

- 1) The authority to administer the NVMSA has not yet been delegated to a specific USDA Agency, though a concerted, reasoned, step-wise process to reach this goal has been under way over the past several months. USDA Agencies whose purviews encompass veterinary medicine and/or higher education (CSREES, FSIS, APHIS, and ARS) do not currently administer any programs which can serve as models for the loan repayment program outlined in the NVMSA authorization. Accordingly, the program's structure has been developed "from the ground up", a process that has included an initial phase of creative programmatic design, consultation, analysis and comparison.
- 2) Interagency efforts within USDA to develop a veterinary educational loan-repayment program consistent with the spirit and letter of the NVMSA have been persistent and ongoing since funds were first appropriated for the Act in the fall of 2005. Meetings of key personnel and interested parties charged with leading this effort have occurred monthly, and sometimes weekly, and these meetings have led to substantial progress. Guidance has also been sought from HHS' National Health Services Corp Office which oversees an analogous program for human health professionals.
- 3) The FY 2006 Department of Defense Appropriations Bill converted dollars appropriated for NVMSA from one-year to no-year funds. This means the FY 2006 funds appropriated for NVMSA can be carried over into FY 2007 if they have not been obligated by the end of FY 2006.
- 4) To facilitate appropriate delegation by the Secretary, an NVMSA Working Group (NVMSA-WG) within USDA CSREES has developed a series of whitepapers describing potential programmatic strategies for implementing NVMSA. Because these strategies vary in key respects, the selection of strategy directly impacts the decision regarding which Agency could best implement a specific approach.
- 5) These alternative strategies have been circulated for review and comment among sister USDA agencies that have an interest in the objectives, execution and outcomes of NVMSA implementation.
- 6) Because NVMSA defines an entirely new program, a series of procedures must be carried out once a viable and robust programmatic structure has been agreed upon. These procedures generally include, in part, rulemaking, a period of public comment and an ensuing period of response to public comments. Temporal constraints imposed by this standard process would make it impossible to distribute loan repayments to awardees before the middle of FY 2007, at the earliest. However, appreciating the importance of instantiating this program as soon as possible, the NVMSA-WG has developed a 2-phase draft strategy (discussed further in point 7 below), the first of which is anticipated to lead to distribution of awards as early as late fall of 2006.
- 7) In a meeting attended by the Administrators of CSREES, FSIS and APHIS, consensus was reached in support of a draft NVMSA program strategy, known as Option C. Option C entails both a short-term plan aimed at making loan repayments to a specific category of eligible veterinarians as soon as possible, and a longer-term strategy that provides a mechanism to obtain validated veterinary workforce needs estimates for the various sectors identified in the Act. The latter is important because reliable quantitative estimates are currently lacking for many specific sectors of presumptive veterinary shortage, yet such information is needed to support the required rulemaking process and ensure that shortage areas and eligibility are objectively defined.
- 8) A decision memorandum that outlines Option C, agreed to in principal by the Administrators of CSREES, FSIS, and APHIS, has been forwarded to the USDA's Office of General Counsel for review and submission to the Secretary.
- 9) Once the Secretary has responded to the decision memorandum, CSREES, FSIS, and APHIS are prepared to communicate USDA's plans to stakeholders and encourage their continued engagement in the implementation of a valuable and sustainable program.