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Veterinarian Jobs Go Unfilled

For an aspiring veterinarian, Iowa State University student Pete Thomas is in a distinct minority. He wants to work with livestock rather than pets. He wants to stay in Iowa.

"I thought that vet school would be a good way to stay connected with agriculture, be with livestock and stay on farms without necessarily having the risk involved with being a farmer," he said.

But veterinarians and livestock industry officials worry that there are too few future vets like Thomas, especially if there is an outbreak of diseases such as avian influenza or foot and mouth.

Research published last year by the American Veterinary Medical Association projected that the need for livestock veterinarians will grow by 12 percent to 13 percent a year and that four in every 100 positions will remain vacant.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the biggest employer of veterinarians, will be short as many as 400 in coming years without an increase in recruitment and a slowdown in retirements, officials say. USDA vets conduct research, investigate disease outbreaks and inspect cattle at slaughterhouses for signs of illnesses such as mad cow disease.

"If we don't have food-animal practitioners in the field as the first line of defense to detect some of these things, that's a real vulnerability we have," said Mike Chaddock, a former Michigan state veterinarian who now works for the Association of American Veterinary Colleges.

The nation's 28 veterinary schools typically graduate 2,500 students a year. Fewer than 10 percent of those go into food-animal jobs, Chaddock said. Experts say twice that number is needed.

A federal law passed in 2004 authorized the USDA to repay the student debt of new veterinarians who work in rural areas or inner cities, but the department has yet to implement rules for the program.

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