



June 4, 2024

David Wolgemuth  
President, Algoma District Cattlemen's Association

Dear David,

The following resolution was passed at the Beef Farmers of Ontario (BFO) annual general meeting in February and was recently discussed by the BFO Board of Directors:

**WHEREAS**, it is recognized that there is a looming crisis with respect to the availability of food animal veterinary services in parts of Ontario and particularly in areas covered by the Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP); and

**WHEREAS**, given that the funding for the VAP has not increased in many years and that there are currently vacancies within the VAP where local vet service is not available;

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT BFO lobby the province to initiate a review of the VAP with a view to increasing funding so that food animal veterinary services continue to be available in all potentially underserviced areas of Ontario.**

BFO thanks the Algoma District Cattlemen's Association for bringing this resolution forward. BFO remains committed to working with the Government of Ontario and our industry partners to implement solutions to address food animal veterinary capacity and access issues in Ontario. Of the many short and long-term solutions that are needed to ensure livestock producers can access vet services for their animals, improving aspects and ensuring the longevity of the Veterinary Assistance Program (VAP) is a piece of that puzzle.

VAP is a well-regarded program that has existed for many years and has supported veterinary clinics and the provision of large animal veterinary medicine in the areas that are covered by the program through access to financial support for mileage expenses, continuing education and locum assistance. In communication with the Northern Producer Animal Health Network (NPAHN), the Designated Area Veterinarians Association (DAVA), and producers in areas covered by the program, there was a strong recognition that this program is extremely important and necessary, but has lacked updates by the Ministry of Northern Development, which has prevented the program from being as effective as it can be. As the program's key stakeholder groups, NPAHN and DAVA have been in contact with Ministry staff, for some time, requesting program updates. These groups have also requested a formal program review be conducted looking at every component of the program and to engage with stakeholders to understand how best to improve VAP. It should also be noted, the program had not been reviewed since 2004.

It was communicated with program stakeholders the formal program review would be initiated in the spring of 2022, which did not occur. BFO and other interested groups, like NPAHN, DAVA, and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), continued to stay in contact with Ministry staff for updates on the review throughout this time. In early February 2024, BFO met with the Minister of Northern Development's staff to discuss VAP and other topics. At this meeting, we asked for the program review to be initiated and outlined the rationale for the review. The following week, the Minister's staff communicated to BFO they would be moving ahead with the review, and the Minister of Northern Development and Indigenous Affairs during his speech at BFO's AGM in February publicly announced their plans to conduct the VAP review.

The Ministry organized various engagement sessions beginning in late February. The Ministry's review consisted of two phases. Phase one focused on engagement with large animal vets who have participated in VAP over the last three years; producers who have received service from a large animal vet involved in VAP in the last three years; and groups that assist in administering the program, such as NPAHN, DAVA, and the Veterinary Service Committees (VSC). The engagement consisted of virtual sessions and an online survey.

On March 12, the Ministry confirmed the details of phase two of the review, which expanded the scope of engagement to vets who had received VAP funding over the last five years; organizations that represent vets and livestock producers; and an additional sample of livestock producers who have received services from a VAP-funded vet over the last three years. Similarly, this phase consisted of virtual sessions with stakeholders and an online survey. BFO participated in the virtual session for livestock and agriculture organizations on April 3, 2024, in addition to submitting responses to the VAP survey.

In the Ministry's communications, it was stated the Ministry was seeking feedback on: VAP's effectiveness in helping maintain a viable livestock industry by providing financial support to large animal veterinary services in applicable communities and VAP design and delivery opportunities to improve, streamline, and create program efficiencies. The Ministry also stated increases to VAP funding and broader large animal vet access challenges that were not directly related to VAP were out of scope.

Through the engagement sessions and surveys the Ministry asked:

- Is the program effectively supporting the viability of the livestock industry by supporting large animal vet services?
- Has VAP allowed livestock producers to increase their ability to access large animal vet services?
- Has VAP allowed veterinarians to increase their ability to provide care to large animals in rural and/or northern areas?
- Are there opportunities to enhance the design of the program?
- Are there opportunities to enhance the delivery of the program?
- Has VAP been effective at attracting large animal vets to VAP covered areas?

Despite stating increases in VAP funding were out of scope for this review, BFO, as well as a majority of other participants in this review, communicated that a number of the program components that required updates to make the program much more effective, such as the cost of travel cap and mileage rates, would require an increase in the overall program budget.

BFO program delivery recommendations aligned with positions of other stakeholder groups. In summary, these included:

- increasing cost of travel reimbursements including moving the cost of travel cap per designated practice from \$40,000 to \$60,000, and increasing the mileage reimbursement rate to better reflect current costs.
- At year end, allowing unspent financial allocations by some clinics to be dispersed to clinics who maxed out their allocation.
- Removing overly restrictive, inefficient and/or unnecessary program guidelines to make the program more flexible.
- Opportunities for telemedicine.
- Continued support for continuing education and locum assistance.
- Increasing the program budget to reflect inflation and above recommendations.

In regards to program design, BFO provided comments and recommendations that touched on:

- Improving communications between VAP stakeholders.
- Examining the VAP decision making processes and areas for improvement or streamlining.
- Considerations for expanding eligible program areas.

We also provided our perspective and additional recommendations related to how the program can be more effective for both livestock producers and vets, and how the program can be improved to attract vets to northern Ontario and other areas covered by the program.

The Ministry communicated to stakeholders that, following further analysis of stakeholder feedback, they intend to have their VAP recommendations finalized this spring/summer. BFO will continue to stay involved in this process and stay engaged with our industry partners who have participated in this review. We are eager and hopeful to see the Ministry move forward with changes that will make the program more effective to better support the farmers and vets who rely on it.

Thank you, again, to the Algoma District Cattlemen's Association for bringing this resolution forward.

Sincerely,



Craig McLaughlin  
President

cc: Ryan McLeod (mover and Advisory Councillor)  
Kristen Taylor (Seconder)  
Mikala Parr (Secretary)