

Concern for food safety as vet students pick pets over farms

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Dr. Stuart Hall of the Lone Oak Large Animal Veterinary Services prepares a vaccine for pregnant cows at Homestead Dairy in Visalia, Calif.
By Olivia Munoz for The Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. — The number of veterinarians who work with farm animals is on the decline as many retire and fewer students choose large-animal practice.

Officials are worried about the impact on food safety, because large-animal veterinarians serve as inspectors at ranches and slaughterhouses.

"They're basically on the front line when it comes to maintaining a safe food supply, not only in the U.S., but in products we export. Vets diagnose diseases that can be transferred from animals to humans," says David Kirkpatrick, spokesman for the American Veterinary Medical Association.

A recent survey by the association found that only 2% of veterinary school students in 2010 graduating classes said they plan to work mostly with large, non-pet animals. Another 7% studied a mixed curriculum that included all types of animals, but the majority of those respondents lean toward pet care.

"We have known for years anecdotally that vets were having a difficult time finding people to work at their practice or selling it when they retire," Kirkpatrick said.

"But now we know how big the problem is and how that will magnify over the years," he said.

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From 1998 to 2009, the number of small animal vets climbed to 47,118 from 30,255, while the number of farm-animal vets dropped to 5,040 from 5,553. And the AVMA found that large-animal vets often earn a lower salary: an average of \$57,745 compared with \$64,744 for small-animal vets, according to a 2008 survey.

The large-animal vet world is graying — half of farm-animal vets are older than 50, and only 4.4% are younger than 30. About a third of veterinarians working at the federal level are eligible to retire in the next three years, according to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#).

At least six rural counties in California have just one large-animal veterinarian.

Stuart Hall, 28, a veterinarian in Visalia, Calif., said a single call can tie him up for four hours — time in which he can't respond to emergencies.

"My worry is always that a farmer is going to try to take care of something themselves," he said.

Hall was born in rural England and educated in London before his interest in working with cows brought him to Tulare County, the nation's largest dairy producer, five years ago. He and his wife have a blog detailing his life as a farm vet.

"I just really like cows. They're big, old gentle things," he says.

Hall likes working outdoors, the drives through the country and the impact his expertise can have on food operations, he says.

But for pre-vet student Justeen Borrecco the decision to pursue a career in pet medicine was easy. She has been shoved, bruised and knocked down by the sheep she feeds every day as a student worker at the on-campus farm at California State University, Fresno.

"This is why I want to work with dogs and kitties. I don't want to deal with anything bigger than me," the 19-year-old said.

On Thursday she pulled on her farm boots, picked up bundles of hay and maneuvered her 130-pound frame around to feed dozens of ewes and lambs.

"But it's still good experience. Anything I learn or help with, like vaccines or bandaging, can apply to other animals," Borrecco said. The sophomore from Hanford, Calif., said it's important to get as much hands-on time with animals before applying to vet school.

Several schools and states have tried to lure students to large-animal veterinary medicine.

At the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine, applicants interested in becoming farm-animal vets have an admissions edge. The university has slowly boosted the

number of students interested in large-animal medicine to 11 of 127, double the number from four years ago. The vet school has also reached out to high schools in rural areas.

More than a dozen states, from Washington to Georgia, offer some type of loan repayment program or other incentives if students pledge to work in a region in need of large-animal vets. Vet students typically finish school with about \$134,000 in debt, according to the AVMA.

Iowa State's VSMART program allows students focused on farm animals to reduce by a year the amount of time it takes to get a veterinary medicine degree — a big deal when you're talking about spending upward of \$32,000 a year, Kirkpatrick said.

Federal legislators have introduced several bills to help increase the number of farm animal vets, including the Veterinary Services Investment Act, which is aimed at recruitment, helping vets expand their practices and providing financial assistance for students. The bill passed the House in September and is awaiting approval in the Senate.

The students who have chosen to work with large animals are committed to their choice.

Elizabeth Adam, 26, of Santa Maria, Calif., earned a degree in English and business at [Loyola Marymount University](#), and later worked as a consultant at a law firm — but really dreamed of being a farm doctor.

"I was making good money but was miserable," she said.

Adam is now in her second year at Fresno State's pre-vet program.

"This is for me," she said. "The outdoors and the late night emergency calls and the country — I'm ready for all of that."

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