

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR BROWNBACK

SEC24

NATIONAL VETERINARY MEDICAL SERVICES ACT

Question: In the 2006 Agriculture Appropriations hearings, you stated that the implementation of the full National Veterinary Medical Service Act would take eighteen months. One year later, we are informed that you have not yet submitted for public comments a proposed rule and we are concerned that the National Veterinary Medical Service Act may not be implemented within the timeframe you initially provided. What steps do you have planned that will assure implementation of the NVMSA by October 2007 (eighteen months from the testimony in which you estimated eighteen months would be necessary to complete the rules)?

Answer: Although there are additional administrative steps that must be completed prior to the distribution of funds, a framework for the program has been proposed by CSREES. This proposal has recently been reviewed by the appropriate legal and regulatory entities. On March 12, 2007, the Final Rule was approved. The Final Rule was published in the Federal Register on March 19, 2007, and permits CSREES to implement a NVMSA program. The Department recognizes the importance of this Act to both the veterinary community as well as the supporters of the Act. You can be assured that we have communicated with agency personnel responsible for moving this program forward to ensure that it is implemented appropriately and as quickly as possible.

SEC25

Question: Section 2 of NVMSA, P.L. 108-161, reads "The National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 (7 U.S.C. 3101 et seq.) is amended by inserting after section 1415 the following new section:..." Given that 3101 of the 7 U.S.C. is entitled "'Purposes of agricultural research, extension, and education" and that the money appropriated for NVMSA has been allocated to CSREES's Research and Education Activities, why has the USDA not formally designated CSREES as the administering agency for NVMSA?

Answer: A Final Rule will be published in the Federal Register on March 19, 2007 delegating NVMSA to CSREES.

SEC26

Question: A study of Food Supply Veterinary Medicine released in June 2006 quantified existing and projected shortages of veterinary practitioners in various practice areas. How has this study helped the NVMSA implementation process?

Answer: CSREES has utilized the 2006 Kansas State University study on Food Supply Veterinary Medicine to identify an area of critical need in veterinary medicine. Results of this study indicate that among the highest forecasted future shortages in veterinary practice between 2004 and 2016 will be the federal-animal health career and federal-food safety and security sectors. The finding of the study correlates with the large number of difficult-to-fill vacancies for veterinarians in FSIS.

SEC27

Question: I do not consider the short-term pilot FSIS program, currently being developed by CSREES, to be an acceptable substitute for progress on the intended NVMSA program, especially the parts of NVMSA that would address rural practice and emergency response shortages. Furthermore, I do not approve of CSREES's intention to reprogram the NVMSA funds into a different loan repayment program within FSIS. Is your work on the FSIS pilot program diverting resources that could otherwise be used to implement the rural and emergency response portions of NVMSA?

Answer: CSREES has entered into a reimbursable agreement to implement the loan repayment provisions of the Act. The FSIS-oriented implementation strategy represents an approach that enables the initiation of the use of NVMSA funds as loan repayments to eligible veterinarians in the shortest possible time frame. Funding is not sufficient to implement the emergency portion of the Act.

SEC28

Question: Your colleague, former HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson, was quoted to have said, "I, for the life of me, cannot understand why terrorists have not attacked our food supply because it is so easy to do." Given that the risks of bioterrorism are high, that the federal government has been criticized for its preparedness for and response to recent disasters, and that you have in the form of NVMSA a program within the USDA that would create a "Veterinary National Guard" available for immediate mobilization in the event of a zoonotic or major food animal disease outbreak and improve disease surveillance in the form of escalated geographic veterinary coverage, why are you not expediting the implementation of NVMSA?

Answer: Implementation of the loan repayment sections of NVMSA are being expedited through the use of a reimbursable agreement with FSIS, which was developed in order to take advantage of current student loan regulations. Funding is not sufficient to implement the emergency portion of the Act. Moreover, eligibility for service to the Federal Government in emergency situations is dependent on first establishing eligibility for the loan repayment program. The current strategy, therefore, helps to establish a population of veterinarians eligible to serve as emergency responders.