

**Public Forums on the
Availability of Rural Community Veterinarians in Tennessee**

**Joseph A. DiPietro Vice President for Agriculture
and
Anthony Haynes, UT Director of State Relations**

Forum Details

A series of three forums were held to solicit public input regarding Tennessee's situation with respect to the availability of services from rural community veterinarians. Of particular concern was the perceived availability of adequate, affordable health care for animals located in the state's most rural counties. The University conducted public forums in each of the grand divisions of the state on these dates at these locations:

- August 17, 2006 – UT Middle Tennessee Research and Education Center, Spring Hill
- August 24, 2006 – UT Institute of Agriculture Campus, Knoxville
- August 31, 2006 – UT West Tennessee Research and Education Center, Jackson

Approximately 145 persons representing agricultural industries, producers, and veterinarian organizations attended the forums.

Each forum was presided over by a panel whose members represented the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, including the College of Veterinary Medicine, as well as members of the legislature and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture. The format for each forum allotted time for invited presentations from recognized interest groups. Time was also allotted for commentary from members of the general public.

UT Vice President for Agriculture Dr. Joseph DiPietro served as the panel chairman, and Mr. Anthony Haynes, UT Director of State Relations, served as host and emcee for each of the forums. Other panel members included:

- Dr. Michael Blackwell, Dean, UT College of Veterinary Medicine
- Representative Stratton Bone, Vice Chair of the House Agriculture Committee
- Representative Willie Borchert, Secretary of the House Agriculture Committee
- Ms. Patricia Clark, Assistant Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Agriculture
- Mr. Ken Givens, Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Agriculture
- Dr. Robert Holland, Professor and Head, UT College of Veterinary Medicine Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences
- Mr. Terry Oliver, Deputy Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Agriculture

The transcripts of the forums will serve as a record of the public input as well as a benchmark for policymakers on this issue in future years. The comments from each of the forums are summarized in the following sections. The entire transcript for each event is available on-line at the following URL:

<http://www.agriculture.utk.edu/news/releases/0610-ruralvetforums.htm>

Overview of Comments

A total of 45 presentations were recorded at the meetings. Twenty-four of the speakers were individuals presenting their own views. Fourteen of the speakers represented 5 organizations that chose to present prepared statements (two spoke on behalf of two organizations at separate meetings). Representing farmer-based organizations were the Tennessee Cattlemen's Association, the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation, and the Tennessee Farmers' Cooperative. Representing the views of their members and practicing veterinarians were representatives of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners and the Tennessee Veterinary Medical Association. Each of the

statements from the participating stakeholder organizations were repeated at each of the three forums.

A representative from the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine spoke at each of the forums, and a representative from two institutions with pre-veterinarian programs of study spoke at each of the forums as well. The pre-vet programs represented were the University of Tennessee at Martin (at the Middle and West Tennessee forums) and the Walter State Community College Department of Agriculture (at the East Tennessee forum).

The breakdown of attendance and speakers was as follows:

Middle Tennessee Forum, August 17, 2006

60 persons attended

19 comments were entered into the record

5 speakers represented stakeholder organizations

1 speaker represented the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine

1 speaker represented the University of Tennessee at Martin

8 individuals represented their viewpoints as local veterinarians

4 individuals represented their viewpoints as local producers

East Tennessee Forum, August 24, 2006

50 persons attended

18 comments were entered into the record

5 speakers represented stakeholder organizations

1 speaker represented the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine

1 speaker represented the Walter State Community College

3 speakers were current veterinary students

4 individuals represented their viewpoints as local veterinarians

3 individuals represented their viewpoints as local producers

1 speaker represented both veterinarians and producers

West Tennessee Forum, August 31, 2006

35 persons attended

8 comments were entered into the record

5 speakers represented stakeholder organizations

1 speaker represented the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine

1 speaker represented the University of Tennessee at Martin

1 local farmer chose to enter a comment into the record

Summary of Issues Raised

In their statements for the record, the stakeholder organizations, institutions of higher education, and individuals expressed concerns regarding a number of similar issues. Their points of view did not always concur, however. The following numbered statements are paraphrases of some of their comments. The numbers in parentheses following each statement indicate the number of organizations and the additional number of private individuals who specifically mentioned the issue in their statements or during their response to a question from the panel. Dissenting points of view are indicated.

[Table 1 summarizes the responses by forum.](#)

Societal Needs

1. Farmers need competent, well-trained large animal veterinarians located within a reasonable distance. (4 organizations; 4 individuals)
2. Research, new technologies, and programs for disease control are critical in maintaining a safe and healthy livestock industry. (2 organizations; 2 individuals)
3. Society as a whole has a stake in food animal health and it is crucial that we maintain an adequate supply of veterinarians in the public health arena. (3 organizations; 1 individual)
4. Veterinarians are on the front line for those diseases that spread from animals to humans. We cannot afford to be without veterinarians trained to deal with bioterrorism, emergency preparedness, food safety, et cetera. (3 organizations; 2 individuals). Note that the individuals (one farmer and one veterinarian) amended this to say that *producers* serve as the front line of defense and that services need to be available to assist them in quickly identifying potential problems.
5. The general perception is that there is a shortage of large-animal or food animal veterinarians or that there will be a shortage beginning within the next ten years. (7 organizations; 3 individuals)
6. A poll of leaders at the 2006 Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation President's Conference indicated that 77 percent believe adequate numbers of veterinarians currently

exist near their operations. While 23 percent feel that a shortage exists. In addition 58 percent of participants indicated that they expect to experience a shortage of veterinarians in the next 10 years. (1 organization; 0 individuals).

Economics

1. Farming and veterinary practices are constantly evolving and must continue to evolve in a way that is economical for both. (1 organization; 11 individuals). Note that producers and veterinarians had differing opinions as to what would be “economical” for the other group.
2. Too often the use of veterinarian services tends to be put off or ignored as farmers try to reduce their costs. (3 organizations ; 12 individuals). Note that for the most part producers thought this was an acceptable practice, while veterinarians indicated that producer economics could be improved if veterinarians were called upon before animals became too ill.
3. While there must be reasonable safeguards, producers and practitioners need to provide routine healthcare to their animals without excessive bureaucracy or the threat of having charges brought against them for violating laws. (2 organizations; 1 individual)
4. Veterinarians should be involved in herd management programs and marketing programs where they are responsible for health verification of cattle or for pre-conditioning programs. (2 organizations; 7 individuals). Note that producers emphasized the need for affordable health management programs.
5. Financial assistance needs to be available for transferring a veterinary practice from a retiring practitioner to a new practitioner to keep service in an area uninterrupted. (2 organizations)
6. Many of the services provided in years past are being offered by lay people with less training. (2 organizations; 12 individuals). Note that producers do not necessarily view this as a negative development, while veterinarians universally object to this trend.
7. The debt load of students graduating in veterinary medicine is extremely high. More than 75 percent of veterinary students face some \$80,000 in debt related to their education when they get out of school. (3 organizations; 11 individuals)
8. Some sort of economic incentives need to be made available from either state or federal government for veterinarians willing to practice in rural areas or on large or food animals. Kansas legislation ([HB 3005](#), [See Attachment Number 1](#)) enacted in 2006 aimed at providing debt forgiveness to recent graduates was mentioned as an example. Debt forgiveness or business grants were mentioned. (3 organizations; 3 individuals) Note there was disagreement over the issue of providing debt forgiveness. Many farmers and veterinarians voiced opinions about the need for younger veterinarians to manage

their own business affairs with limited assistance.

9. Small animal practices are perceived as higher-paying jobs requiring fewer hours in a more controlled environment. (4 organizations; 9 individuals). Note that many farmers and a few veterinarians had little sympathy for those unwilling to work long hours for lower wages. For them these circumstances are wrapped into quality of life issues.

Education

1. Most of the people applying for vet school are from urban backgrounds and are not interested in large-animal care. (2 organizations; 2 individuals)

2. Colleges should emphasize rigorous preparatory courses in undergraduate programs and in high school recruiting efforts, especially in rural areas, to adequately prepare youth. (4 organizations; 5 individuals)

3. Colleges should recruit more students interested in being large-animal veterinarians and students from rural backgrounds. They should also reintroduce animal science backgrounds as an admissions prerequisite. (7 organizations; 3 individuals). Note the UT College of Veterinary Medicine indicated that as compared to rural vs. urban populations in the United States, the student veterinary population is disproportionately from a rural background.

4. Colleges should increase the exposure of veterinary students to food-animal veterinary instructors and internships as well as increase the courses offered and training opportunities available to students interested in food-animal practices. (5 organizations; 6 individuals) Note the need for bovine studies was specifically mentioned.

5. Colleges and organizations need to do a better job of letting students know what jobs are available and where they're available. (3 organizations; 1 individual)

6. Food-animal practices are too physically demanding for women. This is problematic as women comprise the greatest number of veterinary students. (3 organizations; 4 individuals). Note this issue received a number of dissenting views. The majority of comments refuted the statement, maintaining that male practitioners and female practitioners each have their gender-specific advantages.

7. The UT College of Veterinary Medicine should increase its class size. (1 individual)

8. The UT College of Veterinary Medicine should increase the number of in-state students admitted. (1 individual)

Final Summary

Concern over the availability of rural community veterinarians is not limited to Tennessee; it is nationwide. Stakeholder organizations, producers, and veterinarians agree that adequate, affordable veterinary medicine is essential to the vitality of the state's animal-based agricultural economy. They further agree that cooperation is needed to ensure that an adequate number of rural community veterinarians continue to practice large-animal or food-animal medicine for the benefit of the state's animal-based economy as well as for the protection of the public health and welfare of Tennessee's citizens.