THE UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN MADISON

Statement of Support, AB 291

Chairman Hines, distinguished members of the Committee on Public Health: I am Daryl Buss, Dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Veterinary Medicine.

I am pleased to indicate my support of Assembly Bill 291, providing a loan and loan forgiveness program for veterinary medical students pursuing careers in food animal practice in Wisconsin. A shortage of food animal veterinarians is not only an issue for agriculture but for public health, given the importance of maintaining a safe, secure, and wholesome food supply. I believe the loans and the loan forgiveness provisions in this bill will be important in helping to attract and retain graduates into careers in food animal practice.

The need for more rural food animal practitioners is part of an overall shortage of veterinarians in the United States. A pressing national need for more veterinarians, not only in food animal practice, but in such fields as public health, laboratory animal medicine, biomedical research, industry, academia, and government service have been identified by a series of national studies, several conducted by the National Academy of Sciences. Because of that need, our students are highly sought in all of the many career options within veterinary medicine. As you might expect, many of those career options have developed very attractive recruitment and retention programs. In the case of the US Army Veterinary Corps, for example, students joining the Veterinary Corps are immediately commissioned as second lieutenants in the US Army Reserve and, while enrolled in our school, receive full tuition, payment of required books and other fees, along with a more than $1,200/month living stipend for 10 ½ months of the year. For the remaining 1 ½ months, they are paid as a second lieutenant in the US Army Reserve.

Upon graduation, they are commissioned as a Captain in the Veterinary Corps, at a beginning salary of $61,000/year, plus benefits. Moreover, Veterinary Corps veterinarians have the opportunity, later in their career, to receive specialized training, in areas such as public health, pathology, laboratory animal medicine, and others, again with all expenses paid.

A student today faces the prospect of a very significant debt load by the time they receive their veterinary medical degree. The average level of indebtedness at the time of graduation for the new veterinarian, whether from the UW or nationally, now exceeds $100,000. It must be noted that debt load is a total of all debt, undergraduate as well as professional degree, educational debt as well as personal debt, but all of it must be paid. Given that situation, it is easy to see why the US Army Veterinary Corps has been successful in recruiting both outstanding veterinary students and excellent graduate veterinarians from private practice.

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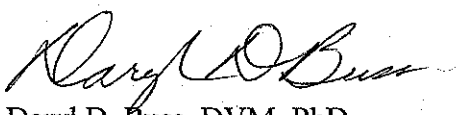
But they are not alone. I mentioned the need for more veterinarians in biomedical research. Veterinarians are eligible for such NIH programs as the one designed to increase the number of professionals engaged in pediatric research. In exchange for a two-year commitment to the veterinarian's research career, NIH will repay up to $35,000 per year of qualified educational debt, will pay an additional 39% of the repayments to cover Federal taxes, and may reimburse state taxes that may result from these payments. There are a series of requirements and constraints, as with all such programs, but my point is that a student with interests in food animal practice is exposed, throughout their education, to many attractive career options within veterinary medicine. Certainly, the lure of those alternatives is increased when such attractive financial and professional benefits are part of active recruitment plans.

I believe that, similarly, food animal veterinary medicine needs a recruitment and retention plan. With an increasingly urban society, fewer and fewer of our applicants come from farms, or even from rural communities. So, they do not enter our program with a built-in understanding of agriculture and of life in a rural community. In such a circumstance, it is often easier for the student and their spouse or significant other to see the challenges of rural practice - long hours, late night drives on country roads, sometimes in bad weather, heavy physical work, possibly limited spousal career opportunities, and the like, than it is for them to see the many personal, family, and professional benefits that are so highly valued by veterinarians who have spent their careers serving production agriculture.

Assembly Bill 291 is not a panacea. We must work hard to recruit rural youth into all areas of agriculture, including veterinary medicine. We must continue to work within the veterinary medical profession and within agriculture to help identify talented students, beginning at the middle school level and continuing at the high school level. That means we must also reach high school guidance counselors and the parents of these youth so they help steer talented students to veterinary medicine.

While this bill is not a panacea that will, by itself, produce more food animal veterinarians, it does represent an important recruitment and retention incentive for our students to pursue this career choice. In a very real sense, this is an investment in animal agriculture, in public health, in rural Wisconsin and our rural communities, and I am pleased to support it.



Daryl D. Buss, DVM, PhD
Dean & Professor

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Assembly Committee on Public Health

Testimony
In support of Assembly Bill 291
May 8, 2007

Good morning Chairperson Hines and distinguished members of the Assembly Public Health Committee. My name is Ray Pawlisch. I am the president-elect of the Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association and a dairy practitioner in Brodhead, Wisconsin. It is my privilege to appear before you this morning on behalf of the 90 percent of Wisconsin's licensed veterinarians who belong to the WVMA. We respectfully ask for your support of Assembly Bill 291.

First, allow me to thank Representative Jake Hines for his leadership in introducing this bill.

If passed, AB 291 would provide a loan forgiveness program for new veterinarians who choose to practice food animal medicine in the state of Wisconsin. Attracting new veterinarians into food animal medicine is imperative for the health of our state and nation. These veterinarians protect our food supply by making certain our food-producing animals are healthy; they protect public health by recognizing dangerous diseases that may be passed from animals to humans; and they protect the state's economy by diagnosing diseases that can spread quickly, putting a strain on Wisconsin's ability to export animals.

We are told that new graduates want better hours and better pay than what is offered in a rural practice. We don't deny that practicing food animal medicine is a lifestyle that may not be desirable to everyone. But there are new graduates who want to live and work in a rural area but are discouraged because of their heavy student debts.

I personally know of a new graduate who started in food animal medicine. She had grown up on a farm and loved cows, but changed her career path two years after graduation because her debt load was "eating her up." She joined a biomedical firm. Recently she told me she regretted the decision, but felt she had no other alternative.

I am especially happy to see this bill is in front of the Public Health Committee. We hear about diseases such as foot and mouth, e-coli, salmonella, cryptosporidium, mad cow disease, anthrax, pseudorabies, tuberculosis and many others. All of these are seen in food-producing animals, many are transferred from animals to humans.

The recent pet food recalls demonstrate how vulnerable our food supply is.

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Please allow me to tell a story that happened in 1976 to my father, Dr. Ronaldean Pawlish in Brodhead. My dad visited a farm in Decatur township to treat sick coughing hogs. The hired man who was milking the cows and caring for the swine came out of the barn and complained about feeling very sick. My father asked if he had gone to the doctor. He replied, "No." Dad quickly recognized that the hogs and that man were experiencing similar symptoms.

He next contacted another veterinarian, Dr. Barney Easterday from UW-Madison's Veterinary Science Department. Dad collected nasal swabs, blood samples, and lung tissue from a dead hog. He also collected throat washings from the sick man. The samples were taken to the UW campus where they were evaluated.

Sure enough, they were the same viruses. This virus became known as Swine Flu, the first documented case of transmission of an influenza virus from hogs to a person. If not for a food animal veterinarian, such a link may never have been found.

The life of a food animal veterinarian is physically demanding. We have a lot of experience, but the hours are long and our knees, shoulders and backs tend to wear out. But who else is there to speak for the cow? We enjoy what we do. I will continue to take care of dairies as long as I am physically able, but I worry about who will replace us.

The shortage of food animal veterinarians is getting a lot of play in the national and local media. While it doesn't appear to be a problem in Wisconsin yet, all of our data points to the possibility of it becoming a problem.

The percentages of veterinarians in the state have moved from food animal to companion animal practices over the past 10 years. In 1997, 45 percent of Wisconsin veterinarians touched a cow on a daily basis; today 32 percent do. And in 1997, 35 percent worked exclusively on companion animals; today that has increased to 49 percent.

Those practicing food animal medicine are getting older. Fifty-four percent of food animal veterinarians in Wisconsin are older than 45. The youngest food animal practitioner in my practice is 47 years old.

The concern over a shortage of food animal veterinarians is not only for the health and well-being of animals, but also for the safety of the food supply and the health and well-being of the consuming public. The further removed animals are from veterinary supervision, the greater the risk is to the animal, owner and public.

You have an opportunity to encourage new veterinarians to practice food animal medicine by removing their debt, which is their greatest deterrent from realizing their dreams.

In closing, let me again thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak in support of Assembly Bill 291. I will be happy to respond to any questions you may have.

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May 3, 2007

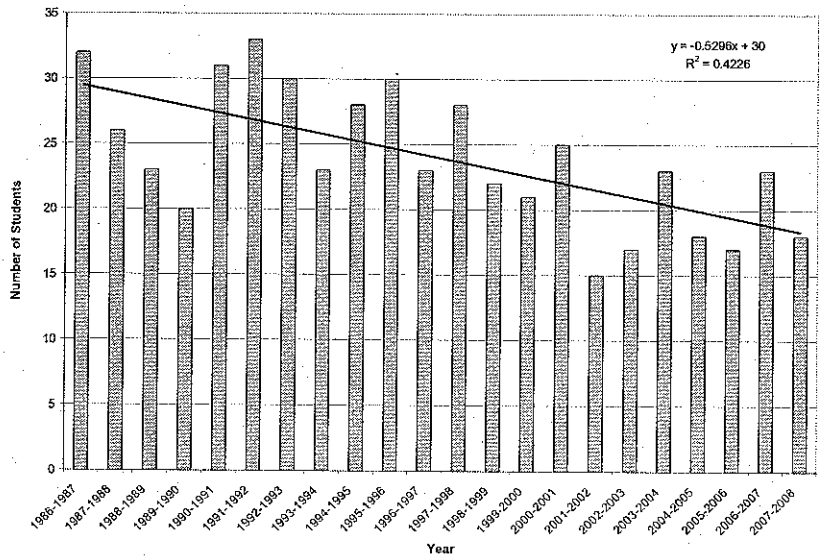
Dear Members of the Legislature,

I am writing this letter in support of Representative Hines; proposal AB-291 – regarding loan forgiveness for food animal track students wishing to follow a career path in dairy cattle veterinary medicine.

As you will all no doubt be aware, there is much recent interest in the apparent shortage of food animal veterinarians, not only in the State of Wisconsin, but across the rest of North America. While it is very difficult to determine to what degree there is an absolute shortage, as dairy veterinarians offer different levels of service to small and large dairy herds, it is clear that in certain rural areas of Wisconsin, there are practices that struggle to recruit new veterinary colleagues.

From my perspective, as head of the Food Animal Production Medicine group at the School of Veterinary Medicine, the problem is real, and it is something that we have been trying to address over the last few years. The figure below shows the number of UW students enrolling in our final year, advanced level dairy production medicine rotations each year since the School began in 1986. The regression line shows that on average, our program accepted around 25-30 students per year in the mid-90s and now accepts 15-25 students per year since 2000.

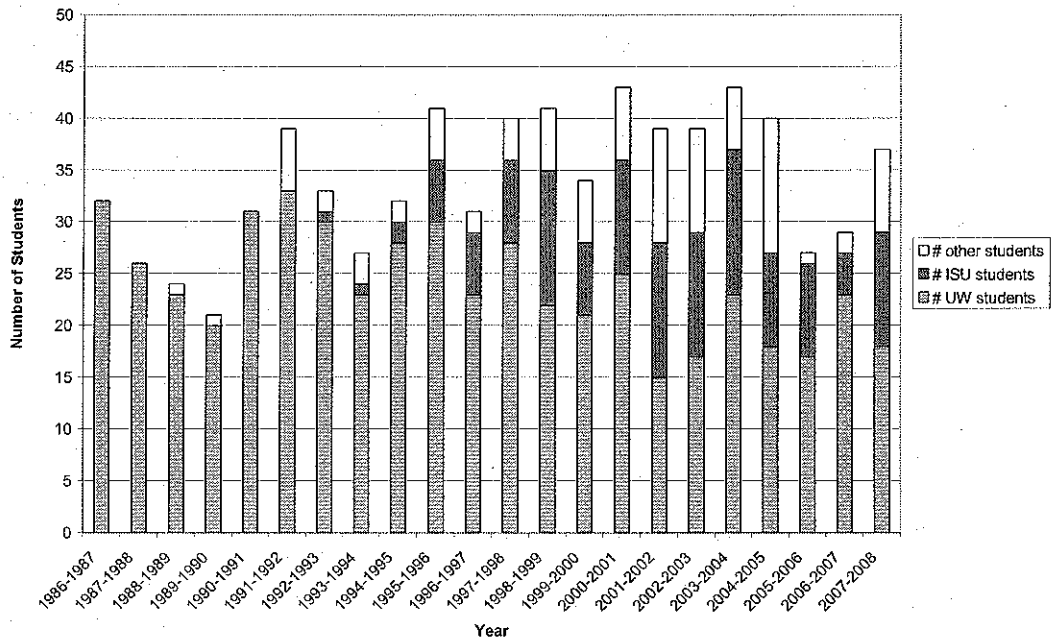
Figure 1. Number of UW students attending the Food Animal Production Medicine final year elective rotations since 1986.



One may conclude from these data that either our program has deteriorated, and students no longer wish to take our electives, or there are simply fewer students that wish to follow a path dedicated to dairy practice.

The reality is that our teaching program has improved and that we have a group of dedicated teachers and researchers that form a dairy veterinarian team that is the envy of every other School in North America. I firmly believe that the School of Veterinary Medicine in the State of Wisconsin is home to the best dairy program in the world. In fact, while the number of UW students taking our program has declined, the total numbers of students attending our electives has remained relatively constant owing to interest from other Schools across North America. Since 1986, the FAPM group has trained 526 UW students, and an additional 223 students from other Schools, including 127 students from Iowa State University (Figure 2). This exchange of students has proven to be a great success, as many Iowa State students move to Wisconsin to practice veterinary medicine, while our students attend the swine and beef programs in these other Schools in order to improve their education and experience.

Figure 2. Students attending the Food Animal Production Medicine Electives since 1986 by source (UW, Iowa State University, or other US schools)



The data therefore support Representative Hines' view, that we are facing a future where the recruitment of dairy veterinarians will be a challenge. There are clearly several factors involved in this shortage;

Firstly, we are trying to recruit students from a shrinking pool of food animal applicants. Our traditional recruit; the farmer's son or daughter from a rural background, is becoming a rare commodity. We are increasingly expected to recruit from a more urbanized student class that

have had few opportunities to be mentored and shown what a wonderful career large animal practice can be. Additionally, with larger dairy herds, there are more opportunities for students from rural backgrounds to have careers as a herd manager or owner, earning as much money as a dairy veterinarian, while not having to deal with the large debt load that our students face when they leave School. We are also facing life-style choices as society increasingly values time off. Students often perceive that the time on-call in food animal practice is greater than in small animal practice.

Secondly, of the students that claim to be interested in food animal practice when they enter the SVM program in the first year, approximately one third are diverted from that career path before they reach the final year for a variety of reasons.

Thirdly, of the students that eventually receive their DVMs, approximately one third leave food animal practice after a relatively short period of time due to disenchantment, injury, family commitments and a variety of other reasons.

We recognize these problems, and the bill suggested by Representative Hines is one step in the right direction. If we can relieve some of the debt issues that our students face, one facet of recruitment will most certainly improve. Other initiatives that we currently have underway at the SVM include;

1. Weekend wet labs organized by our Bovine Club and supported by faculty targeted at bringing in high school students and Ag teachers and introducing large animal practice as a career path
2. Creation of a Vet Scholars program where Animal Science students throughout the UW system are mentored to facilitate their recruitment into the Veterinary program
3. A full bovine teaching curricular review of the four year program – focused on developing teaching opportunities in the first three years of the program to inspire and encourage food animal focus students.

We are committed to supporting the Wisconsin dairy industry as it moves forward and we will continue to work to graduate the best dairy practitioners that we possibly can. Assistance in reducing debt load and encouraging students from both rural and urban backgrounds to entertain a career as a dairy veterinarian will be invaluable to the State in the future.

Sincerely Yours,

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Clinical Associate Professor in Food Animal Production Medicine
Head of FAPM Section