

# External Peer Review of the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program NIFA Response to the Panel Recommendations

March 2016

## OVERVIEW

NIFA's Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) was reviewed by an external panel of experts in December 2015. The five-member panel, made up of veterinarians from veterinary schools, professional organizations and private practice, developed a comprehensive set of nine recommendations focusing on stakeholder outreach, shortage nominations, applications and awards. The panel's report was received by NIFA in January 2016.

NIFA expresses its sincere gratitude to the panel for their thoughtful analysis of the VMLRP and for making clear recommendations that can be used by NIFA to improve VMLRP administration, oversight and impact.

## NIFA RESPONSE

In general, NIFA agrees with all nine of the panel's recommendations. This document addresses the recommendations one by one, provides programmatic insight into some of the issues raised by the panel, and describes NIFA's plans for addressing each recommendation.

### RECOMMENDATION #1 - Stakeholder Outreach, Diversity and Quality of Nominations

*"Expand outreach to stakeholders for the purpose of raising the visibility and awareness of the VMLRP, gathering feedback from and involving a diverse array of stakeholders, and elevating the quality of shortage nominations."*

*Outreach:* NIFA agrees that stakeholder outreach could be improved. Updates are currently provided to the National Association of State Animal Health Officials (NASAHO) during the United States Animal Health Association/American Association of Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratories annual meeting, the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) through NIFA's annual update to its Research Committee, the American Association of Swine Veterinarians (AASV) during the AASV-NIFA annual research update, and to the American Veterinary Medical Association-Government Relations Division which in turn distributes relevant information to its membership. NIFA will actively work to engage stakeholder groups beyond these organizations (e.g., American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP), American College of Poultry Veterinarians (ACPV)), as well as the executive boards of these organizations at-large, and ask for assistance when recruiting peer review panelists and panel managers. Additionally, NIFA is developing a brochure that will be made available electronically and formatted for printing to veterinary schools and distributed at veterinary meetings to help raise awareness of the program.

*Stakeholder Diversity:* The program has been recognized for achieving excellent ethnic, gender, age and geographic diversity in the composition of its peer review panels. NIFA recognizes the importance of having private practitioners on the VMLRP peer panels given Congressional emphasis on filling private practice needs in shortage areas. However, veterinarians who are currently in private practice can be

difficult to recruit for panel service primarily due to the time commitment required to engage in panel activities and compensation (honorarium) that does not fully replace the income lost from time away from their business and clients. To reduce the burden on reviewers' time without diminishing the integrity of peer review, the program continues to look for ways to streamline the review process e.g., packaging items for review for each reviewer by their role. We hope that as our processes become more efficient, more private practitioners will be able to participate with minimal impact on their primary professional responsibilities.

In 2015, 14 out of 30 VMLRP panelists were private practitioners, representing a significant increase from approximately 5 when the program first started. Panelists from academia are usually involved in veterinary extension which includes direct interaction with local practitioners, livestock and poultry producers, and/or have a private practice background. Counting those panelists who may not be practicing at the time the panel meets, but were in private practice earlier in their career, NIFA has been able to ensure approximately 75% of VMLRP panelists have private practice experience. While we believe this provides sufficient private practice perspective to assure informed evaluation of applicants, NIFA will continue to work with panel managers to recruit private practitioners to serve as panelists. Further engagement with stakeholder groups should aid this process.

*Quality of Shortage Nominations:* NIFA recognizes that shortage nominations could be improved. To address this issue, a webinar was offered to SAHOs and other nominating officials for the fiscal year (FY) 2016 shortage nomination process. The webinar included a review of the nomination form and presentations by a past participant and panelist who provided their perspectives on the quality of shortage nominations. This webinar was well-received and NIFA plans to continue offering it each nomination period to facilitate the nomination process. Additionally, as part of our efforts to enhance stakeholder engagement, stakeholder groups will be encouraged to assist nominating officials in the identification of shortage situations and submission of nominations. However, it is the SAHO's responsibility to consider and balance input received from all different stakeholder groups when nominating shortages.

## **RECOMMENDATION #2 – Expanded Flexibility to Increase Placement of Highly Qualified Applicants and Filling Shortage Areas**

*“Create greater flexibility to fill critical shortages when more than one high quality applicant has applied to a shortage area.”*

NIFA acknowledges the potential benefits of affording applicants the opportunity to apply to more than one similar shortage location, but notes that this change would pose significant administrative challenges. Most notably, the total number of applications submitted to the program is expected increase significantly if applicants are allowed to apply to more than one shortage situation. NIFA plans to explore different mechanisms to accommodate greater numbers of applications—including triage of the least meritorious applications—while maintaining the integrity of the review process and balancing panel costs, panelist review burden and administrative time. After evaluating these mechanisms, NIFA will determine how best to proceed. Stakeholder feedback will also be sought on proposed changes.

To help ensure that unsuccessful applicants do not become discouraged from reapplying to the program, NIFA is exploring ways to improve the quality of reviewers' comments. In FY 2016 we will provide an informational webinar for panelists to explain the review process, clarify responsibilities and

expectations, and provide examples of constructive and not-so-constructive reviewer feedback. This webinar will be recorded to enable panelists that have a conflict to view at an alternate time. In the past this information has only been provided via email. We believe providing this information via webinar will be more effective and help more panelists provide helpful, constructive feedback that will encourage veterinarians to reapply to the program in subsequent years.

### **RECOMMENDATION #3 – Quality of Shortage Nominations**

*“Provide additional guidance and information to help SAHOs identify economically viable shortage situations and provide quality nominations that will attract applicants.”*

This recommendation was made with respect to shortage areas that have been nominated by SAHOs multiple times but remain unfilled. NIFA accepts the committee’s recommendation to avoid changing the selection criteria in order to address chronic shortage situations, and agrees that making the awardee selection process more transparent to SAHOs may help them improve the quality of their nominations. To this end, NIFA offered SAHOs and other nominating officials a webinar in FY 2016 that reviewed the application review process and offered perspectives from a past VMLRP participant and panelist. Each year some SAHOs serve as panelists and have the opportunity to evaluate several shortage nominations. (To avoid conflicts of interest, SAHOs do not review applications from their own state or adjacent states.) Additionally, all SAHOs were provided data describing the number of applicants and awards for each shortage area in FY 2015 to aid them during the FY 2016 nomination cycle. NIFA will explore ways to obtain SAHO feedback on how they designate shortage situations in order to identify best practices that can be shared with other SAHOs during the annual webinar, through participation in conference calls, or via our website.

### **RECOMMENDATION #4 – Allocation of Shortage Nominations**

*“We recommend that NIFA or another appropriate party constitute a neutral committee to review the shortage area formula.....The panel also suggests revisiting the allocation of shortages between public sector positions and the private sector.....”*

NIFA agrees that the annual process of allocating shortage situations should be revisited to ensure accurate description and identification of shortage areas. NIFA will consider establishing a neutral, external committee to review the current process and propose options for improving it. With respect to allocation of shortage areas between public vs. private sectors, NIFA will seek stakeholder input to determine whether increasing the proportion of funds available for public practice positions is advisable—especially in light of recent animal disease outbreaks like avian influenza in the Midwest—and whether such a change would be consistent with Congressional intent for the program to focus on private practice.

### **RECOMMENDATION #5 – Validity of the Selection Process**

*“Provide more detailed guidance to panelists on the goals of the VMLRP and how those goals should guide or influence the selection of Awardees to create greater consistency in selection criteria across panels.”*

Prior to each panel meeting, NIFA currently provides all panelists with documents outlining the intent of the program, the evaluation criteria, and samples of good and poor reviews. Despite receiving this

guidance ahead of time, NIFA recognizes that the interpretation and use of the materials sometimes varies among panelists during the panel meeting which may lead to inconsistency in the review and selection process. Starting in FY 2016, NIFA will host a mandatory webinar for all panelists shortly after they receive the review guidance documents to review the materials, expectations, and answer questions. NIFA also plans to develop a template that reviewers can use to help them organize the strengths and weaknesses of each component of the application. NIFA agrees with the panel's conclusion that the in-person meetings are the best format for VMLRP award panels and has no plans to replace these with virtual meetings. Not only does the face-to-face time enhance the quality of the discussions, it is required for logistic reasons because many of our panelists, particularly private practitioners located in rural areas, do not have sufficient internet connection speeds to support a three-day virtual panel meeting.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #6 – Quality of Applications**

*“Establish and communicate clearer expectations for applications from veterinarians for the purpose of improving the quality of applications.”*

NIFA agrees that effective and timely communication with applicants is key to improving the quality of applications. Using the two established mechanisms for communication – webinars and the VMLRP website – NIFA will incorporate the committee's recommended emphasis on a solid business plan, research of the shortage area, and identification of a mentor as essential components of a strong application. During the webinar for SAHOs (described above in the response to Recommendation #1), the previous participant and panelist both emphasized the important role that SAHOs play in the application process and can assist applicants they may be aware of improve their applications. Consistent with the panel's recommendation to enlist a broader range of stakeholders to advertise and promote the program, NIFA staff gave a presentation to the Academic Affairs Committee at the AAVMC annual meeting in March 2016. This presentation provided veterinary deans with information on the common shortfalls of VMLRP applications and ways in which veterinary schools can help applicants prepare strong applications. NIFA also gathered input from the deans at this meeting regarding possible strategies for providing veterinary schools with the specific information they need to promote the program. To directly engage with veterinary students and increase their awareness of VMLRP before graduation, NIFA will work with AVMA and other professional veterinary organizations to reach their student chapters (as well as their general membership) and offer to provide information on the program at their monthly/annual meetings or other events.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #7 – Alignment of the Award Cycle with Academic Year**

*“Revisit the timing of the veterinary application and selection process to coincide with the time of year when most veterinary graduates are searching for jobs and considering their options.”*

NIFA recognizes that the current award cycle, in which shortages are announced in April, does not match the academic cycle and is not optimal for new veterinary graduates who have often found jobs before application are due. The current application cycle is driven largely by the shortage nomination timeline which in turn is based on feedback from SAHOs. Due to other annual commitments, the earliest time when SAHOs can submit shortage nominations each year is February. Given the critical importance of identifying shortage areas, NIFA balances program requirements with SAHO's other commitments to allow them enough time to prepare high quality nominations. NIFA will explore the advantages and

disadvantages of changing the shortage nomination calendar. For example, the length of time a shortage area remains designated could be extended to two years (vs. one year). Alternatively, shortage area nominations and application review could be de-coupled so that designations in one FY could apply to the following year's application cycle.

**RECOMMENDATION #8 – Information Collection**

*“We support NIFA’s initiative to collect feedback from Awardees and other information to be able to understand the impact of the program on a longer-term basis.”*

NIFA appreciates support of current initiatives to collect feedback from current and past participants. NIFA will review the list of metrics suggested by the committee and explore options for obtaining these data to better assess and describe the outcomes and impacts of the program.

**RECOMMENDATION #9 – Monitoring and Accountability**

*“We support NIFA’s initiative to require that Awardees maintain a service log to improve NIFA’s monitoring capacity and increase the accountability of Awardees.....”*

NIFA appreciates support of the current initiative requiring participants to maintain a service log. As part of that initiative, NIFA has created a guidance document for participants that clarifies reporting requirements *e.g.*, the types of services they are expected to provide and how much drive time can be counted toward their total hours of service. To minimize the reporting burden, NIFA will provide an electronic template and explore the options of making it web-based using a drop-down list of services. NIFA is in the process of converting many of its information technology systems to a new platform. VMLRP program staff are hopeful that the service log, along with several other VMLRP reporting and record-keeping processes, will be incorporated into the new platform.

**SUMMARY**

NIFA greatly appreciates the work of the VMLRP external evaluation panel and finds their report both thoughtful and comprehensive. Many of the recommendations made by the panel are consistent with challenges already recognized by NIFA, while others provide novel insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the program from the unique perspective of our external stakeholders. Taken together, this input will be very valuable as NIFA continues its efforts to improve the administration, oversight, outcomes and impacts of this important program in the coming years.