

May 3, 2024

Melanie Muncaster
Director, Regional Economic Development Branch
Ministry of Northern Development
70 Foster Drive, Suite 200
Sault Ste. Marie, ON
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Submitted via email: melanie.muncaster@ontario.ca

Dear Melanie,

Re: Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP) Review

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) appreciated the opportunity to participate in the virtual Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP) program review session on April 3, 2024, hosted by the Ministry of Northern Development (MND). Based on the engagement session discussion, OFA would like to provide additional suggestions on opportunities for program improvement and enhancement. Our topline feedback is summarized below:

- **Burden and Transparency:** OFA recommends reviewing the VAP governance structure and examining additional VAP processes to streamline the program and decrease administrative burden and red tape. OFA recommends a formalized communication structure between the MND, governing bodies and stakeholders. Lastly, OFA recommends that MND publish basic program data and analytics.
- **Increase Flexibility:** OFA recommends more flexibility within the VAP, to ensure all allocated VAP funding is used. OFA also believes that veterinary technicians should be eligible for VAP funding, and not just veterinarians.
- **Reflect Current Costs:** OFA requests that \$1.6 million be budgeted yearly to the VAP program based on the current rate of inflation.
- **Increase Amount of Funds Designated to a Single Contract:** OFA recommends increasing the amount of funds able to be designated to a single contract to help offset travel costs.
- **Increase Mileage Rate:** OFA recommends increasing the mileage reimbursement rate to \$2.05 per km travelled.
- **Reallocate Program:** OFA believes that the VAP program should be transferred to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

OFA is the largest general farm organization in Ontario, proudly representing more than 38,000 farm family members. OFA has a strong voice for our members and the agri-food industry on issues, legislation and regulations administered by all levels of government. We are passionate

and dedicated to ensuring that the agri-food sector and rural communities are considered and consulted with for any new or changing legislation that would impact the sustainability and growth of our farm businesses.

Ontario's agri-food sector is an economic powerhouse – producing more than 200 farm and food products, fuelling rural communities, generating nearly 750,000 jobs, and contributing over \$47 billion to Ontario's annual GDP. The province's agri-food strategy, Grow Ontario, aims to strengthen the agri-food sector, support economic growth, and ensure an efficient, reliable and responsible food supply. By removing barriers, unnecessary costs and red tape, Ontario farmers will be positioned to seize opportunities and rise to the challenge of an ambitious growth strategy, allowing the agri-food sector to drive the economy forward.

Veterinarians are essential for the well-being of animals, the economic stability of rural communities, and the safety of Ontario's agri-food system. They not only care for livestock but also contribute to human and public health by addressing zoonotic diseases, food safety, and biosecurity concerns. Unfortunately, access to veterinary services is often limited in rural Ontario, posing risks to farm animals and the food system.

The VAP is an essential financial assistance program that attempts to ensure access to large animal veterinary services in underserved areas, particularly in Northern Ontario. Veterinarians in designated underserved areas of Ontario state the program is essential to the viability of their businesses. However, the current VAP is not an adequate incentive for veterinarians to open practices in rural areas, as indicated by areas continuing to experience a shortage of veterinarians and access to critical veterinary services. OFA believes the program is outdated and requires modernization to help maintain and promote the viability of veterinary businesses providing services to Ontario's livestock producers.

Based on the April 3rd engagement session discussion, OFA would like to provide the following insight and suggestions on opportunities for program improvement and enhancement:

Burden and Transparency

It is the understanding of OFA that the current VAP process is burdensome and confusing to navigate. Veterinarians currently experience their fair share of administrative burden while practicing veterinary medicine. Financial assistance program applications should be straightforward to navigate, without adding additional administrative burden. OFA recommends reviewing the VAP governance structure to streamline the program, and examining processes within the VAP to decrease administrative burden and red tape for veterinarians and their clinics. Additionally, OFA recommends a formalized communication structure between the MND, governing bodies and stakeholders to create a formalized feedback structure, and increase communication and transparency.

Little to no data or detailed information is available on the VAP, making it difficult to determine its effectiveness or identify opportunities for improvement. Program data and analytics are important

when determining strategies to better streamline programming and assess opportunities for modernization. OFA recommends that MND publish basic program data, to allow for a more effective evaluation of the VAP program now, and in the future.

The VAP program has not been reviewed in-depth since 2004. OFA also recommends reviewing the program every five years to ensure that the program is effective, meeting its objectives, and allow for updates if required.

Flexibility

Approximately \$830,000 in funding is budgeted for the VAP program, but it is the understanding of OFA that these funds are rarely entirely disbursed. Contracts are rigid, and the VAP lacks the flexibility to utilize unused funds or transfer to other contracts if their capacity and expenses are exhausted. OFA recommends more flexibility within the VAP, to ensure all allocated VAP funding is used to the full benefit of veterinary contracts.

With the introduction of Bill 171, Enhancing Professional Care for Animals Act, veterinary technicians will be formally brought within the scope of practice and professional oversight of veterinary professionals. OFA believes that veterinary technicians should be eligible for VAP funding, and not just veterinarians, to provide greater access to services for Ontario's livestock producers.

Reflect Current Costs

The funding provided to VAP has remained unchanged for 25 years, despite rising costs associated with the business of veterinary medicine, and a declining number of veterinarians providing service to designated underserved areas. Approximately \$830,000 in funding is allocated yearly to the VAP program. Based on an inflation calculator provided by the Bank of Canada, OFA requests that \$1.6 million be budgeted yearly to the VAP program, the equivalent of \$830,000 in 1990.

Increase Amount of Funds Designated to a Single Contract

Contract veterinarians are reimbursed for travel up to \$40,000 per year per contract currently. OFA recommends increasing the amount of funds able to be designated to a single contract to help offset travel costs.

Increase Mileage Rate

Currently, veterinarians are reimbursed \$1.20 per km travelled within 70 km of the practice location, based on rates provided by the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA) at the time the VAP program was developed. Based on current mileage rates suggested by the OVMA, OFA recommends increasing the mileage reimbursement rate to 2.05 per km.

Reallocate Program

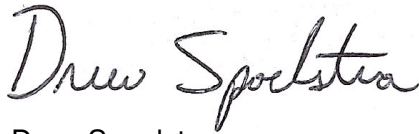
Inadequate access to veterinarians and veterinary services is no longer limited to northern Ontario. OFA believes that the VAP program should be transferred to the Ontario Ministry of

Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, allowing other large-animal veterinary practices in Ontario to access the program. This would help support the objective under the Grow Ontario strategy of strengthening the agri-food sector, supporting economic growth, and ensuring an efficient, reliable, and responsive food supply for Ontarians.

OFA would like to emphasize the importance of veterinarians in rural Ontario. The VAP program provides critical support to veterinary practices in underserved areas and is part of the solution to a complex problem.

OFA appreciates the opportunity to provide our comments on the review of the Veterinary Assistance Program.

Sincerely,



Drew Spoelstra
President

cc: Hon. Greg Rickford, Minister of Northern Development
Hon. Lisa Thompson, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
Laurie Ypya, VAP Program Coordinator, Regional Economic Development Branch
Leah Schmidt, Manager, Regional Economic Development Branch
Richard Scott, Director, Strategic Initiatives Branch
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