

# Summary of Stakeholder Comments for Implementation of the Veterinary Services Grant Provision in the 2014 Farm Bill

## Background

The 2014 Farm Bill authorized creation of a new competitive grant program— the Veterinary Services Grant Program (VSGP). The purpose of this program is to relieve veterinarian shortage situations and support veterinary services. Grants are to be made available on a competitive basis to develop, implement, and sustain veterinary services through education, training, recruitment, placement, and retention of veterinarians and veterinary students, as well as establish or expand veterinary practices in rural veterinary shortage situations. Although the 2014 Farm Bill authorized \$10 million per year for VSGP, the 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act funded this program for the first time at \$2.5 million.

The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) held two web-based, public listening sessions (webinars) in February 2016 to gather stakeholder feedback regarding VSGP. Invitations to participate in these sessions were posted on the NIFA website, sent to appropriate NIFA stakeholder lists, and widely disseminated through associated stakeholder distribution channels. The invitation also provided instructions for submitting written comments regarding NIFA's implementation of this new program given limited appropriations and a condensed timeline for implementation. Slides from the webinar, which provided general information about the major goals of the program and invited input on several questions, were made available on the NIFA web site prior to the first session. The second webinar was recorded and posted at NIFA's VSGP website for any-time viewing by stakeholders who could not participate in the live virtual sessions.

NIFA's focus during the webinars was on two major areas: design of the "Education" and "Rural Practice Enhancement" (referred to as "equipment" during the webinars) objectives of the program and allocation of available funding between these components. At least seventy-one people participated in the listening sessions. Additionally, feedback on implementation was received via email through February 29, 2016.

## Questions Posed to Stakeholders

1. Of the \$2.5 million available for VSGP, how much should be devoted to the Education objective versus the Rural Practice Enhancement objective?
2. How should veterinary public health activities be defined?
3. What proportion of practice needs to be engaged in public health activities?
4. Given the expedited timeline and limited funding, how should NIFA prioritize the education projects? Should focus be on recruitment, continuing education, technical assistance, etc.; strengthening academic pipeline; emphasize projects for current practitioners (including veterinary technicians and other health professionals); or other?
5. Why types of equipment should be eligible under the Rural Practice Enhancement objective? Should any be excluded?
6. What are "reasonable" overhead costs and categories for the Rural Practice Enhancement objective?
7. What portion of the equipment grants should address education or extension needs?

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8. How long should Rural Practice Enhancement terms of service be relative to award amount?
9. What should the minimum award amount be for the Rural Practice Enhancement objective?
10. Should there be a minimum term of service regardless of award amount?

### Stakeholder feedback

Feedback was received during the listening sessions and via email from multiple individuals from private veterinary practice, universities, associations, and state and local governments. Additionally, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) provided a joint letter outlining their recommended priorities on behalf of their membership.

Major themes and recommendations extracted from the comments provided during the webinar or via email are as follows:

#### General Recommendations

- VMLRP awardees should be eligible for the Rural Practice Enhancement Grants, and their applications should be given preference to strengthen their commitment to continue serving their current shortage area.
- Recommended allocation of available funds between Education and Rural Practice Enhancement program objectives ranged from 10% for Education and 90% for Rural Practice Enhancement, to 90% for Education and 10% for Rural Practice Enhancement, with AVMA/AAVMC recommending a 50/50 split.
- Veterinary practice owners and individual veterinarians are not accustomed to the Federal grant process; this should be taken into consideration when developing the Request for Applications (RFA) and providing guidance for submitting application packages.
- Including a matching component would help solidify commitment of the applicant.
- Metrics for measuring outcomes should be included in any proposal.

#### Education Program Area Recommendations

- Priorities for the Education program area should include continuing education (CE) projects, projects that cover expenses for externships in shortage situations (*i.e.*, travel, lodging, education projects that address business and/or best practices for serving shortage situations), education projects that center on active disease surveillance and outbreak response (epidemiology), projects that cover expenses related to post-DVM training such as residencies and PhD programs.
- Recommended emphasis on projects that focus on group training versus individuals in order to have greater impact.
- Recommended emphasis on projects offered through multiple modalities *e.g.*, remote offerings for greater impact and reach.
- Suggested award sizes ranged from \$50k to \$250k.

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### Rural Practice Enhancement Program Area Recommendations

- Suggested award sizes ranged from \$5k to \$250k.
- Overhead funds should include salaries for staff as they enable veterinarians to provide more services.
- Veterinary public health activities include any activity for controlling livestock and wildlife diseases (to include zoonoses).
- Rural Practice Enhancement Funds should be competed/reviewed separately from Education/Extension funds in order to control for the disparity in grant writing skills and resources of the respective qualified entities.
- Equipment purchased should have direct impact on addressing the shortage situation.
- Terms of service should be approximately one year per \$25k awarded and roughly correlated with the value and time of use of the equipment.

### Next Steps

NIFA appreciates all of the feedback received from stakeholders concerning VSGP development and implementation. Stakeholder needs and opinions were carefully considered and, to the extent possible, are reflected in the FY 2016RFA. In situations where stakeholder feedback was unclear or there were conflicting views, NIFA attempted to balance stakeholder feedback with administrative efficiencies. In future funding cycles, NIFA will continue to reach out to stakeholders for feedback on the implementation of the program and identify shifting priorities as the program matures.