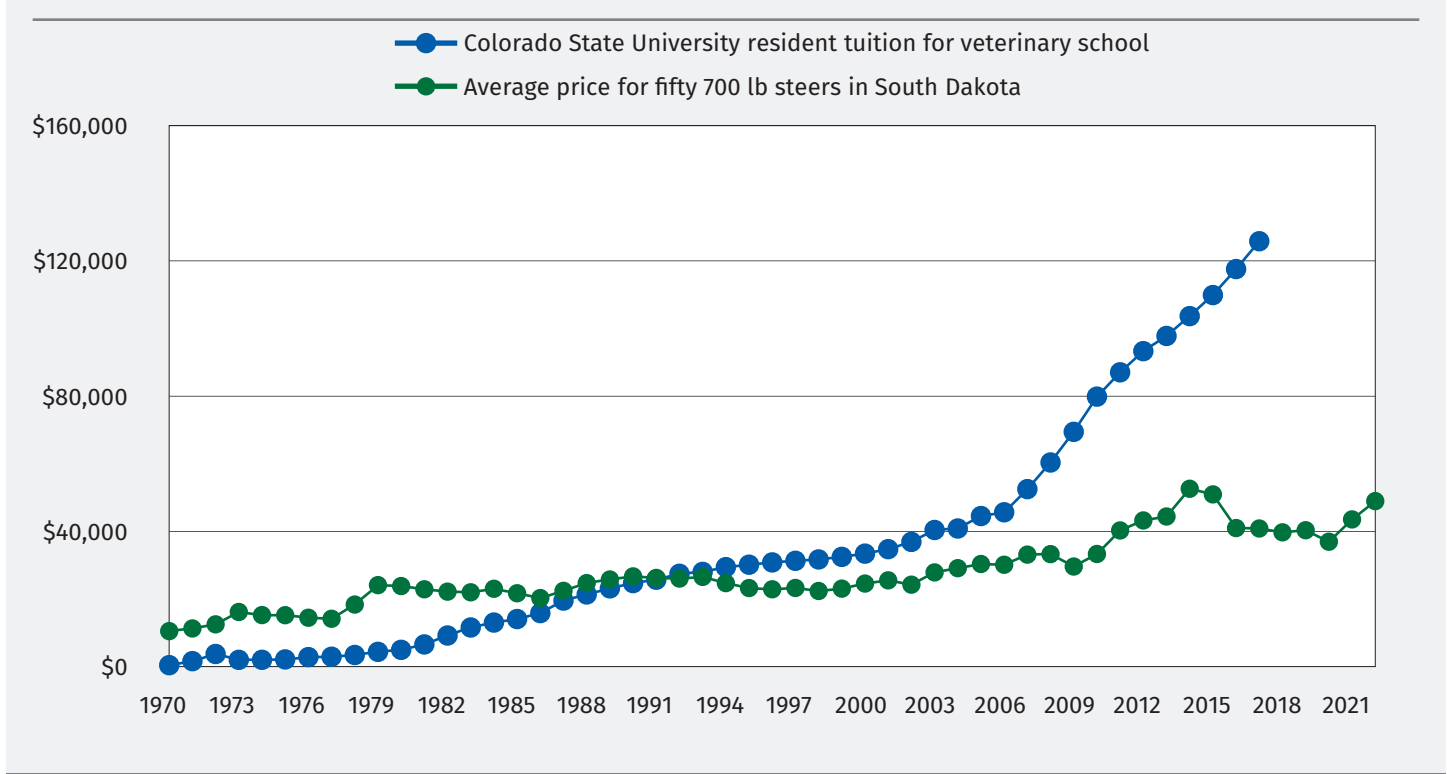
It's important to emphasize that food animal medicine in underserved areas is not only physically challenging, but often even dangerous. Underserved producers often lack good handling facilities, have poor knowledge of animal handling techniques, and unrealistic expectations of what a veterinarian can accomplish. While it would be nice to simply decline such calls, the marginal profitability of shortage areas often forces practitioners to do the work that presents itself, even if that work occurs in less-than-ideal conditions.

VMLRP application and selection process

Although the VMLRP program succeeds in identifying shortage areas and selecting the most suitable applicants for awards, the timing of this process is awkward for new graduates seeking an award. Applicable shortage areas are posted on the USDA's website in February, and the application period closes in April. In order to apply, new graduates must have identified a shortage area, secured employment within it, and submitted an application packet between February and April of their senior year. Usually, this is a time when they are also completing their senior clerkships.

One mitigating factor is that unfilled shortage nominations are often recycled from year-to-year. Thus, if a veterinary student

Figure 1: Historical trends in veterinary educational cost and beef steer prices.



has identified a particular region where they wish to work and knows it had an unfilled shortage area the prior year, they can look for employment in that area before the shortage list is released in their senior year.

A peer-review panel of veterinarians comprised of private practitioners, academics and regulatory veterinarians review each application and try to find the best fit for each in the designated shortage area. This process is bit like hiring someone except the job description and the applicant are both new to the panel. At this stage, there is a selective pressure to find candidates who will do the most work for the program. Individuals with strong local ties, a solid employer, a good business plan and a willingness to do the type of work specified in the nomination form will be ranked higher. The more of these criteria they meet, the better as the committee wants someone who can do the work, do it well and continue doing it long after their 3-year VMLRP term is over.

Competitive applicants will have educational and work experience that is similar to the needs of the shortage area. For example, if a nomination specifies swine expertise as a requirement, the committee will be looking for candidates with a background in swine medicine. Similarly, applicants who are residents of the area and who will work there full-time are more competitive than ones who will only be available periodically, whether that is because of geographic separation or other non-shortage related employment. Likewise, proposals that will serve the majority of the designated shortage area are more competitive than ones that only serve a small subset.

However, the nominating officials do not analyze the economic viability of food animal medicine within the shortage areas. No one on the selection committee knows applicants' levels of debt or personal income requirements. Business sustainability in these regions is not evaluated by the committee. It is up to the

VMLRP applicants to evaluate those factors and decide if their chosen region is financially suitable before applying.

Veterinary Services Grant Program

This program works in tandem with the VMLRP program. It provides competitive grant funding for VMLRP awardees and any other veterinary practitioners who work in designated shortage areas to purchase equipment that will allow them to better serve their clients. The VSGP utilizes the same shortage area list as the VMLRP and has a similar timeline and selection process. Any practitioner working in a designated shortage area can apply as well as any VMLRP awardees fulfilling their obligations within previously designated shortage areas. Annual timelines and application materials are posted on the USDA's website.

VSGP application and selection details

Generally, the program funds basic mobile equipment such as vehicles, veterinary cabinets, some routine tools and limited money for overhead expenses. The program will fund more specialized equipment, but applicants will have to demonstrate why that equipment is especially suitable for their area and particular to the needs of the shortage. Real estate and property are ineligible for funding, so the program cannot help with building a clinic.

The committee wants an itemized and specific budget so research needs to be done ahead of time. Applicants should include quotes for exactly what they want in their proposals. If they find a lower cost option later, they can notify the USDA, purchase the cheaper item and use the left-over funds for additional eligible expenses.

Outreach plans

All grant-funded mobile equipment requires an educational outreach plan. Applicants must have a plan for how they will show the community what their capabilities are and convince them to use the new equipment. This is really a chance for advertising a practice. Taking their new mobile clinic truck to the FFA meeting, the local cattleman's group, or the county fair. Any way the practitioner can reach out to the community and show them they are available to help.

Awardees must use the equipment for at least 3 years within the shortage area. If a piece of grant-funded equipment isn't working out, it can be sold and the funds used for another eligible expense with prior approval from the program. There is also a time commitment associated with the equipment. It needs to be available and used within the shortage area regularly. For example, a mobile clinic used in a shortage area every day will meet the minimum, but if a practitioner spends 80% of their time in small animal work, that may not meet the requirement. Applicants can contact the program in advance to make sure they will meet that minimum requirement.

Personal reflections

The VMLRP program worked amazingly well. As a new graduate, it allowed me to establish an ambulatory practice, grow that practice to 3 doctors, and then realize the folly of my actions. While the program is very good at getting veterinarians into areas of need, how well they survive is another matter entirely. The first 8 years of my practice, I worked. I took no vacations, no nights off, didn't go home for Christmas, and didn't drink a drop of anything stronger than coffee. Why? Because I was the only vet for 12 counties, and I was on call for everybody. That strategy is an excellent way to build a clientele. It's a great way to make money. It's also a great way to get divorced or kill yourself. So, you know, tradeoffs.

Subsequent VMLRP applications resulted in renewals that will allow me to pay off the entirety of my student loans by January 2023, which isn't that bad for a 2012 graduate in food animal medicine. A VSGP award in 2017 has permitted my practice to be well-equipped. Some of the fancier toys proved unfeasible in my shortage area, but they were sold and replaced with more useful alternatives. Overall, both programs have significantly contributed to my business's fiscal stability and growth.

Because of my positive experience with these programs, I attended the VSGP-funded AABP practice profitability workshop. In the workshop, I learned how to calculate the difference in profitability between companion animal and production medicine. Unfortunately, what I came away with was a solid understanding of just how worthless my shortage area practice is, and just how tremendous the gulf is between food animal and companion animal work. While I can make a living from the practice, the hours are too long and the pay is too low for any sane person to buy it or even buy into it. I had an excellent associate leave because they didn't get selected for VMLRP funding. Without VMLRP support, it didn't make financial sense for them to stay with the practice and after 2 years; they were already burned out on just half the workload I'd been handling solo for the past 8.

In short, the VMLRP is an excellent system that works very well at subsidizing access to veterinary care in underserved areas, but it can't change the fundamental economics that created those areas in the first place. Participating in the VMLRP program can reduce or pay off student debt. It's a surefire way to be the classic, small town, fire engine vet who can handle anything that comes at them, but the VMLRP doesn't come without personal cost, be it injury, burnout, relationship stress, or serious mental health concerns.

Make no mistake, the VMLRP is designed to put veterinarians where they are needed, and it's very good at that, but what happens to these practitioners afterward isn't the program's concern or part of its objectives.

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