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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Testimony of Congressman Jack Kingston (GA01)
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Committee on Agriculture
United States House of Representatives
To
Review the National Veterinary Medical Service Act

Committee On Appropriations
Ranking Member, Agriculture Subcommittee
Defense Subcommittee

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Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the National Veterinary Medical Service Act, specifically the Veterinary Loan Repayment Program portion.

There are some that probably wonder why I am on the panel today so I wanted to take a minute to explain. As most of you know, I am the Ranking Member on the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. At the very least, I have a responsibility to make sure the money we appropriate for programs is being used for the purpose we intended. In addition, last year I got more involved with the veterinary community and I developed a working relationship with Dr. Shiela Allen, Dean of the University of Georgia's Veterinary School.

In most of our meetings, the discussion centered on the need for more veterinarians in rural or underserved areas. For me, the First District of Georgia, and the state as a whole, this translates to large animal or food animal veterinarians. Most people think livestock, but Georgia has one of the largest poultry populations in the U.S. In the past year I have heard more and more from the Georgia Cattlemen, the Georgia Poultry Federation and the Georgia Farm Bureau on the need to make finding a solution to the large animal veterinarian shortage a priority this year.

I think we are headed for a train wreck if we do not address the lack of veterinarians in rural areas and the lack of 'heir apparent' large animal/food animal veterinarians to take the place of soon-retiring veterinarians. There are about 85,000 veterinarians practicing today and of that number, 8,850 are food animal veterinarians – that's only 10 percent of veterinarians working in the food animal field. While this is obviously a commerce issue, with food animal production generating about \$124 billion annually to the U.S. economy, we also need to acknowledge that it is a national security issue as it relates to Agroterrorism. Food animal veterinarians act as our first line of defense against zoonotic (animal diseases that can spread to humans) diseases.

The 28 accredited Veterinary Schools in the U.S. are graduating around 2,600 students a year, which is a number that has stayed the same year after year since 1989. More alarmingly, only around 250 graduates are going into large animal practices. A Food Supply and Veterinary Medicine Coalition study concluded

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that between 2004 and 2016, demand for food supply veterinarians would increase 12 percent to 13 percent, but the supply of veterinarians entering the workforce would fall short of that demand by 4 percent to 5 percent per year. This trend is likely to continue as veterinary school graduates enter the workforce.

Population growth and increased ownership of companion animals, combined with the appeal of making more money in small animal practice, it is safe to assume that the trend of more veterinarian school graduates choosing companion animal practices in urban areas over large animal practice in rural and underserved areas will continue. Out of the 150 counties in Georgia, there are 42 counties that do not have access to large animal veterinary service. We need to ensure that a good percentage of veterinarians entering the industry can work in underserved areas and, most importantly the food animal field. That is why I am supportive of the loan repayment program and ready for it to be up and running!

I know from my conversations with the American Veterinary Medical Association and Dean Allen, that Colleges of Veterinary Medicine are emphasizing an interest in underserved areas in admission, and offering scholarships and other incentives to entice students into the field. For example, the UGA Veterinary School has instituted the Food Animal Veterinary Incentive Program whereby high school students from rural areas with a strong background in food animals are guaranteed admission to veterinary school after satisfactory completion of an undergraduate degree in Animal and Dairy Science at the University of Georgia.

The cost to the student for attaining a veterinary degree in the United States ranges from \$37,000 to \$55,000 per year for tuition, books, and living expenses. This results in an average educational debt load for a veterinary graduate of \$100,000. Unfortunately, many of the underserved areas of the veterinary profession are some of the lowest paying positions. As a result, few graduates can afford to enter these fields, no matter how strong the motivation.

A case in point is in place at the University of Georgia at the moment. Dean Allen told me they accepted an applicant who had a Masters of Public Health degree and was working at the CDC before he entered veterinary school. He intended to return to a public health career, working on diseases that are transmissible from animals to people. He is entering his final year of the DVM program, and despite his continued interest in public health, he is now considering a career as a specialist in small animal surgery. When he learned about the loan repayment program and the NVMSA, he said: "I thought perhaps I'd take this opportunity to remind you how important this topic is to students. I have to admit that a big reason I look more favorably on small animal surgery and private practice is simply I'll never be able to pay my crushing educational debt while working in public health."

I cannot state it more clearly that the NVMSA will provide the opportunity for students to enter underserved careers, yet still serve their educational debt. The veterinary colleges can admit the students with this interest, and nurture that interest while in school; but they cannot compensate for the economic reality of debt load. With the loan repayment provided by the NVMSA, graduates can afford to enter underserved career paths.

The NVMSA was enacted in 2003, and has received appropriated funds the last three fiscal years for the loan repayment program. We have provided approximately \$1.875 MILLION and USDA has yet to write the rule on it. The Congressional Budget Office scored the first year of the program to cost around \$1 Million. In FY2006 we gave the program \$500,000.00. In FY2007 it received \$500,000.00, and in the

recently passed FY2008 Omnibus it received \$875,000. I think the Appropriations Committee will continue to give this program consideration, but I want to know when it will be functional. We will think long and hard before we put any more money into it without seeing any movement from USDA.

The excuse we have been hearing is that USDA does not know how to write a rule for a loan repayment program. I think there is plenty of expertise within USDA to assist in this rule-making process, but there is certainly help over at the Department of Health and Human Services where they are currently administering a rural nurse loan repayment program, which the NVMSA loan repayment program was based on. How hard would it be to collaborate?

I and several other members have had a meeting with USDA's Research, Education and Economics (REE) Undersecretary Buchannan and have had several conversations since then – it's time for action. Since the initial meeting on the loan repayment program, REE has suggested a scholarship program as an alternative to the loan repayment program. I think developing a scholarship program for veterinarians who will serve in the food animal profession in rural and underserved areas in tandem with a loan repayment program would be a better suggestion. Our veterinarians are the ones that know what would work best to get food animal practitioners in needed areas, and they believe the loan repayment program is the solution so I think this is what we need to focus on.

Now is the time to hear what the holdup is and what else might be needed in the way of authorizing language that would make the program easier to develop, implement and administer.

I am here to talk about the money. We have put in over \$1.8 Million to start the program but we have not seen any movement except for rumors of some of the funds being transferred to a preexisting federal loan repayment program, which I am very much opposed to. Included in the FY2008 Omnibus bill was language directing USDA to come up with a timeline and implementation plan – I believe within 120 days. There is also language in the Senate version of the farm bill that asks for the same thing of USDA in addition to requesting an emphasis be placed on food animal veterinarians.

As a witness today I cannot question the other witnesses, but putting on my Appropriations cap for a minute, I am looking for answers to several questions:

- It is my understanding that a working group was established to guide this program – what is the makeup of this group and what have they done (if anything) thus far? Has REE even met with the group?
- If there is a problem – either in authority to write and administer the program or in funding – why haven't we heard what USDA needs? All I have heard is that "we can't do it" – well, why not? What is needed?
- How much of the previously appropriated funds have been spent on something else? What program were they spent on?

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I will be happy to answer any questions.