

President Bush Signs The National Veterinary Medical Service Act

On Saturday, December 6, President George W. Bush signed into law the National Veterinary Medical Services Act, legislation drafted and sponsored by Congressman Chip Pickering (Miss-3). This act (HR 1367) will provide student loan repayment to veterinary school graduates who agree to work in underserved areas of the country. Senator Thad Cochran, also of Mississippi, sponsored the Senate companion legislation.

"This legislation is a common sense solution to our veterinarian shortage in many areas of this country," Congressman Pickering said. "With the growing threat of agro-terrorism, and fears of foreign disease like 'mad-cow,' this bill would create the manpower for a veterinarian 'national guard' that would serve as our front line defense and intelligence service for animal health concerns."

The bill passed the House and Senate unanimously and enjoyed bipartisan support. Texas Democrat Charles Stenholm called it "good, cost-effective policy." Congressman Stenholm said during House debate, "Assuring an adequate supply of veterinarians in many underserved rural and urban areas is a critical issue for our nation's animal health infrastructure. It is generally private veterinarians who are the first to identify and respond to animal disease outbreaks."

This act will place veterinarians in underserved areas of the country in need of veterinary health care by offering veterinary students grants to assist in repaying educational debts. Eligible students will enter into agreements with the Secretary of Agriculture for a period of time and amount of repayment of educational loans determined by the Secretary in exchange for the veterinarian's service in a shortage area including rural regions and inner-city areas.

In addition, this act will establish a 'national guard' of veterinarians. In exchange for additional debt repayment, eligible students can enter into further agreements with the Secretary to assist USDA in addressing disease outbreaks, agro-terrorist threats or similar emergency situations determined by the Secretary. The Secretary would be able to mobilize these volunteers to investigate suspicious and/or treat suspicious outbreaks, or as otherwise necessary.

"Veterinarians are highly qualified medical individuals that first notice and diagnosis developing health patterns in animals," said Dr. John Thomson, Dean of Mississippi State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "These first responders in the field are our front line defense against foreign or domestic disease epidemics and agro-terrorism threats. Long before the laboratory technician or the college research facility begins their work, veterinarians have already encountered the challenges."

The National Veterinary Medical Services Act has been a work in progress since its original inception in October 2000, by Congressman Pickering, as he worked with veterinary schools across the country, the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges. Since the measure passed out of the Agriculture Committee in late September, scores of veterinary students and faculty from around the country have contacted Congressman Pickering's office for more information on the program.

"This legislation has been the number one priority of several organizations," said Thomson, "Our profession is thankful for Congressman Pickering's vision and understanding on why our country needs this legislation. It is important to the veterinarian industry; it is vital to the security of our country."

Fellow Agriculture Committee member Congressman Gil Gutknecht (R-Minn) praised the legislation from the Floor of the House, "I commend the gentleman from Mississippi, Mr. Pickering, for his leadership on this issue...Having a pool of qualified veterinarians able to assist in a time of an emergency simply bolsters our ability to rapidly contain diseases which can cost our economy millions or even billions of dollars."

Rural veterinarians are the nation's front line of defense against disease outbreaks such as foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and preserving food safety. Inner-city veterinarians are in demand to address public health problems associated with pet overpopulation, parasites, rabies and

other zoonotic diseases. There is a critical shortage of veterinarians with special training in strategic disciplines within the profession, including food safety veterinarians. Programs already exist for recent graduates of human health professions (doctors and nurses), as well as educators, with loan forgiveness in return for work in underserved areas, no such program exists for veterinary school graduates, until this act.

Chip Pickering is currently serving his fourth term as a Republican member of the United States Congress. He represents the Third District of Mississippi and serves on the Agriculture Committee and the Energy & Commerce Committee. He is assistant majority whip.

Perfect Pet Products

ISVMA was contacted by a member doctor who expressed concern with the services offered by PerfectPetProducts.com. The website appears to describe diagnostic testing, consultation, and help obtaining heartworm pills.

ISVMA is of the position (consistent with the AVMA) that the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) is the basis for interaction among veterinarians, their clients and patients. A VCPR exists when all of the following conditions have been met:

1. The veterinarian has assumed responsibility for making clinical judgements regarding the health of the animal(s) and the need for medical treatment, and the client has agreed to the veterinarian's instructions.
2. The veterinarian has sufficient knowledge of the animal(s) to initiate at least a general or preliminary diagnosis of the medical condition of the animal(s). This means that the veterinarian has recently seen and is personally acquainted with the keeping and care of the animal(s) by virtue of an examination of the animal(s), or by medically appropriate and timely visits to the premises where the animal(s) are kept.
3. The veterinarian is readily available, or has arranged for emergency coverage, for follow-up evaluation of adverse reactions or the failure of the treatment regimen.

At the request of the ISVMA, Dr. Elizabeth Curry-Galvin of the AVMA has contacted the appropriate review committee at AVMA to determine whether PerfectPetProducts is engaged in veterinary practices inconsistent with the VCPR and, therefore, the Illinois Veterinary Medicine and Surgery Practice Act. I will keep you updated in future newsletters.