May 31, 2011

The Honorable Harold Rogers   The Honorable Norm Dicks
Chairman   Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations   Committee on Appropriations
H-307 Capitol   1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515   Washington, DC 20515

RE: FY 2012 funding for the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program and National Animal Health Laboratory Network

Dear Mr. Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Dicks,

Later today the full Appropriations Committee will mark up the fiscal year 2012 agriculture spending bill. Of the bill's $125.5 billion in total spending, just $17.2 billion is discretionary. This relatively small amount of discretionary funding directly supports programs that fulfill critical functions for our country's food safety, food security, animal health and welfare, and public health.

I write to strongly urge you to restore funding stripped away by the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee-passed fiscal year 2012 spending bill for two critically important programs – the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (7 U.S.C. 3101, Sect. 1415A) and the National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN).

The Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) was cut by 12.5 percent or $600,000. The VMLRP is responsible for placing food animal and public health veterinarians in federally designated veterinary shortage areas all across our country. Presently there are 218 designated areas identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Each of these areas is in desperate need of veterinarians to establish food animal and public health practices. Last year 260 veterinarians applied for the program and 62 were selected to fill shortages in 34 states. Participants provide an array of services for food animal producer's livestock including beef, dairy cows, poultry, swine, dairy goats, meat goats, sheep, lamb, and farm horses. Participants ensure animal health and welfare while protecting the nation's food supply; they perform services required for interstate movement of livestock; perform tuberculosis checks and certified blood sample services for Brucellosis, Bluetongue, and Bovine Viral Diarrhea. Participants provide reproduction management consultation services; health and nutrition consultation; and disease surveillance and diagnostics for state and federal program diseases and for foreign animal diseases. Participants may also play a role in a state's veterinary emergency response team and take part in disease control and eradication programs. I urge you to restore the $600,000 in funding that was cut for the VMLRP in the Subcommittee-passed bill.

The surveillance and surge capacity functions of National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN) are critical to livestock and poultry industries, and our nation's food safety and security. Our nation needs to protect its agriculture industry, food supply and public health. Funding for NAHLN was eliminated by the Subcommittee when it zeroed out funding

for the National Institute for Food and Agriculture's Food and Agriculture Defense Initiative (FADI) Integrated Activities. The total FADI allocation in support of NAHLN was about $4.4 million annually. Any reduction, however small, in NAHLN's budget places our nation's world class animal industries and our food supply at grave risk.

Twenty-eight NAHLN lab are supported by the $4.4 million previously allocated through FADI. Funding was reduced by 39% in fiscal year 2011. The proposal to completely eliminate the funding in fiscal year 2012 will result in serious risk to our nation's food supply. Zeroing out funding is an enormous mistake and may create a critical problem for our nation in responding to a disease crisis when it comes. The relatively small investment in NAHLN pales in comparison to the economic losses our nation may suffer if the labs are unable to continue their work in the event of serious animal disease event.

The mission of NAHLN is surveillance, rapid detection, response and recovery from any foreign animal disease or emerging diseases which threaten the nation's food supply and public health. The program is part of a national plan to support, coordinate, and maintain formal lines of communication among existing state veterinary diagnostic laboratories and governmental agencies that provide a coordinated network for rapid recognition, identification, and response to routine and/or emerging disease and emergencies. The NAHLN infrastructure provides critical roles in responding to disease outbreaks and animal health emergencies that could devastate our nation's food supply and public health. The state of readiness and surge capacity of state and university diagnostic labs is highly dependent on federal funding to provide this national level of surveillance and response. Federal funding for NAHLN is grossly insufficient and inappropriate in light of the enormous losses associated with response to and recovery from a serious animal disease event.

At a time when our nation is tightening its collective belt, you are faced with many tough decisions. No one can deny that our nation is facing serious fiscal challenges; however stripping funding from the VMLRP and NAHLN programs is unwise. I urge you to do everything in your power to protect our nation's food safety and food security by opposing funding cuts these two programs. Please do not hesitate to call upon the AVMA to serve as an information resource on these or any other veterinary medicine issue. I may be reached at 202-289-3205 or mlutschaunig@avma.org.

Sincerely,

Mark Lutschaunig
Director
Governmental Relations Division
American Veterinary Medical Association

CC: Members of the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives