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SUBMISSION

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The Parliamentary Officer
Joint Committee on Mental Health and Wellbeing of Veterinarians in South Australia
GPO Box 572
ADELAIDE SA 5001
Via email: JCMHWV@parliament.sa.gov.au

Dear Parliamentary Officer

Re: Submission to the Joint Committee Inquiry on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Veterinarians in South Australia

Livestock SA is the peak industry organisation for South Australia's red meat and wool producers. Representing over 5,200 sheep producers, 2,700 beef cattle producers and several hundred goat producers across the state, we work to secure a strong and sustainable livestock industry. South Australia's \$4.3 billion livestock industry is a key economic contributor to the state and supports 21,000 South Australian jobs across the red meat and wool industries.

Livestock SA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of veterinarians in South Australia, which is important to our members and industries. Our primary concern is the critical shortage of mixed and large animal veterinarians in rural and regional areas. This shortage threatens the stability and retention of the veterinary workforce, placing additional strain on professionals in these areas.

Quantifying the significant economic, social and emotional benefits that veterinary industry brings to society and having this acknowledged by government and industry

Veterinarians in South Australia deliver significant economic, social, and emotional benefits to society and these contributions are often undervalued by both government and industry. Economically, veterinarians play a critical role in maintaining animal health and biosecurity, ensuring the sustainability of agricultural industries and food production.

In 2023-24, the gross value of agricultural production was reported as \$82.4 billion, with livestock production accounting for 39 per cent of this figure.¹ To support the continued growth and development of industries to achieve the national goal of reaching \$100 billion in agricultural output by 2030, veterinarians will play a crucial role in Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) preparedness and response. To put EADs in context, a large multi-state foot and mouth disease (FMD) outbreak has an

¹ ABARES, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/products/insights/snapshot-of-australian-agriculture#agricultural-production-is-growing>

estimated direct economic impact over 10 years of around \$80 billion², making preventative measures and expertise a critical investment for state and national economies and regional and rural communities.

The expertise of veterinarians in disease prevention and management helps safeguard animal health, protect livestock industries, and ensure the resilience of agricultural supply chains. Maintaining strong biosecurity measures is essential not only for industry sustainability, but also for preserving Australia's market access and global reputation as a reliable producer of high-quality agricultural products.

Beyond economic contributions, rural and regional veterinary services provide social and emotional value to rural communities. They play a critical role in managing zoonotic diseases and regulating food safety and are key advisors on resilience planning and best-practice management. For example, the cumulative annual cost of treatment, prevention, and production losses associated with the now established, but originally exotic, sheep blowfly is estimated at \$323.7 million per annum.³

The societal value of veterinarians supporting biosecurity practice change on ground ensures that producers are informed and supported to implement proactive disease management strategies, safeguarding both animal welfare and industry sustainability. By fostering strong relationships with producers, veterinarians play a vital role in building on-farm resilience, ensuring that rural communities remain productive, competitive, and prepared for emerging animal health threats.

Recommendation 1: The South Australia Government establish long-term funding support and recognition of veterinary services in rural and regional communities, ensuring sustainable access to animal healthcare and biosecurity expertise for livestock producers.

Measures that can be taken to improve veterinarian retention rates, including incentives for working in rural and regional areas

For the past four years, veterinarians have been listed on the Occupational Shortage List for South Australia, highlighting a significant workforce deficit.⁴ This is supported by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), which has identified systemic workforce challenges including almost 50 per cent graduate migration out of the state after graduation.⁵

AVA surveys have revealed that approximately 13 per cent of the workforce was considering leaving a veterinary role within the next 12 months, due largely to difficult working conditions, financial strain, limited career progression, and negative impacts on well-being.⁶

Further research conducted by the University of Adelaide revealed that 68 per cent of veterinarians in South Australia work in small animal practice.⁷ This highlights a critical workforce imbalance, with a shortage of veterinarians in rural and regional areas placing additional strain on livestock

² ABARES, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/biosecurity/biosecurity-economics/fmd-update-of-2013-estimate>

³ Shephard et al (2022): Priority list of endemic diseases for the red meat industry — 2022 update. MLA Project code: B.AHE.0327

⁴ Australian Government, Jobs and Skills Australia. <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-shortages-analysis/occupation-shortage-list>

⁵ Australian Veterinary Association, Veterinary Workforce Survey 2023-24 Analysis Report, https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/advocacy/workforce-survey/ava-2023_2024-workforce-survey-report.pdf

⁶ Australian Veterinary Association, Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report, <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf>.

⁷ <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/alumni/ua/media/5247/rva-sa-workforce-survey.pdf>

producers and essential animal health services across the state. Without targeted retention strategies, these workforce challenges will continue to escalate, further exacerbating the strain on South Australia's veterinary sector.

The financial burden of student debt is a significant barrier to workforce retention in regional and rural areas. In 2023, 100 per cent of respondents to an AVA survey indicated they would consider working in a regional or rural practice if their Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt was waived.⁸ Most students have outstanding debt at graduation with median amounts ranging from \$39,000 for male graduates to \$56,000 for female graduates.⁹

To address these challenges, the AVA has proposed a Rural Placement Incentives Scheme aimed at encouraging early-career veterinarians to work in regional and rural areas. Key elements of the proposed scheme include:

- Eligibility for Australian citizens or permanent residents registered to practice veterinary medicine in Australia.
- Employment in a veterinary practice with a primary focus on production animals.
- Placement in a Rural or Remote area, as classified by the Australian Government's Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas (RRMA) classification system.
- Availability to all graduates within five years of completing their degree.

While attracting new entrants into the veterinary profession is critical, ensuring long-term retention is equally important. Addressing financial barriers, providing structured career support, and enhancing available mental health resources is key to securing a sustainable veterinary workforce in South Australia and nationally.

Recommendation 2: The South Australian Government support and adopt a rural placement incentives scheme that waives HECS debt for veterinary science graduates while they are working in regional and rural areas.

Working conditions, including remuneration, unpaid hours, safe workplace culture and client conduct standards

Systemic issues affecting rural and regional veterinarians include remuneration gaps, unpaid work, workplace safety concerns, and client interactions.¹⁰ Rural veterinarians experience extensive unpaid work often exceeding 20 hours of on-call duty per week and are spending up to 5 extra hours per week responding to emergency call-backs. With limited availability of veterinary professionals in these areas, regional clinics struggle to manage workload distribution, increasing the risk of burnout and workforce attrition. Empowering regional vet practices through providing targeted business training, financial incentives, and administrative support would likely enhance operational efficiency and help attract and retain skilled professionals in these regions.

Recommendation 3: That the South Australian Government investigate the need for a rural veterinary business support program, aimed at providing targeted guidance on business operations, legal compliance, and financial management.

⁸ Australian Veterinary Association, *Veterinary students raise their hand to help solve regional workforce crisis - peak body reiterates calls to wipe regional HECS debt*, Media Release, <https://www.ava.com.au/media-centre/media-releases/hecs-debt/>

⁹ Australian Veterinary Association, *Veterinary Workforce Survey 2023-24 Analysis Report*, https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/advocacy/workforce-survey/ava-2023_2024-workforce-survey-report.pdf

¹⁰ Australian Veterinary Association, *Veterinary Workforce Survey 2023-24 Analysis Report*, https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/advocacy/workforce-survey/ava-2023_2024-workforce-survey-report.pdf

Measuring and identifying initiatives to prevent the high rates of suicide and burnout among veterinarians, particularly in regional and rural areas

Burnout and mental health challenges are increasingly prevalent across all veterinary service professions, with those in regional and rural areas facing unique and heightened pressures. Veterinarians in these areas often work in isolation, manage high workloads with limited resources, and support clients dealing with emotionally charged situations and financial constraints.

Livestock SA understands that it has been known for some time that the rate of mental health challenges in the veterinarian workplace is higher than the general population.¹¹ Programs, such as the AVA's THRIVE initiative, have been established to support veterinarians and veterinary staff in leading fulfilling, sustainable, and healthy careers.

Building a better understanding of the issues facing past and present veterinarians will ensure fit-for-purpose support and solutions can be provided. This may include gathering better quality data and developing mentoring opportunities where valued experiences can be exchanged and shared amongst new and incumbent professionals. A tailored mental health program may also assist with some of the sector specific issues being experienced by the current workforce.

Recommendation 4: The South Australian Government review the AVA's wellness initiative THRIVE and other relevant support programs to determine current gaps to tailor investment that can help address the high rate of suicide and burnout in regional and rural areas.

The role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray, and homeless animals and injured wildlife, dealing with emergency situations, and the financial burden incurred by veterinarians in those circumstances

In December 2022, Livestock SA welcomed the State Government's commitment of an additional \$6.8 million over four years to help combat the increased risk of EADs¹². However, remain concerned about South Australia's ability to effectively manage an EAD outbreak due to a shortage of veterinarians with the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience. The AUSVETPLAN framework relies on international veterinary professionals to supplement response efforts; however, technical and language barriers may limit the effectiveness of this approach.

One of the key challenges is the complex and time-consuming registration process for overseas veterinarians seeking to practice in Australia. To address this issue, the government should explore reciprocal agreements that facilitate the seamless integration of qualified international professionals into the Australian veterinary workforce. Additionally, regulatory and administrative burdens, including the high cost of professional indemnity insurance pose significant barriers to both local and international veterinarians. Streamlining registration and accreditation processes, particularly during an outbreak, is critical to ensuring a rapid and effective response.

There is also a pressing shortage of veterinarians in regional farming communities, particularly in the northern areas of the state, where there is limited to no after-hours veterinary services currently available in some locations. Emergency callouts can be costly and often delayed, leading to potential livestock losses and increased financial strain on livestock producers. This shortage not only threatens animal welfare but also heightens biosecurity risks for South Australia's livestock industry.

¹¹ Australian Veterinary Association. 2021 Veterinary Wellness Strategy: Summary of research findings, <https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/resources/thrive/documents/ava-short-report-research-findings.pdf>

¹² <https://livestocksa.com.au/6-8m-to-protect-sa-from-emergency-animal-diseases>

Recommendation 5: Accelerate the registration process for overseas veterinarians seeking to work in South Australia, with a focus on reducing administrative burdens and regulatory barriers, particularly in the event of an emergency animal disease outbreak.

Recommendation 6: Conduct a comprehensive audit of South Australia's capacity to respond to an EAD outbreak, assessing the existing veterinary workforce, resource limitations, and access to insurance. Develop and implement necessary measures to strengthen response capabilities and ensure effective disease management.

Reviewing the roles and responsibilities of veterinary nurses with a view to relieving pressure on veterinarians, as well as the training of veterinary nurses and the related workforce

The role of veterinary nurses and their capacity to support the provision of animal health care has long been debated in rural and regional areas of the state. Livestock SA acknowledges that roles and responsibilities of veterinary nurses presents an opportunity to relieve some of the pressure currently placed on rural veterinarians; however, an opportunity exists to clarify and strengthen career options such as the veterinary technology role to further support workforce sustainability.

The introduction of the Bachelor of Veterinary Technology course at the University of Adelaide in 2020 was intended to strengthen the veterinary workforce and alleviate pressure on veterinarians by equipping graduates with industry-specific skills. However, instead of providing a clear pathway for veterinary technicians to take on expanded roles, anecdotal evidence suggests the course has introduced confusion regarding responsibilities within veterinary teams. While veterinary technologists are trained in advanced animal-care roles—including imaging, anaesthesia, and emergency response—the lack of clear distinctions between veterinary nurses, technologists, and veterinarians has created uncertainty in workforce planning and practice integration. This needs to be rectified to ensure the new course achieves the desired outcomes.

Recommendation 7: Establish clear distinctions between veterinary nurses, veterinary technologists, and veterinarians to ensure a structured and effective workforce. This should include defining scope of practice, responsibilities, and career progression pathways.

Strategies to improve access to veterinary care during a cost-of-living crisis

We understand that most veterinarian practices have payment plans in place for clients who cannot pay upfront, but during times of considerable financial strain, this may not be sufficient.

South Australia's livestock industry is confronting the immediate pressures of severe drought conditions—among the driest on record—and the long-term challenges of market volatility. The compounding effects of these factors, including the 2023 red meat price crash, have left producers under extraordinary strain. Access to veterinary care is essential for maintaining animal health and welfare, yet rising costs and economic hardship threaten the viability of these critical services.

Governments must therefore continue to invest appropriate levels of funding in the right areas, including drought, that will build more resilient, productive and sustainable livestock businesses.

The role of universities in preparing veterinarians for practice and the transition to the workforce

South Australia relies on the University of Adelaide to train its veterinarians. A key concern in relation to our industry and regional and rural areas is the insufficient focus on large animal veterinary care. Anecdotal evidence from veterinary students has highlighted that there has been

limited availability for hands-on training opportunities in large animal practice, resulting in graduates who may not feel fully prepared to enter the workforce in rural or livestock-focused roles.

This level of graduate veterinarian preparedness does not adequately equip a new entrant for the pressures of a regional clinic, where there is already a shortage of staff and the demand for large animal expertise is high. While we understand the funding implications of increased large animal focus in the curriculum, the current approach tends to ‘push’ graduates towards small animal practice, which exacerbates the workforce shortages in regional and rural areas.

We acknowledge the significant investments that are being made by the University of Adelaide in the sheep and cattle yards, an infectious disease and sheep resilience grazing systems facility; however, continued funding and support are essential to ensure that veterinarians receive the highest standard of training, equipping them with the skills and expertise needed to meet the evolving challenges of animal health and biosecurity in the livestock industry.

Additionally, while entry requirements for the veterinary program have changed to attract a broader range of students, these adjustments have not successfully increased retention within the mixed and large animal veterinary practices. Greater support for students interested in large animal work is needed. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach, including increased funding for practical training, expanded rural placement opportunities, and targeted incentives to encourage graduates to remain in large animal practice. A holistic review of the current entry requirements is urgently needed to address the ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining mixed and large animal veterinarians in South Australia capable of servicing the state’s diverse animal industries.

Recommendation 8: The South Australian Government strengthen investments in supporting the education of large animal practice veterinarians in South Australia.

Recommendation 9: A comprehensive review of the entry requirements for veterinary science in South Australia be undertaken to improve the recruitment and retention of mixed and large animal veterinarians. This should include evaluating admission criteria, exploring alternative pathways for regional students interested in the profession, and implementing targeted incentives to attract candidates interested in rural and production animal practice.

The ongoing shortage of veterinarians in rural and regional areas poses a significant threat to the sustainability of the agricultural sector. To mitigate these risks, greater incentives are needed to attract and retain registered veterinarians, particularly those specialising in large and mixed animal clinical practices. Targeted support and strategic investment across the veterinary sector are essential to ensure the livestock industry’s needs are met with confidence.

Please contact the Livestock SA office on (08) 8297 2299 or via email at admin@livestocksa.com.au if you would like to discuss this submission further.

Yours sincerely

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