

Large Animal Veterinarian Workforce Shortage in Washington State

**An Interim Report Prepared for the Washington State Legislature
Committee on Post Secondary Education and Workforce**



WSU EXTENSION

**Division of Governmental
Studies and Services**

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Studies and Services**

DGSS Project Team

Christina Sanders, M.P.A.

Director, Division of Governmental Studies and Services

Season Hoard, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Division of Governmental Studies and Services

School of Politics, Philosophy and Public Affairs

Travis Franklin, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Division of Governmental Studies and Services

Daniel Mueller, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Division of Governmental Studies and Services

Graduate and Undergraduate Student Team

Nur Afsa Syeda, School of Electrical Engineering & Computer Science

Joseph Akowuah, School of Politics, Philosophy, & Public Affairs

Nathaniel Bailey, School of Politics, Philosophy, & Public Affairs

Report Prepared By:

Travis Franklin, Ph.D.

Daniel Mueller, Ph.D.

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About the Division of Governmental Studies and Services

The Division of Governmental Studies and Services (DGSS) is a social science research and outreach unit housed in Washington State University (WSU) Extension within the College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences (CAHNRS). DGSS has served Washington State University's land grant mission of research, outreach, and education in Washington State and across the Pacific Northwest for over 60 years. Through this engagement, DGSS has developed a reputation for robust applied research and serves as an important link that leverages the University's resources for public benefit through applied social science research, technical assistance, and training for government and non-government organizations. DGSS engages both undergraduate and graduate students in applied research projects whenever possible. Students provide cutting edge insight and are able to apply theoretical classroom learning to provide a critical service to DGSS partners.

About the Work Group

Engrossed House Bill 1705 indicates that DGSS shall convene a work group to study and recommend strategies to recruit, train, and retain large animal veterinarians in Washington. The legislation also directs DGSS to secure at least one member from each of the organizations or interest areas as listed below:

- a) The director of the department of agriculture, or the director's designee;
 - b) The secretary of the department of health, or the secretary's designee;
 - c) The dean of Washington State University college of veterinary medicine, or the dean's designee;
 - d) The Washington state veterinarian, or the veterinarian's designee;
 - e) One representative from an organization representing veterinarians;
 - f) One representative from an organization representing farmers and ranchers;
 - g) One representative from an organization representing livestock producers;
 - h) One adult leader representing a national youth development program that includes experiential learning in agriculture and large animal husbandry;
 - i) The director of equity of the department of agriculture, or the director's designee; and
 - j) One representative from a historically marginalized community, such as a member of an organization that promotes the agricultural sciences and related fields in a positive manner among communities that have been historically underrepresented or marginalized.
- (EHB 1705, 2025)

As a result, the DGSS research team assembled a work group composed of 14 individuals. The following list identifies these individuals, with a letter after each member's name corresponding to the work group positions listed above:

Member	Position	Organization
Dori Borjesson, DVM, Ph.D. ^c	Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine	Washington State University
Poppy Budrow ^b	Program Manager of the Veterinary Board of Governors	Washington State Department of Health
Patrick Capper ^a	Deputy Director	Washington State Department of Agriculture
Bridget Coon ^f	First Vice President	Washington Farm Bureau
Amber Freeberg ^b	Executive Director of the Veterinary Board of Governors	Washington State Department of Health
Eddie Haigh, DVM ^e	Immediate Past President	Washington State Veterinary Medical Association
Bruce Hutton ^d	Field Veterinarian	Washington State Department of Agriculture
Miguel Inzunza ⁱ	Director of Student Recruitment and Retention, College of Agriculture, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences	Washington State University
Amber Itle ^d	State Veterinarian	Washington State Department of Agriculture
Nicole Johnson ⁱ	Director of Equity and Environmental Justice	Washington State Department of Agriculture
Caitlin Kline ^h	Veterinary Science CDE Co-Coordinator	Washington FFA
Paul Kuber ^h	State 4-H Agri-Science Specialist	Washington State University Extension
Fred Muller ^g	Veterinarian	Washington Cattlemen's Association
Ben Smith ^d	Assistant State Veterinarian	Washington State Department of Agriculture

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SUMMARY OF PROGRESS

This interim report represents the work of the Large Animal Veterinarian Workforce Shortage Study Work Group—established pursuant to Engrossed House Bill 1705—convened by Washington State University’s (WSU) Division of Governmental Studies and Services (DGSS). The work group was first convened on September 8th and has met bi-weekly for a total of six meetings to date. In addition, DGSS has 1) conducted an initial analysis of legislation passed by other states to address similar large animal veterinarian shortages; 2) examined strategies adopted by more than 30 Doctorate of Veterinarian Medicine (DVM) programs across the country; and 3) begun examining data on DVM students enrolled at Washington State University.

To date, the work group has identified preliminary factors they believe have contributed to the shortage of large animal veterinarians in Washington, especially in rural regions of the state. Collectively, these contributing factors appear to operate within four primary domains:

1. The pipeline of Washington’s prospective DVM students
2. The veterinary school experience
3. The transition from veterinary school to rural/large animal veterinary practice
4. Sustaining successful rural/large animal practices

While this report summarizes the initial position of the work group on numerous contributing factors to Washington’s rural and large animal veterinarian shortage (described in detail later in this report), the work group members continue to explore the veracity of each factor, and to further examine additional factors, as they work toward June 30, 2025, when the final report will be submitted to the committee on Post Secondary Education and Workforce.

With a series of contributing factors identified, the work group has transitioned to identifying targeted solutions to address the potential causes of the shortage that fall within each of the four domains above. This will be achieved within the context of continued bi-weekly meetings where work group members and invited experts will weigh in on solutions. In addition, the WSU research team will contextualize proposed solutions within existing research where relevant; analyze existing data on students enrolled in WSU’s DVM program; survey WSU’s DVM students to learn more about their backgrounds and career preferences; and work to identify the specific municipalities/counties of Washington that are most in need of additional rural and large animal veterinarians.

INTRODUCTION

Nature of the Problem

The large animal veterinarian shortage – particularly acute in rural areas – has been a growing national and international problem for decades. While data in this field can be challenging to track, owing to the lack of standardized metrics for workforce size and variation in naming conventions for the occupation (large animal veterinarians are often also referred to as “food animal”, “rural”, or “livestock” veterinarians), it is estimated that the total number of large animal veterinarians across the United States has dropped by 90% since the 1940s, even as the number of livestock has risen starkly in the same time (Weltzien, 2023). Research in France, the UK, and Australia, among other countries, demonstrates the global nature of this trend (Berrada et al., 2024; Hagen et al., 2020; Thio et al., 2025). This dramatic decline has many drivers

that have evolved over the decades, but Weltzien (2023) identifies six primary recent drivers of the shortage in the US:

1. Significant student loan debt that compels many new veterinarians to leave or altogether avoid large animal care to pursue higher-paying companion animal care, often in urban areas;
2. A gradually aging large animal workforce that results in retirements outpacing new entries to the field;
3. A growing gender disparity, where women make up the bulk of applicants to, and graduates from, veterinary schools, even while men remain the significant majority of large animal veterinarians;
4. Lack of racial diversity in the field of large animal care, resulting in white veterinarians making up more than 90% of the workforce;
5. Unfamiliarity among recent veterinary school graduates with livestock, often due to a shifting focus within schools to companion animal care and limited budgets to support direct exposure to livestock;
6. Significant mental health risks attributable to compassion fatigue, burnout, economic strain, and isolation, which have resulted in a suicide rate among veterinarians that is 3.5 times higher for female veterinarians than the population average and 2.1 times higher for male veterinarians than the population average.

As a result of these factors, 2025 saw the largest shortage of rural veterinarians in the US, with the USDA declaring 243 rural veterinary shortage areas in 46 states (Larkin, 2025). Washington State accounts for six of those shortage areas, including Whatcom, Stevens, Grant, Klickitat, Whitman, and Asotin Counties (NIFA, 2025). Given the scope of the problem, the federal government and many state governments have been actively developing policy responses, consisting of national and state loan repayment programs, training grants, facilities loans and grants, scholarship programs, and work group studies (NCSL, 2025).

Despite this response, Washington is among a small collection of state governments that has not produced robust policy to address the large animal veterinarian shortage in the state. The work group created by EHB 1705 notwithstanding, there have been few efforts in Washington State to develop the kinds of programs listed here. In 2008, the state enacted SB 6187 to fund a limited scholarship program for Washington State University's veterinary program, identifying in the legislation the existence of a "critical shortage of food animal veterinarians particularly in rural areas of the state" driven by "an extensive and high-cost education" that pushes new graduates to work with "companion and small animals" (SB 6187, 2008). The scholarship program was never funded, and the same shortage and state drivers identified 17 years ago are now noted in EHB 1705.

Moreover, Washington State hosted the Pacific Northwest's only veterinary program at Washington State University, until Oregon State University (OSU) created their own in 1979 (OSU, 2024). Even so, OSU veterinary students had to spend part of their training in WSU's program until 2003, when OSU began its full four-year program (WSU, 2022). The withdrawal of Oregon students left WSU's veterinary program facing a \$2.4 million budgetary shortfall, which was addressed by the state government in 2003 with an expansion of available seats in the program (WSU, 2022). The Washington State Veterinary Medical Association (WSVMA) points out that 2003 was the last year the state legislature approved an expansion of seats for WSU's veterinary program, which has left it unable to admit more Washington residents to help address the state's large animal veterinary shortage (WSVMA, 2024). With the creation of a new veterinary program at Utah State University that began in August 2025, WSU's College of Veterinary Medicine faces another potential revenue shortfall as it loses students from Utah who pay higher out-of-

state tuition, but also a new opportunity to expand program seats to Washington students to help address the state shortage.

Like most of the country, Washington State has long faced a large animal veterinary shortage that has only grown with time. This shortage threatens food security and animal welfare in the state and places ever more mental, physical, and economic strain on Washington's large animal veterinarians. While the state in recent decades has lacked a robust policy response to these challenges, EHB 1705 represents a renewed interest in addressing Washington's shortage. The section below describes the legislation authorizing this work group and the goals it seeks to achieve, which include not only identifying the drivers of the shortage in Washington State, but providing actionable solutions to address it.

Legislative Authorization and Requirements for the Current Study

Engrossed House Bill 1705 was passed to address the growing shortage of large animal veterinarians in the state, particularly in rural areas. Noting that this shortage negatively impacts animal welfare, disease prevention, and public health, the legislation goes on to emphasize three major exacerbating factors of the shortage:

1. First, Washington's agriculture economy and agricultural communities are under enormous strain, and this deters medical professionals from choosing a future connected to the industry.
2. Second, the state population has grown by nearly 2,000,000 people over the last 20 years but has not increased in-state class sizes at the state's college of veterinary medicine in the same time period.
3. Third, many large animal veterinarians have left the field due to long hours, unpredictable schedules, and higher wages available for small animal care.
(EHB 1705, 2025)

The legislation additionally identifies specific sources of agricultural strain in the state, pointing out that "labor expenses per farming operation in Washington were 462 percent higher than the national average", that "Washington is currently losing, on average, two farms per day", and that increased production costs that cannot be matched by increased prices of goods has led to enormous economic pressures impacting the mental health of agricultural workers, sending the suicide rate for these workers to "nearly 25 percent higher than the overall state rate" (EHB 1705, 2025).

As a result, EHB 1705 directs Washington State University's Division of Governmental Studies and Services to convene a work group "to study and recommend strategies to recruit, train, and retain large animal veterinarians in Washington," with a final report containing these recommendations due to the relevant legislative committees by June 30, 2026 (EHB 1705, 2025). As noted earlier, the legislation requires the work group to consist of at least ten members, defined below:

- a) The director of the department of agriculture, or the director's designee;
- b) The secretary of the department of health, or the secretary's designee;
- c) The dean of Washington State University college of veterinary medicine, or the dean's designee;
- d) The Washington state veterinarian, or the veterinarian's designee;
- e) One representative from an organization representing veterinarians;
- f) One representative from an organization representing farmers and ranchers;
- g) One representative from an organization representing livestock producers;

- h) One adult leader representing a national youth development program that includes experiential learning in agriculture and large animal husbandry;
 - i) The director of equity of the department of agriculture, or the director's designee; and
 - j) One representative from a historically marginalized community, such as a member of an organization that promotes the agricultural sciences and related fields in a positive manner among communities that have been historically underrepresented or marginalized.
- (EHB 1705, 2025)

Purpose and Organization of this Interim Report

This interim report aims to provide the legislature with an update on both the tasks already completed by the work group and DGSS and the intended trajectory of the group over the course of the next six months as it pursues the goal of “[studying] and [recommending] strategies to recruit, train, and retain large animal veterinarians in Washington” (EHB 1705, 2025).

This report is organized as follows:

1. First, a review of state laws addressing large animal veterinarian shortages across the country is presented. This section describes the recent policy efforts of several state governments and identifies common themes.
2. Second, an overview of efforts taken by universities housing DVM programs to encourage, promote, and support their students to become large animal veterinarians is provided.
3. Third, the various causes of the large animal veterinarian shortage in Washington are described as identified by work group members over the course of the last six meetings.
4. Fourth, the trajectory of the work group over the next several months is laid out, describing how the work group will develop solutions to the shortage and recommendations for the legislature in each of the four domains identified earlier.

EFFORTS BY STATES AND UNIVERSITIES TO ADDRESS LARGE ANIMAL VETERINARIAN SHORTAGES

As noted earlier, the shortage of large animal veterinarians has been intensifying for several decades, which has given state governments and universities with veterinary medicine programs ample opportunity to develop a variety of responses to address the shortages. The following two sections summarize these efforts, providing an overview of state legislation passed this century broken down by policy type and a sampling of programs from select universities and their veterinary medicine programs targeted at students with a large animal focus. While the examples provided in both sections are not exhaustive, they provide a robust representation of recent and current efforts around the country to address large animal veterinary shortages and could serve as models for recommended action in Washington State. As the work group continues its efforts to investigate solutions to the challenges unique to Washington, a more complete compilation of state laws and university efforts will be assembled.

State Efforts

The shortage of large/food animal veterinarians has been a long-standing concern for many states across the country, and consequently, there have been various legislative efforts to help alleviate shortages. Many of these efforts were spurred by the passage of the National Veterinary Medical Services Act of

2003, which authorized the first federal loan repayment program for veterinarians who agreed to serve in designated shortage areas. The resulting Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) began providing its first awards in 2010, providing up to \$25,000 (and currently \$40,000) per year (for a maximum of three years) of loan repayment for veterinarians who committed to at least three years of service in one of these designated shortage areas. The VMLRP was a response to the understanding that the high cost of veterinary education coupled with lower salaries available in the area of large animal practice (relative to small/companion animal practice) was contributing to shortages nationwide.

As shown in Table 1, at least 24 states have passed legislation to enact their own student loan repayment programs, sometimes with greater flexibility and/or award amounts than the federal VMLRP. For example, Texas stands out for offering up to \$45,000 per year (\$180,000 total), for up to four years of service in dedicated rural counties to cover the costs of tuition, fees, and educational loans. Likewise, Kansas stands out through their use of forgivable loans (\$25,000 per year) that are awarded to veterinary students who intend to practice in rural areas of the state. Kansas' strategy assures prospective large animal veterinary students of loan repayment, which may offer a stronger incentive than alternative strategies, such as that adopted by the VMLRP, where new veterinarians must first begin work in qualifying rural areas and then seek loan forgiveness through competitive awards they may or may not receive.

Table 1: State Legislation Passed to Address Large Animal Veterinarian Shortages (2000 - Present)

State	Legislative Strategy					
	Vet Med Scholarships	Student Loan Repayment	Grants for Facilities & Equipment	New or Expanded DVM Programs	Secure Access to Out-of-State DVM Programs	Work Group to Study Shortages & Solutions
AR	X	X				
AZ		X				
CO		X		X		
CT				X		
GA		X				
HI						X
IA		X				
ID					X	
KS		X				
KY		X		X		
LA		X				
MD			X			
ME		X				
MN		X				
MO		X				
MS	X					
NB		X				
ND		X				
NH		X				
NJ		X				
NM		X				
NC		X	X			
OH		X				
OK	X	X				
TX		X				
UT		X		X		
VA		X	X			X
VT		X				
WA	X					X
WI		X				

While student loan repayment is clearly the primary method adopted by state legislatures to address rural and large animal veterinary medicine shortages, a small number of states have adopted other strategies as well. For example, Arizona, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Washington passed legislation to provide scholarships to students who commit to working in designated shortage areas. In addition, a few states have established grant programs to provide large animal veterinarians with funds to acquire new equipment and or facilities for their practices, while others have focused on expanding their state’s Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) programs, securing access to neighboring state’s DVM programs, and further studying their shortages through the establishment of work groups.

It is important to note, however, that not all efforts taken by states have been sufficiently funded. Washington stands out as an example, where Senate Bill 6187 was passed during the 2007-2008 legislative session to establish the Food Animal Veterinarian Conditional Scholarship Program. Although SB 6187 found a “critical shortage of food animal veterinarians particularly in rural areas of the state,” the scholarship program did not receive appropriations from the legislature, and to date, no students have been awarded the conditional scholarships.

It is also important to note that Table 1 presents only the findings from state legislation passed to address the large animal veterinarian shortages across states. This does not reflect non-legislative efforts adopted by DVM programs, various state agencies, and private entities who have sought solutions to these shortages. The WSU research team is currently working to capture a complete picture of these efforts, many of which include privately funded scholarships, expanded DVM programs, directed recruitment efforts, and partnerships with neighboring states for additional access to veterinary education. These non-legislative efforts will be detailed in the final report provided to the legislature on June 30, 2026.

University Efforts

There are currently 33 accredited veterinary schools in the United States, mostly concentrated in the eastern half of the country. Seating in these programs is limited, which results in high competition for admission. While most schools reserve at least some proportion of their seats for students from their respective states, many schools have agreements to take on specific numbers of students from neighboring states that lack veterinary schools. As the need for large animal veterinarians grows, however, several of the states without veterinary schools are considering starting their own programs, which could result in the number of accredited schools increasing in the near future.

Table 2: Efforts to Address Large Animal Veterinary Shortages at Select Schools of Veterinary Medicine

State	University	Efforts Addressing Shortages				
		Early Admissions	Targeted Recruitment	Rural/Large Animal Programs	Funding	Other
Colorado	Colorado State University			X		
Georgia	University of Georgia		X	X	X	X
Illinois	University of Illinois	X				
Indiana	Purdue University		X	X		X
Iowa	Iowa State University	X		X		
Kansas	Kansas State University	X		X	X	X
Minnesota	University of Minnesota	X	X	X		
Missouri	University of Missouri	X				X
Oklahoma	Oklahoma State University	X	X	X		X
Wisconsin	University of Wisconsin - Madison			X		

Given the number of veterinary schools across the country, a variety of programs have been implemented to address the shortage of large animal veterinarians. These efforts include early admission programs, targeted recruitment efforts, specific programs tailored to bringing students into large animal care, funding opportunities to limit debt accrual, and other unique efforts to reinforce the pipeline of students into rural areas and large animal practices. A select list of veterinary schools and their approaches to addressing large animal veterinary shortages is provided in Table 2.

These efforts include, but are not limited to, programs like the University of Minnesota's VetCamp, which serves as a career education program for middle and high school students to develop an early interest in veterinary medicine; Kansas State University's Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas (VTPRK), which creates a cohort of students that receive financial assistance and placement in rural counties with low population or existing veterinarian shortages; Oklahoma State University's early admission program that guarantees undergraduate students admission to veterinary school while certain academic conditions are met; Purdue University's high school camps that can include scholarships or other financial assistance to help funnel students into a veterinary career; vet tech degree programs like the Bachelor's program at the University of Missouri; and large animal programs to provide vet students with direct experience, including Kansas State's Beef Cattle Institute and Oklahoma State's Integrated Beef Cattle Program.

The various efforts described above are not exhaustive but serve as a sample of the kinds of programs universities and veterinary programs specifically have adopted to increase interest in large animal veterinary careers and ensure stable placement of new graduates into positions and rural areas of states where large animal veterinarians are needed most. As the work group continues to explore these efforts, several may serve as models for programs that can be adopted by Washington State University's College of Veterinary Medicine to generate greater interest in large animal care among Washington students and target career placement to shortage areas in the state.

FACTORS LEADING TO WASHINGTON'S LARGE ANIMAL VETERINARIAN SHORTAGE

During the first five bi-weekly meetings held by Washington's Large Animal Veterinarian Workforce Shortage Study Work Group, a series of preliminary factors associated with Washington's shortage were identified. The WSU research team organized these factors into four domains, to include 1) the pipeline of Washington's prospective DVM students, 2) the veterinary school experience of students enrolled in WSU's DVM program, 3) the transition from veterinary school to large animal and rural veterinary practice, and 4) the sustainment of successful rural and large animal practices in the long term. Each of these four domains is described in more detail below, along with the relevant factors associated with Washington's shortage of rural and large animal veterinarians.

The Pipeline of Washington's Prospective DVM Students

The pipeline of Washington's prospective Doctor of Veterinary Medicine students represents the source of Washington's future veterinarians, of whom only some may select to work in rural communities and with large animals connected to the food industry. The majority of future veterinarians choose to work in larger communities and often only with companion animals. As a result, understanding the composition of Washington's pipeline of prospective DVM students and cultivating a healthy interest in work with large animals and in rural communities may be critical.

Work group members have initially identified at least three factors pertaining to the pipeline of Washington's prospective DVM students that may be contributing to the shortfall of rural and large animal veterinarians across the state:

1. The current pipeline of prospective students is showing reduced interest in working with large animals.
2. The DVM program at Washington State University has limited resources which, in turn, generates challenges for creating additional seats in the program for in-state students versus out-of-state students (who pay higher tuition).
3. Historically, large animal and rural veterinarians have been disproportionately white and male, while current interest in veterinary practice has undergone a significant shift to being disproportionately female.

The Veterinary School Experience

The experiences of DVM students during their time in veterinary school may be integral for their ultimate career placement. For example, the extent to which veterinary students gain exposure to, and experience with, large animals was identified by the work group as a potential contributing factor to Washington's shortage. Put more directly, the work group indicated that new veterinarians often lack familiarity with large animals and often do not feel comfortable working with them. This may be compounded by the need for practicing alone when operating in a rural setting where many large animals reside.

In addition, it was also noted that such experiences are limited in part due to inadequate resources available to Washington State University's DVM program.

The Transition from Veterinary School to Rural/Large Animal Veterinary Practice

Once DVM students complete their educational experience at Washington State University, there are several challenges that may inhibit successful transition to a rural or large animal practice. The work group identified a series of factors that may act as roadblocks or hindrances to a successful transition. These include, at minimum, the following factors:

1. New veterinarians are typically faced with substantial student loan debt upon graduation, and rural and large animal veterinary practices typically yield substantially less income as compared to non-rural practices that focus on companion animals.
2. New veterinarians typically prefer not to practice alone when they begin their careers, which is more typical of large animal practice as compared to companion animal practice.
3. Large animal veterinarian culture may be a detractor for new veterinarians, where expectations surrounding work-life balance have undergone generational shifts.
4. Existing rural veterinary practices often lack resources for modern equipment and facilities to attract newly graduated veterinarians.
5. Rural and large animal veterinary practice, which has been historically dominated by male veterinarians, is not always welcoming to women, who currently constitute a large majority of veterinary students. Likewise, rural and large animal veterinary practice is largely white, which can result in challenges for veterinarians of color.

Sustaining Successful Rural/Large Animal Practices

Even when DVM students are successfully transitioned into Washington's rural and large animal veterinary practices, they often face considerable challenges that prevent them from remaining in these positions for the long term. Rather, many rural and large animal veterinarians relocate to larger metropolitan areas and/or transition to working primarily or exclusively with companion animals. The reasons for making such career changes are linked to numerous factors identified by the work group, to include the following:

1. On-the-job conditions for large animal veterinarians practicing in rural areas often involve considerable travel from farm to farm, long work hours, the requirement to remain on call around the clock, physically demanding labor, loneliness, and the stress of managing a rural practice. These conditions often prevent the work-life balance expected by newer generations of veterinarians.
2. Rural practices in Washington could face potential competition from large scale telemedicine practices which may operate outside Washington State, sometimes in ways that violate existing WACs.
3. There is no universal, successful model in place for integration of veterinary technicians into rural and large animal practices to help balance demanding workloads.
4. Rural communities often lack professional work opportunities for veterinarians' spouses/partners, creating challenges for long term veterinary careers in rural areas.

NEXT STEPS

Planned Activities

Leading up to June 30, 2026, when a final report is due to appropriate legislative committees, the work group and the DGSS research team will engage in the following activities:

1. Bi-weekly meetings dedicated to identifying and prioritizing solutions to each of the causes of Washington's large animal veterinarian shortage as identified in this interim report
2. Consultation with experts outside of the work group as needed, to include those working with Washington's 4-H Youth Development Program, Washington's Future Farmers of America, and other relevant organizations
3. Survey of WSU's DVM students to learn more about their backgrounds, career preferences, and perceptions of large animal veterinary practice
4. Data analysis examining the characteristics of WSU's enrolled DVM students
5. GIS mapping of Washington's veterinarians practicing in rural regions of the state

Planned Deliverables

Upon completion of the activities noted above, the DGSS research team will produce the following deliverables:

1. Meeting summaries for all bi-weekly meetings held by the work group
2. A final report containing, at minimum:
 - a. a detailed description of Washington's large animal veterinarian shortage,
 - b. a comprehensive review of research that has examined large animal veterinarian shortages in other states,
 - c. a review of state and federal legislation that has attempted to redress shortages,

- d. a review of strategies adopted by DVM programs around the nation to increase the number of large animal veterinarians,
- e. findings from analyses of WSU's DVM students,
- f. and recommendations for addressing the identified causes of Washington's shortage, ranked by priority

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