

A New Problem for Farmers: Few Veterinarians

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GORHAM, Me. — Rainbow had the bad luck to try to have a baby on a Thursday.

Thursday was her doctor's day off, and there was no one else for miles who could handle a complicated breech birth, not when the mother was a Holstein cow.

“Had the vet been here, we could have done a C-section and she could have lived through it fine,” said Becki Benson, the owner, with her husband, Eddie, of Rainbow and 150 other dairy cows.

Instead, “I worked on her till I was just exhausted,” Mr. Benson said. “But I ended up having to take the cow to a butcher shop, where she got processed for hamburger.”

These days, the Bensons' veterinarian is pretty much the only cow doctor in a 1,300-square-mile swath of Maine, and one of only about 30 large-animal veterinarians left in the entire state.

And across the country, veterinarians who care for the animals that provide the United States with food are in increasingly short supply.

For one, there is generally more money to be made caring for cats and dogs. And with fewer students from farm backgrounds, fewer gravitate to rural jobs, especially if a spouse needs work, too. Large-animal care can be tough, even dangerous — think of maneuvering in frigid weather around 1,000-pound cows in manure-filled pens. And more veterinarians are women, generally less inclined toward large animals.

Since 1990, the number of veterinarians focusing on large animals has dropped to fewer than 4,500 from nearly 6,000, according to the

American Veterinary Medical Association, which said those doctors now made up less than 10 percent of private-practice veterinarians. A recent study predicted that by 2016, 4 out of every 100 food-animal veterinary jobs would go unfilled.

“We look at it as a crisis,” said Dr. Roger Mahr, the association’s president, who cited serious consequences not only for the well-being of farmers and animals, but also potentially for food safety and the impact of non-native diseases like bird flu.

“Of all the emerging diseases in people in the last 25 years, 75 percent of those were transmitted from animals,” Dr. Mahr said. “Veterinarians are the ones to identify those diseases in animals first.”

Pressed to address the problem, Congress enacted a law in 2004 offering to repay the student loans of veterinarians working in underserved areas, but it has received little financing.

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States are jumping in, with loan repayment or grant programs under way or proposed in Kansas, Maine, Missouri, North Dakota, Texas and elsewhere.

In Iowa, students at the state’s veterinary school formed Vsmart, which barnstorms county fairs and 4-H meetings to entice teenagers to become rural veterinarians.

And in Oklahoma, State Representative Don Armes, Republican of Faxon, has introduced a bill offering tax breaks to large-animal veterinarians. Mr. Armes, a cattleman, knows the shortage firsthand, especially after one Friday last summer when a heifer struggled to deliver a large calf.

“I called six different veterinarians and could not get any of them,” Mr. Armes said. “We lost the calf. Almost lost the heifer.”

The dearth of food-animal veterinarians (the shortage is not as critical for horses) reflects seismic shifts in farming, veterinary medicine, the economy and American culture.

Money is critical when veterinary students graduate \$100,000 in debt. While some say salaries can be the same, no matter the animal size, many say small-animal practices are more profitable, allowing for dozens of clinic appointments daily instead of requiring trips of long distances between farms and ranches. And dog or cat owners more often pay for expensive surgery and treatment.

“For Fifi the family dog, you’ll spend \$1,500 or \$2,000,” Mr. Armes said. “That old cow — at some point economics kick in and you say if she’s going to cost \$1,500, I can buy two cows for that, so I should have shot her.”

Tembra Gatlin, 27, who was reared on an Oklahoma ranch, started veterinary school “large animal all the way,” she said.

She changed her mind after doing “a C-section on a cow and it’s 50 bucks,” Ms. Gatlin said. “Do a C-section on a Chihuahua and you get \$300. It’s the money. I hate to say that.”

A study by the American Veterinary Medical Association found the median starting salary of large-animal veterinarians to be \$60,500, \$11,000 less than that of small-animal veterinarians. For veterinarians practicing 25 years, the gap was even wider: \$98,500 for large-animal practitioners, \$122,500 for small.

In Maine, the closing of about 250 dairy farms since 1993 makes it harder to attract new veterinarians and leaves remaining farm doctors overstretched.

“If you can’t get a vet or it’s so expensive because they have to travel such a distance, farmers end up just dealing with it themselves, and in a lot of cases that’s not a good idea,” said Dr. Donald Hoenig, Maine’s state veterinarian.

Timothy Leary, a farmer in Saco, Me., nearly lost a cow with a prolapsed uterus when no veterinarian was available. “You either eat your mistakes or you bury them, if you literally can’t get anyone,” Mr. Leary said. Even the small-animal clinic where Mr. Leary’s wife is a technician could not help him.

Dr. Dennis M. Brewster treated animals of the Bensons’ and other farmers until a few years ago, when he felt forced to switch to dogs and cats because he could not find another large-animal doctor to help cover emergencies.

“I just didn’t want to face all of these dear people and tell them that I could not come to their farm for an emergency, and then when I showed up have them say, ‘You know that prize cow you didn’t come for died,’ ” he said. “Now, some farmers have had to make hard decisions. They’ve had to kill cows for things that we used to fix.”

The Bensons, who raise valuable cows for breeding as well as milking, now shoulder many veterinary responsibilities, giving cows antibiotics for mastitis and intravenous calcium for milk fever.

Their current veterinarian, Dr. Becky Myers, 52, worked for years round the clock.

“Half killed myself,” Dr. Myers said. Back problems developed. A cow broke her hand.

When she had a baby son, farmers with sick animals “would be pushing the stroller around while I was pushing a cow’s uterus back in. I used to call people in the middle of the night to come over and watch him when a farmer called. He gave me the nickname Mommy Moo.”

Three times she managed to hire partners, but they either left Maine or large-animal care. In 2003, Dr. Myers said, she scaled back to four 10-hour days, “which people here consider to be part time.”

Before reducing her hours, Dr. Myers held a training session for farmers, providing a detailed manual with tips on giving cows anesthesia and pumping their stomachs. Her schedule is still packed. One recent day was spent vaccinating calves for brucellosis, helping a sheep give birth, poking into a heifer's uterus to determine pregnancy, inserting magnets into a sick cow to attract metal fragments it might have swallowed and examining an arthritic goat whose owner had driven 70 miles because no doctor was nearer.

But with so few counterparts — one of the closest is Doc Cooper, 80, an hour's drive north — “people get stuck and I feel really bad about it,” she said. “It was one of those decisions — is my health and my family life more important or less important than somebody's cow?”

Dr. Myers once visited the Bensons every 10 days; now it is once a month. They understand her need to cut back. Still, just in the last month, one cow, Darling, had a foot problem the Bensons could not diagnose. Another, Karissa, had mastitis, but the Bensons initially misdiagnosed the strain and gave the wrong antibiotic, delaying her recovery and milk production.

And Alpha, a cow worth thousands of dollars, became weak and feverish after miscarrying twins, unfortunately on a weekend. When the Bensons tried moving her to a comfortable pen, she literally dropped dead.

“The fact that there's nothing you can do, you accept it as a business expense now,” Mr. Benson said. “You didn't used to. If you have livestock, sooner or later you're going to have deadstock.”