

VETERINARIAN EDUCATION LOAN REPAYMENT PROGRAM – HB184

For many years, farmers have endured a shortage of rural veterinarians – the kind who specialize in care for animals like cows, pigs and sheep. But the problem is now at an all-time high – with 24 counties across the state meeting the federal standard for veterinary care shortages, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The shortage is mirrored by a growth in the number of veterinarians that Americans are much more familiar with – those who take care of the family pet. Since at least the early 2000s, more veterinarians have chosen the better pay and more reasonable work hours that go with a practice that focuses primarily or exclusively on what are known as "companion" animals. With the COVID-19 pandemic-driven spike in demand and salaries for companion animal veterinarians have increased rapidly, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

But while business is mostly booming for our veterinarians along the Wasatch Front the implications of this veterinarian shortfall in rural areas go beyond the farm. Farmers and the AVMA warn that without enough vets on the rural front line, the food supply chain is vulnerable to diseases such as foot and mouth and swine flu.

Food-animal veterinarians are a front-line defense in the surveillance, prevention, treatment, and control of animal diseases, Veterinarians help to protect the health and welfare of animals that produce eggs, milk, meat, wool, and other protein and fiber products and most of these operations in Utah are located in rural areas.

Veterinarians spend four years in vet school after completing an undergraduate degree. In Utah, the new Veterinary school tuition is \$24,000 per year plus living expenses that could easily add another \$20,000 to that annual total. It's not ridiculous to expect a new veterinarian to leave school with \$190,000 in debt. In 2021, the starting salary for a veterinarian working exclusively or predominantly in the treatment of food animals was about \$85,000, compared to more than \$100,000 for those who specialize in pet care.

When you've got six figures of debt and then you're looking at trying to buy a practice or buy into a practice, and then add in the cost of the equipment and technology related to starting a practice, those numbers become hard to finance.

All this leads to the bill you have before you. HB184.

This bill is intended to help address the acute veterinary care shortage in our rural areas by creating a veterinary loan repayment program under the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food.

To Qualify a veterinarian has to have attended an accredited veterinary school. Then they bring their diploma to the Dept of Ag and make application to the program.

By doing so they commit to working in a qualifying area veterinary shortage area as determined by the US Department of Agriculture. This would also include working for an animal shelter run by a municipality or a non-profit.

If the Veterinarian works for 5 years in a qualifying area or facility then they can have up to \$100,000 in student loans paid off.

The bill has a fiscal note of \$5M for the program. With allowed administrative costs to the Department of Agriculture that would allow for at least 49 Veterinarians to participate with potentially more if individuals receive less than the allowed amount.