

RESOLUTION #7—2017
Regular Annual Session

Submitted by—
National Association of Federal Veterinarians

THE IMPORTANCE OF VETERINARIANS IN FOOD SAFETY

RESOLVED, that the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) support the USDA FSIS Public Health Veterinary workforce hiring efforts by recommending that FSIS implement the three actions below to resolve the recruiting and retention issues when hiring of veterinarians in FSIS:

1. All slaughter plants must be under the direct supervision of a Supervisory Public Health Veterinarian (SPHV); Federal veterinarians, as animal and public health professionals, are uniquely equipped to lead the inspection and food safety processes necessary to protect Americans' food source;
2. Remuneration and incentives of SPHV's must be immediately improved to be commensurate with their extensive education and expertise and to be competitive with the private sector;
3. Administrative time and support for annual professional continuing education and training are essential to retaining SPHVs.

Statement about the Resolution

Veterinarians with training in public health are vital to the effective inspection of meat and poultry. No other profession has the education and expertise to serve at the nexus of animal health and public health. Veterinarians also take an oath to practice our profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics and accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of our professional knowledge and competence.

USDA declared its veterinary positions as mission critical in 2016 and these positions are also considered essential in times of emergencies for emergency response to animal health outbreaks. It is critical to the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) mission and goals that their veterinary workforce be well-staffed and well-trained. The essential FSIS inspection duties that can only be competently performed by veterinarians include:

- Ante-mortem inspection for zoonotic and foreign animal diseases
- Post-mortem verification of food safety diseases and conditions, and carcass dispositions
- Expert direction of the national residue program
- Decision and direction of sample collection for pathology and microbiological determinations
- Verification of eligibility of products for export, and signing of certificates

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has conducted two assessments of the federal veterinary workforce and reported that: *"the federal veterinarian workforce plays a critical role in ensuring the safety of the U.S. food supply... several veterinarians working in slaughter plants told us (GAO) that, because of inadequate staffing, they are not always able to meet their responsibilities and perform high-quality work. For example, veterinarians told us they cannot always verify crucial sanitation and security checks of the plant or promptly log data on animal diseases and welfare. Finally, FSIS veterinarians told us that their salaries do not sufficiently compensate for the working conditions and are low relative to those of other veterinarians."*

Tragically, the current FSIS Supervisory Public Health Veterinary (SPHV) workforce vacancy

level in FSIS is 11%. FSIS acknowledges this vacancy level makes it impossible for the remaining veterinarians to perform all the necessary functions required of SPHVs. In addition, approximately 53% of the FSIS SPHV's are 55 years of age or older and close to retirement. (35% of FSIS SPHVs are over 60 years of age; 26% are between 50 and 60 years of age; 14% are between 40 and 50 years of age; 12% are between 30 and 40 years of age; 1% are between 20 and 30 years of age). Impending retirements from this older workforce will add even more pressure towards maintaining an effective FSIS SPHV workforce in the next several years.

Despite past efforts by FSIS to incentivize SPHVs, the agency has fallen short in offering sustained competitive compensation resulting in losses of key personnel. Instead of offering fair remuneration to attract, recruit, and retain the SPHV workforce needed to ensure the safety of the public's food supply, **FSIS has, for the first time in its 110 year history, proposed changes that remove veterinarians from their direct role in food safety and to instead place inadequately educated lay inspectors into more primary decision making roles with much less direct supervision or oversight from the SPHV.**

The AVMA is encouraged to approve a policy ensuring support for the SPHV staffing plan which will help protect consumers by ensuring that meat and poultry are safe to eat. FSIS has just 1000 veterinarians, of which 720 Public Health Veterinarians (SPHVs) working in the field on the inspection front lines. However, staffing our Nation's primary food safety agency has chronically suffered and it needs help to recruit and retain its professional veterinary workforce. SPHVs are the most difficult profession for FSIS to hire and retain. We have conducted extensive research and identified several of the most important factors that have culminated in our current exhausted FSIS veterinary workforce. It is critically important that FSIS take the three simple actions in the resolution above to ameliorate recurring issues with hiring and retaining these professionals.

The National Association of Federal Veterinarians developed the SPHV staffing plan for FSIS that incorporates three simple actions in more detail to ameliorate recurring issues with hiring and retaining these professionals. AVMA support is needed to encourage FSIS to implement this plan and secure the funding needed. (SPHV staffing plan is [attached](#)) FSIS will need to redistribute \$10 million towards this workforce enhancing effort

Financial Impact:

	Board of Directors	House Advisory Committee	Reference Committee #5	House of Delegates
Recommend Approval		X		
Recommend Disapproval				
Recommend Referral to...				
No Recommendation				
Recommend Postpone Indefinitely				
(use this space for additional narrative, if needed)				