

Shortage of veterinarians in rural and remote areas

Summary report

Brussels, 8 July 2020

OVERVIEW

FVE surveyed the shortage of veterinarians in rural and remote areas¹ in Europe. A questionnaire was addressed to the FVE Members organisations and target contacts within competent authorities. Data was received for 28 countries, namely: Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands and the UK. We thank all for the great input.

This report refers to rural areas, including remote areas, which comprise any location that is difficult to reach and away from urban centres.

The shortage of veterinarians in rural areas is a concern in all the surveyed countries. Around **78.5% are already experiencing a shortage**, and while for the rest **21.5%** the shortage is not reported to be significant, evidence suggests it will worsen in the coming years.

The shortage of veterinarians in remote areas is generally not reported to be linked to a shortage of veterinarians in the whole country or a lack of new graduates. Rather, it reflects the work and life preferences of veterinarians nowadays, that prefer to work with companion animals and larger practices in urban locations². Thus, it is **understood to be a problem specifically affecting rural and remote areas**.

The reported **reasons** for the lack of veterinary professionals in rural and remote areas are diverse: unfavourable working conditions (e.g. travelling long distances, climate conditions, long shifts etc.), difficulties to achieve the desired work/life balance and weak demand as some farmers cannot afford veterinary services. The increased corporatisation of the veterinary profession also plays a part because corporations tend to get established in urban areas and focus on companion animal practice. Finally, the lack of veterinary professionals in rural and remote locations is part of the larger trend seeing population outflowing to urban locations³. This evidence reinforces the severity and urgency of the problem.

The reported **consequences** of this problem affect veterinarians, animals and farmers alike. By extension, it hinders the economic development of rural areas. The increased workload for the remaining veterinarians tends to lead to burnout and retention problems. In some cases, veterinarians need to engage in activities, such as cattle insemination, to make up for the low demand of other types of services such as preventive work.

¹ Rural areas cover 44% of the EU-28 territory, and account for 19% of the EU population today. (European Commission (2019), "Jobs and Growth in Rural Areas", *CAP specific objectives*, Issue n°8)

² FVE demographic survey.

³ Between 2013 to 2017, 500 million people left rural areas. (European Commission (2019), "Jobs and Growth in Rural Areas", *CAP specific objectives*, Issue n°8)

Rural population outflow affects many other sectors such as the human health profession. The World Health Organisation wrote a report on the issue in 2010: "Increasing access to health workers in remote and rural areas through improved retention. Global policy recommendations"

There is also a potentially negative impact on animal health and welfare because it becomes difficult to manage all cases, and preventive work is neglected.

Some countries have already taken **measures** to tackle the problem with varying strategies, including a network of state-funded veterinarians in the Nordic countries, a tutored internship programme in France and a veterinary scheme offering subsidies for veterinary services in Scotland.

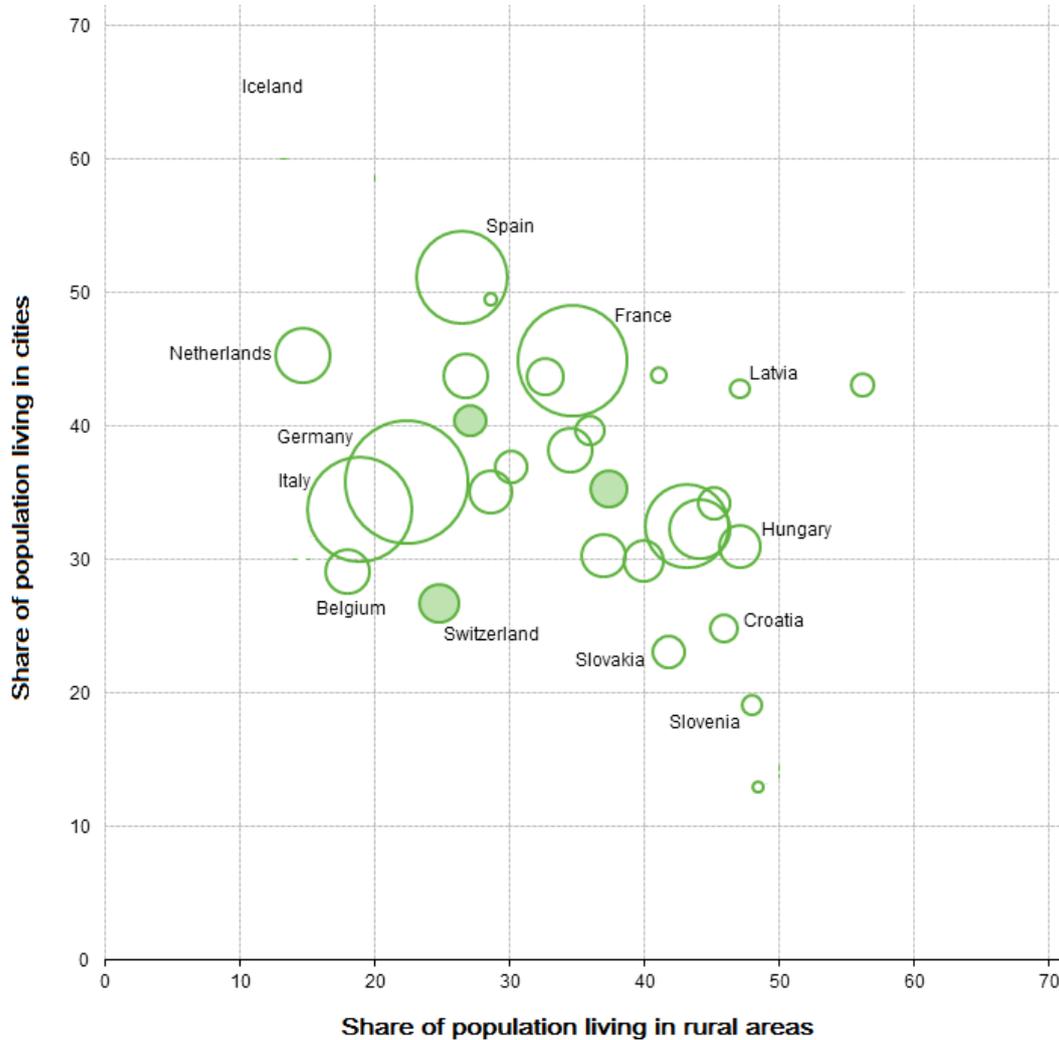


Figure 1. Share of EU population by the degree of urbanisation in % (2015, Eurostat)

A multitude of reasons are reported to lead to these shortages

- **Lack of attractiveness of rural areas.** The lack of services and infrastructures in remote areas does not meet with current social aspirations, such as raising a family or finding the desired work/life balance.
- **A preference for companion animal practice⁴.** Companion animal practice aligns better to graduates' vision of the veterinary profession since a majority of students report animal welfare as the main driver for taking up a veterinary career⁵. Farm animals are treated at herd level and not so much individually,

⁴ 67% of European veterinarians work in small animal practice while 54% are in farm practice (26% cattle, 14% poultry and 14% swine). (FVE (2019), *Survey of the Veterinary Profession in Europe*)

⁵ FVE (2019), *Survey of the Veterinary Profession in Europe*

and veterinary care is provided depending on its economical profitability. Companion animal practice can better fulfil professional aspirations.

- **Economic hardship experienced by farmers.** Because of the low financial power of small and medium livestock businesses, they cannot always afford to pay for veterinary services, and this results in a decrease in the demand and thus in a lack of sustainability for veterinary practices.
- **Difficult to set up a profitable business.** Linked to the previous point, the low demand for veterinarian services implies that the volume of business makes it difficult or impossible for rural veterinarians to make a living. Consequently, professionals are not willing to buy or set up new practices in these areas.
- **Increased corporatisation of the veterinary profession⁶.** Corporations are slowly but steadily settling as an important business model in the sector. The attractiveness of corporations lies in a more balanced schedule, well-equipped clinics and a stable income. However, corporate practices tend to settle in urban areas and the companion animal sector, as this is a more profitable market.
- **Working conditions.** Having to work long hours to make up for the lack of workforce, travelling long distances and increased on-call duties render rural practice unattractive for most. These unfavourable conditions result in stress, burnout, and ultimately retention problems.
- **Decline of public procurements.** In most countries, the government contracts several tasks to private veterinarians such as on mandatory vaccinations and disease prevention activities. In some countries, these public procurements make up an important part of the workload of private practitioners in rural areas. However, in several countries, they are declining, which is making it more difficult for practitioners to be profitable.

Shortages are reported to lead to potentially severe consequences

‘Veterinary desertification is the last sign before agricultural desertification’

- **Welfare of the veterinary profession in rural practices.** Veterinarians in rural and remote areas are under great pressure to cover the demand for their services due to shortages of competent assisting staff and clients who face difficulties to pay. Serious retention problems arise from this situation.
- **Animal health and welfare problems.** The shortage of veterinary professionals impacts preventive work and early diagnosis, which is particularly important in the case of notifiable diseases. This can lead to disease outbreaks and, with a loss of livestock, economic benefits also decrease. Emergency services cannot always be guaranteed either. In those cases where farmers experience economic hardship, they will choose not to call a veterinarian until it is too late, or they will even try to take on veterinary duties themselves. Shortage of veterinarians also means that they have less time to attend to their clients and so the quality of the service offered can be affected. Finally, the shortage of veterinarians puts the welfare of the animals seriously at risk.
- **Shrinking of the agricultural economy in remote areas.** Shortage of veterinarians in rural areas further hinders the development of the livestock sector and rural areas more generally. Farmers may experience an economic loss as a consequence of the poor health of those animals that were not able to receive professional treatment on time or disease outbreaks that went unprevented and undetected. Some livestock businesses are having to close down, and the number of small and family farms has reduced substantially over the last decade⁷. This is especially worrying given the contribution of rural areas to the food supply chain.

⁶ Data on the rise in the number of corporations: from 1% in 2015 to 3% in 2019. Market share of corporations varies between 0% to 52% across EU countries. There was also a rise in the number of limited liability companies, from 11% to 21%. (FVE (2019), *Survey of the Veterinary Profession in Europe*)

⁷ Between 2005-2016, is estimated that up to 4.2 million farms were lost across the Member States, of which the vast majority (~85 %) were small farms. The largest reductions in farm numbers were recorded in Poland (~1.1 million farms, 43

Some countries have already put measures in place

The response of the countries to this situation focuses on three main areas: educational, legislative and financial support.

- **Placement programmes.** Veterinary faculties in France offer tutored internships, financed by the government, with an 80% success rate of students staying in rural farming upon completion of the programme. Keys of its success are tailored training in the hands of an experienced rural veterinarian and deep immersion in rural practice. The programme also benefits rural veterinarians since it helps secure the continuation of their businesses.
- **Financial aid.** A public funding scheme in Spain, Scotland and France pays for veterinarian services in small and medium-size rural farms or areas identified at risk. These measures increase the demand for veterinary services which makes setting up a profitable veterinary business more plausible, while it ensures that the health of animals is looked after. Countries can help also by continuing public procurements to mandate private practitioners to perform certain official tasks, such as mandatory vaccinations.
- **State-employed veterinarians.** In Finland, Greece, Norway and Sweden, it is a legislated duty for veterinary services to be organised and financed at the municipal or regional level. In this way, essential animal healthcare is ensured across the territory, including rural and remote areas.
- **Networks to coordinate practices within the same area** contribute to better work conditions. Networks contribute to better management and distribution of working time, while at the same time it allows to create more attractive schedules and to set up a rotative on-call schedule. It's also a way of tackling isolation, as it puts professionals in contact. An example of this has been done in Scotland.
- **Commissioning of studies to study the phenomenon.** Some countries e.g. Ireland did studies to analyse the availability of veterinary services to farmers in rural and remote areas. This is important to know the precise extent of the problem and the areas which are most problematic.

The FVE recommend that more can and should be done

- **Support regular preventive veterinary visits to all farms.** The new Animal Health Law, coming into force in April 2021, also emphasises veterinary preventive work and makes it obligatory for farmers to receive regular veterinary visits. At present, the European Commission is drafting the new Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) and rural areas are one of the main objectives of the programme. Veterinarians are accounted for in some of the objectives, especially in the “Health, Food and Antimicrobial Resistance” pillar, which seeks to promote and incentivise the development of farm health plans⁸. To make this happen is vital.
- **Smart management of veterinary practice by using already available infrastructure for other purposes.** Veterinary practice nowadays depends at large on sophisticated tools for diagnosis and treatment. Veterinarians should be encouraged to enlarge their network of cooperatives with other health professions, e.g. medical doctors, dentists, laboratories, etc. to be able to deliver high-level services (e.g. radiography, echography, laboratory tests, etc) sustainably. This will benefit enhance a ‘One Health’ approach. This can be done in a variety of ways: for example, facilities such as buildings could be shared by the human and animal health professions to reduce costs. Establishing professional networks between health professionals could prevent the feeling of isolation and help them better integrate into the local society and benefit the rural population.
- **Facilitating favourable living conditions⁹.** For example, providing for child-care support, good maternity and annual leaves, as well as housing and a car. With supporting living conditions that

%), Romania (~0.8 million farms, 20 %) and Italy (~0.6 million farms, 34 %). Source: Eurostat Statistics explained Evaluation of farms and farmland 2005-2016

⁸ European Commission (2019), “Health, Food and Antimicrobial Resistance”, *CAP specific objectives*, Issue n°9, p6.

⁹ Austria is applying innovative ideas to address the lack of attractiveness of rural areas. More information can be found on <https://www.vetvoice.com.au/articles/creative-methods-to-attract-veterinarians-to-rural-areas/>

contribute to achieving the desired work/life balance, workforce retention will be more safely guaranteed.

- **Financing the supply of work equipment**¹⁰. Especially, facilitating those instruments that allow working off-site, such as telecommunication technologies and health monitoring technology. If the time spent on the road is reduced, the overall quality of their services is likely to improve as veterinarians will be able to spend more time with their clients. Also, it positively impacts on the veterinarians' wellbeing, prevents burnout and enhances job retention.

Different types of measures should be applied together to maximise results. Especially since the shortage of veterinarians in rural and remote areas is a multi-factorial problem, different aspects should be addressed in a joint effort. For example, the problem of farmers' low economic resources should be tackled jointly with the lack of attractiveness of rural areas. For instance, the new Farm to Fork strategy¹¹ sets different measures to improve the financial sustainability of farmers, mainly transitioning to a greener business model based on the circular economy, more sustainable food production practices and energy-efficient solutions.

¹⁰The WHO suggests that professional support measures help make rural posts more attractive and improve workforce retention. World Health Organisation (2010), *Increasing access to health workers in remote and rural areas*.

¹¹ European Commission Farm to Fork Strategy: https://ec.europa.eu/food/farm2fork_en

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS PER COUNTRY

Albania

In Albania rural population makes up for about 47.7% and the hilly-mountainous relief occupies about 60% of the entire territory of the country, habitats that are preferred for cattle breeding, sheep, goats, and wild fauna. Every year more people migrate to urban areas. This phenomenon has also included veterinarians, thus creating difficulties and shortages in the provision of veterinary service in rural areas.

Due to the lack of services and poor infrastructure in rural and remote areas, as well as difficulties to raise a family and find the desired work/life balance, there has been a lack of desire to work in these areas. There is a preference for companion animals practice, especially amongst the younger generation of veterinarians up to 35 years old, as it is more comfortable and profitable. Large animal practice is seen as difficult and it has a low-profit margin. The economic difficulties experienced by farmers have also affected the payment of veterinary services in rural areas. As a result, it is difficult for veterinarians to get enough income, and also to purchase instruments and equipment to apply new technologies. Finally, the corporatisation of the profession of veterinarian has not yet been established as an important business model, and this would solve many problems as it provides more balanced schedules, well-equipped clinics and a stable income.

Working conditions -extended hours, long-distance, high-cost travel, dealing with emergencies and on-call duties- are not attractive and can lead to stress and veterinarians leaving the profession.

The lack of veterinarians in rural and remote areas has put livestock farms in difficulty or out of service, mainly sheep and goat farms. It has had consequences not only for the protection animal health and well-being but also for many other veterinary problems such as control of animal products for human consumption, control of zoonoses and monitoring of waste, which have an impact on public health-

Due to many social and economic factors, Albania still does not have a simulation program for veterinarians in rural and remote areas. The Albanian parliament has made legal arrangements for the organization of veterinary service on a geographical basis by assigning veterinarians to all municipalities and communes of the country who will conduct surveillance and implement animal protection measures on all livestock farms. Incentives have also been proposed for all veterinarians and recent graduates to set up veterinary clinics and go to work in rural and remote areas of the country.

Albania still does not have a proper study report on the distribution of veterinary doctors and veterinary problems in rural and national areas, but the Order of the Albanian Veterinary Doctor has proposed to the relevant structures, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to undertake a study to anticipate perspective problems in the development of veterinary service.

Austria

There is already a shortage of veterinarians in rural areas in Austria.

The Institute of Advanced Studies of Austria (IAS) recently assessed the state of the veterinary market in Austria¹². It concluded that despite there being a sufficient number of new graduates to cover the overall demand for veterinarians in Austria at present, shortages in rural areas are expected to increase in the next 10 years, paired with growth in livestock numbers.

No measures are being studied or implemented at present.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

There is a shortage of veterinary professionals in the rural areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main reported reasons for this shortage are poor infrastructures in rural areas, the small business potential of rural practices, and the low economic power of farmers to invest in veterinary services.

¹² Binder, David; Terzieva, Berta; Unger, Martin; Haag, Nora; Mathä, Patrick and Engleder, Judith (2019) *Veterinärmedizinische Versorgung in Österreich*. [Research Report]

The main concern is the risk that this shortage poses to controlling the epizootic area of the country and more generally to manage possible disease outbreaks, both of which can have devastating economic effects for farmers and the economy at large.

No measures are being taken at the moment, neither in the form of financial incentives or initiatives to encourage young professionals.

Belgium

Overall, Belgium is not experiencing a shortage of veterinarians in rural areas, as the country is mainly urban. In the region of Wallonia, however, there has been a reduction in the number of veterinarians specialising in mixed practice as reported by the Union Professionnelle Vétérinaire (UPV)¹³. The report also found that a more attractive work-life balance and better economic conditions are the main reasons why veterinarians prefer companion practice over livestock practice.

Croatia

In Croatia, there is a generalised shortage of veterinarians in farm animal practice, especially in small farms in rural areas. In some areas, especially those with small numbers of large animals (Dubrovnik-Neretva, parts of Split-Dalmatia, Šibenik-Knin county, and parts of the islands) it is not possible to establish a thriving veterinary business.

In rural areas there operate veterinary organisations. Most of these are in a contract with the state, which subsidises disease control and animal food control activities. A significant percentage of a veterinarian's income derives from this contract with the state. However, the number of livestock is decreasing and thus it is feared that state procurement will also decline.

In the last twenty years, there has been a decline in the number of family farms while the number of big livestock businesses has grown. Big farms are allowed to perform veterinary duties, thus posing a threat to the veterinary profession. With lower demand for their services, veterinarians struggle to make an income.

Finally, the demand for veterinarians in farm animal practice cannot be met. Many young professionals move out of the country or choose to work in small animal practices, even though enough graduates are produced every year. Also, while it is a legal requirement for local authorities to ensure the provision of veterinary services, there is no enforcement mechanism to ensure the application of this rule.

As a result of the shortage of veterinarians in rural and remote areas, animal owners have difficulties in finding veterinary services and control measures for the prevention of disease cannot be guaranteed.

For now, the problem has not been solved, and there is no financial help stimulating the work of veterinarians in rural areas.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic does not report a serious lack of veterinarians in rural areas, but they observe a decreasing number of young professionals moving to remote areas. Given this trend, there are concerns that a shortage will be experienced soon in rural locations.

Currently, veterinary schools across the Czech Republic are producing almost 3 times more graduates than there is a demand for. Despite this excess, the demand for veterinary professionals in rural areas is not satisfactorily met. Furthermore, young professionals tend to leave the profession after a few years.

Some of the reasons for the shortage are changing professional expectations with young professionals not willing to work long shifts or unsocial hours, and the lack of job opportunities for partners in rural areas. In general, rural practitioners have an urgent need to recruit staff and are seeing a decline in the quality of their services and the availability of out-of-hours services.

¹³ Union Professionnelle Vétérinaire. *Heureux ou malheureux dans votre pratique?*

A recent survey assessed the numbers of new veterinarians in the country. It concluded that the less urbanised areas tend to feature the lowest percentages of new veterinarians. Furthermore, the problem is not only a lack of veterinarians but also that they are not specialised enough in large animal medicine.

The government has not adopted any measures yet. The Veterinary Chamber of the Czech Republic has been delivering seminars for last-year students on the topics of starting a career in the veterinary sector and current developments in both companion and farm animal practice.

Denmark

The country is experiencing a minor shortage of veterinarians in rural areas, mainly because there are few rural areas in Denmark and these tend to be close to urban areas. However, they do report a general lack of veterinary professionals across the country. No measures are being taken at the moment.

Estonia

Rural areas in Estonia are experiencing a significant shortage of veterinarians. The main reasons are unattractive working conditions (irregular hours and low wages), young graduates pursuing careers abroad, and small numbers of livestock. Furthermore, the demand for veterinary services is low given the limited financial power of small farmers and because larger holdings contract professionals permanently. As a consequence, current rural practitioners are under pressure and there are fears over the health and welfare of livestock.

No incentives or measures have been adopted.

Finland

At present, Finland does not observe a lack of veterinarians in rural areas. The country has a system of official veterinarians organised at the municipal level that spreads across the entire country. Official veterinarians treat both companion and large animals and provide a wide range of services: preventive care, on-call service, disease control, herd health planning, animal welfare and meat inspection. They are organised in working groups, allowing for the share of different duties.

Unfortunately, budget reductions are threatening to remove farm animals from the duties of official veterinarians. This measure, added to the fact that very few private veterinarians operate in rural areas, could potentially hinder the availability of veterinary services in rural areas soon.

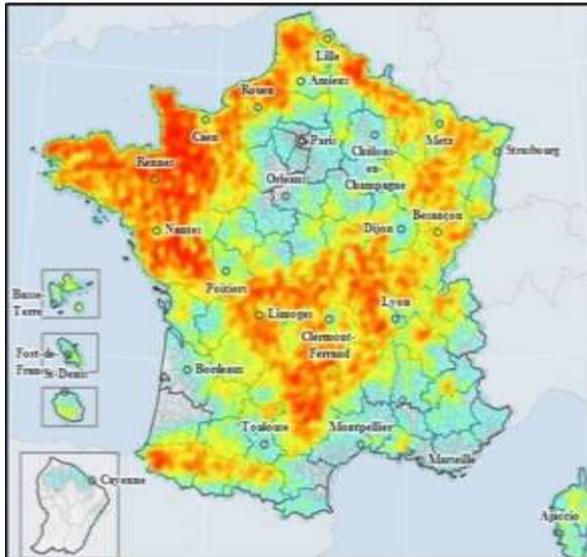
France

There is not a generalised shortage of veterinarians across all French rural and remote areas, but some specific rural locations keep experiencing difficulties in recruiting new professionals. More generally, the number of new graduates is insufficient to cover the demand (800 graduates per 1000 positions¹⁴), plus, large numbers of veterinarians retire or change career paths each year. In a recent study, it was noted that 40 departments are now concerned by this phenomenon of veterinary desertification and the phenomenon is accelerating: the number of veterinarians specializing in farm animals has decreased by 15% in the last 5 years.

The reasons for the shortage in rural areas range from unattractive working conditions to changing life and professional aspirations. As a consequence, some farmers do not have access to veterinary services while practitioners struggle to find successors to their businesses and need to work longer hours. This shortage also poses difficulties in terms of health monitoring and the permanence of care for farm animals.

A measure already in place is a government-funded tutored internship programme that is being offered in all four veterinary faculties of France. The programme reports significant success, with 80% of the students taking the programme staying in rural practice. There are several other initiatives they plan to launch soon: increasing the number of places in veterinary faculties, modifying the selection process to access these courses and the creation of a rural areas track for last-year students that include an internship in the field.

¹⁴ CGAEER (2019), *Installation et maintien de l'exercice vétérinaire dans les territoires ruraux*.



Map: coloured regions show regions coping with veterinary desertification.

The Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas (CGAAER) has laid down a plan to tackle the problem in its report¹⁵. Among its measures, it seeks to facilitate the installation and retention of veterinarians, contribute to the profitability of farming businesses and promote the education and recruitment of rural veterinarians.

On 9 July, the French government adopted new measurements¹⁶ to combat veterinary desertification. The measures will allow, in areas of shortage as determined by decree of the Minister of Agriculture, to local authorities which so wish, to distribute aid for the installation and maintenance of veterinarians. Besides, they may pay study and professional project allowances to students who agree, by signing an agreement, to practice in their territory if it is located in a deserted area.

Germany

Germany is starting to experience a shortage of veterinary professionals in rural areas and rural practices are struggling to recruit assistants. Thus, while the need for veterinary service in rural areas is covered in the present, it is feared that this will not be the case in the near future.

The principal reasons for young veterinarians not wanting to take a position in rural areas are a preference for urban life, having no connection to rural areas, a significant number of young female veterinarians (~20%) are either not practising or working part-time, most veterinary faculties are oriented towards small animals and the insolvency of veterinary businesses in rural areas.

The consequences are that emergency services cannot always be guaranteed, there is a shortage of medical supplies and farmers taking on veterinary duties themselves. It is also expected that this will affect animal health and welfare.

Recently this year, the university of Gießen carried out a survey to assess how effective are veterinary faculties in preparing students for cattle practice¹⁷. It showed that 70% of veterinarians in cattle practice today found it very difficult to recruit new practitioners, citing as reasons for this the unattractiveness of rural life, unfavourable working conditions and inadequate training in the area.

In the last 15 years, measures have been launched by individual university clinicians and the German Federal Veterinary Association with modest success in the form of media campaigns and taster internships to create interest and approximate students to farm animals' practice. At the governmental level, no initiatives have been discussed or implemented.

Greece

Rural and remote areas in Greece have a shortage of veterinarians, especially the islands (Cyclades and Dodecanisos) and mountain areas like those in central Peloponnese. The problem is linked to the abandonment of rural areas because of poor animal health results in less profitability of livestock businesses. In 2018 a study identified the areas experiencing a shortage of veterinary professionals. Up to this day, no measures have been taken to address the issue in Greece.

¹⁵ idem

¹⁶ <http://www.senat.fr/presse/cp20200709a.html>

¹⁷ University of Gießen (2020) *Does buiatric education meet the needs of the modern bovine practice? Part 2: Assessment of the situation through farm animal practitioners and dairy farmers.*


Hungary

There is a definite shortage of rural veterinarians in Hungary, but a shortage is also developing in small animal practices in both towns and cities.

In the last decades, the number of rural veterinarians has decreased. The majority of veterinarians work in mixed practices of small size (single or two-veterinarian practices).

The Hungarian Veterinary Chamber together with Budapest University of Veterinary Science is planning a set of special measures to encourage students and young veterinarians to start a career and build up their practice in rural areas.


Ireland

Rural and remote areas of Ireland have a shortage of veterinarians.

The reasons for the shortage are long working hours, poor work-life balance and low salaries. The Recent Graduate Working Group of Veterinary Ireland (RGWG) reports that the corporatisation of practices certainly may become an issue, but it is not the primary issue at the moment for younger veterinarians.

The RGWG also reports that the retention of staff in rural areas, especially in mixed veterinary practice (i.e. two or more species from food animal, equine and/or companion animal practice), is becoming increasingly more difficult due to long working hours, low salaries and poor work-life balance.

While rural and remote areas of Ireland have a shortage of veterinarians, the situation in Ireland is seen by some veterinarians in the Food Animal Interest Group of Veterinary Ireland as part of the greater overall rural divide and a drive for people to live in urban areas of Ireland. Cattle veterinary practices are not always rural based, as there are a number of food animal veterinary practices based around large urban centres like, Limerick, Cork and Galway. While it is seen that all food animal practices, even those more urban based, find it hard to attract veterinary staff, those practices based around the larger urban areas do find themselves at an advantage and can attract staff easier than perhaps those in the more westerly or southernly rural and remote areas of the country. Despite, this food animal veterinary practice still does have issues regardless of its location, due to increased workload and low remuneration, and the sustainability of large animal practice, succession and long term career prospects may be some of the reasons leading to shortages, further enhancing the urban-rural divide. Concerns have also been expressed by some Food Animal members that the basic food animal competencies needed for Food Animal practices are not being taught in veterinary schools, and this may have the effect of diverting recently qualified practitioners away from cattle and pig practice.

The main concerns for such shortages in rural and remote areas of Ireland are that disease may appear and spread more quickly, and that emergency services cannot be guaranteed.

A study by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine of Ireland (DAFM) showed that 95% of bovine and sheep herds are in remote locations, within 20km to their nearest practice (unpublished data).

On the other hand, a Competition Authority of Ireland report on the veterinary profession in 2008¹⁸: highlighted an increase in the numbers of veterinarians in companion animal practice while the numbers of livestock had decreased.

In 2019, the Veterinary Council of Ireland recognised the shortage of veterinarians in rural and remote areas as a key challenge for the profession¹⁹. It set out to carry out research in order to inform future policies.


Italy

¹⁸ Retrieved from: <https://www.cpc.ie/business/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/02/2008-06-19-Vets-Final-Report.pdf>

¹⁹ Veterinary Council of Ireland (2019), *Corporate Strategy 2019-2023*.

Around 30% of the population in Italy lives in rural areas, but this number is declining every year²⁰.

Both private and public veterinarians operate in rural and remote areas in Italy. The veterinary services must assist the animals and if the official vet services have a shortage of vets they can assign practitioners for controls/vaccinations/ clinical assistance of the farm animals. The system is a special type of contract, allowed by the rules of the Italian National Health System.

If a shortage occurs, particularly in remote mountain areas, the regional or provincial government organizes services for the availability of veterinarians through conventions (i.e. professionals working for the regional health services).

Latvia

Most veterinarians in Latvia work in the companion animal sector. Currently, private veterinarians working in the livestock sector struggle to have a full-time working schedule. They usually work on an on-call basis and they are rarely asked to perform preventive activities, such as herd health management. Partly, this is because there are a lot of veterinary consultants, available for free, from veterinary medicines wholesalers. Besides, small farmers cannot afford to pay for veterinary services and bigger livestock businesses prefer to have an employed veterinarian to have better control of the animals. Farmers' associations have alarmed the government about the lack of local veterinarians in some rural areas with a lower density of people and animals and worse economic situation. The Latvian Veterinary Association will survey the situation. At present, the government does not offer incentives.

Lithuania

Lithuania is seeing a decline in the number of veterinarians choosing to work in the livestock sector in rural and remote areas. One of the reasons is the outflow of population to urban areas, but also the lowering demand for veterinary services for several reasons. Firstly, there has been a decline in the number of livestock over the recent years- either because the prices for meat have fallen or due to disease outbreak such as African Swine Fever. veterinary duties are increasingly being performed by non-trained personnel, mainly by farmers, and medicines are supplied directly to businesses. Finally, there has been a decline in public procurement destined to state veterinarians and this compromises their income.

The government plans to strengthen the law so that veterinarian medicines must be prescribed by a veterinarian and to increase the number of in-farm controls to monitor the correct use of medicines.

Luxembourg

While there is no shortage of veterinary professionals in the rural areas of Luxembourg, there are difficulties to recruit young veterinarians in these areas and it is feared that the demand for veterinary services will not be met in the near future.

In 2019 the Ministry of Health commissioned a study to assess the situation but no measures have been taken yet.

Netherlands

The Netherlands is experiencing a shortage of veterinarians in rural areas, both for private and public professionals.

The reported reasons are a small number of places at universities and retention problems mainly due to burn-out. The consequences are increased stress suffered by professionals in rural practice and a decrease in the quality of the service given.

²⁰ Source: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/ITA/italy/rural-population#:~:text=Rural%20population%20refers%20to%20people,defined%20by%20national%20statistical%20offices.&text=Italy%20rural%20population%20for%202017,a%201.12%25%20decline%20from%202015.>

There has been no study to estimate the extent of the problem. The Royal Dutch Veterinary Association is currently discussing this issue with other relevant authorities and stakeholders.

Norway

Rural areas in Norway are experiencing a shortage of veterinarians, even though municipalities are required to provide sufficient veterinary services by law. Financial incentives have increased in recent years but this has not been sufficient to address the problem.

Not being able to provide on-call services in every case or delays in the provision of services are some of the consequences being experienced. No measures have been taken.

Poland

There is a shortage of veterinary professionals in the rural areas of Poland. The main reasons for this shortage are the long working hours, hard work, low salaries and low economic power of farmers to invest in veterinary services. Rural practices are struggling to recruit successors as young veterinarians prefer to settle in small animal practice in urban areas.

No measures are being taken at the moment, neither in the form of financial incentives or initiatives to encourage young professionals.

Portugal

In Portugal, there has been a shortage of veterinarians in rural areas for decades. Despite an increase in the number of graduates over the last 20 years, it is difficult to hire both farm and small practice veterinarians in rural and remote areas.

The problem is associated with retention difficulties, mainly because of unfavourable working conditions (long hours, physically demanding), economic reasons (delayed payments, low profit margin) and living conditions in these areas (education opportunities, increased desertification of these areas).

Another concern is that farmers can access medicines without the need for a prescription. This can contribute to antimicrobial resistance and pose a threat to the environment. Also, farmers and other third-parties perform veterinary activities, such as dehorning. This is a big threat to animal health and welfare and the veterinary profession.

It is reported that farmers tend to be unaware of their ethical responsibilities towards animals and reluctant to innovate. Resources such as reproductive technologies, nutritional support, prophylactic measures and laboratory diagnoses have a low implementation. This is a deterrent for veterinarians looking for a career progression. Furthermore, the provision of official animal health services has also been linked to protectionist practices hampering innovation.

Romania

Romania has over 2600 veterinary practices in rural areas. Most of them provide their services to non-professional farms and since 1999 they also have a contract with the state, which subsidises the following activities: issuing of slaughter and transport certificates, identification and registration, disease control activities, and vaccination.

The number of animals in non-professional farms is decreasing every year. Also, the state pays veterinarians very low rates for their services which do not cover the expenses. For these reasons, rural areas have become increasingly unattractive and many territories, especially those in the southern part of the country, have been left without veterinary services.

In 2019, the Romanian Parliament adopted a law to support veterinarians in rural areas, by which the state grants 10.000 lei (2000 euros) per month to each veterinary practise that has a contract with the state. This amount is conditioned by the performance of additional activities: professional and vocational training for the

contracted activities, advising animal owners in regards to the food chain, welfare and biosecurity conditions, provide services during emergencies, as well as for the inspection and certification of animals for slaughter.

The law entered into force in December 2019, but it still has not come into force because the Government did not issue the application rules by their due date, which was March 2020.

Slovakia

At present, Slovakia does not have a shortage of veterinarians in rural and remote areas, and enough graduates are produced every year, which are trained for large animal practice. However, different circumstances suggest that there will be a shortage soon:

There is an increasing preference for living in cities and a significant number of graduates are emigrating abroad. Also, over the last twenty years, the number of food animals has been declining and their production has been concentrated in larger farms.

Spain

Spain is experiencing a shortage of veterinary professionals in rural and remote areas. Reasons for this are two-sided: farmers not having enough financial resources to pay for veterinary services, and young professionals not willing to cover positions in rural areas. The results are a decrease in the profitability of veterinary businesses in these areas, as well as veterinary duties being performed by untrained personnel.

The government has addressed the issue through financial subsidies, which had a positive impact until they were reduced in the last years. No other incentives or aids are in place.

Sweden

Sweden is experiencing a shortage of veterinarians in rural areas, especially because young professionals prefer to work in small animal practices in urban areas. Increase work burden for current veterinarians in rural practice and difficulties to cover all the farms within an area are reported as consequences. To present, no action has been taken to tackle the issue.

In Sweden, the District Veterinarian Organisation (DVO)²¹ is a nationwide veterinary organisation managed by the government. The government provides the clinic (the building), as well as the necessary equipment. It also covers the basic costs for the treatments and sets up standard fees to be paid by the client for the services. The DVO offers 24/7 emergency service and it prioritises farm animals and the control of diseases.

While the DVO's coverage extends to the whole country, including rural and remote areas, it is not exempt from the fact that very few professionals wish to work in these areas. The DVO alone does not provide a solution to this shortage.

Switzerland

With some exceptions, veterinary services in the rural areas of Switzerland are sufficiently guaranteed at present. Moreover, about a third of farm animal practices are underutilised and have the potential to provide services to more clients.

On the other hand, there is concern that the future demands for veterinary services in remote areas will be difficult to meet as a survey by the University of Bern found out that new graduates do not meet the requirements to fill these positions²².

UK

²¹ More information about the DVO can be found here: <https://www.sva.se/media/vjqp1dqf/district-veterinarian-organisation-in-sweden.pdf?epieditmode=False>

²² University of Bern (2018), *Studie zur Versorgungslage in der Schweizer Nutztiermedizin*.

The annual survey by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons found that only 3.2% of veterinary professionals work in farm practice in the UK²³.

England is experiencing a shortage of veterinarians in rural areas, especially in the South-West. With older professionals retiring from practice and young veterinarians not wanting to take a position in rural locations, there is a concern that the demand for veterinary services in these areas will be difficult to meet in the future. The increased corporatisation of the profession, unfavourable work conditions, difficulties finding a good work/life balance and a decrease in the number of profitable farms are the main reasons for young professionals favouring urban areas, as found by The British Cattle Veterinary Association²⁴.

The consequences range from the deterioration of the relationship between veterinarians and farmers to increased pressure suffered by rural veterinarians as well as fears for the welfare of production animals.

The corporative VetPartners is running a formative course, the Farm Graduate Development Programme, in which experienced clinicians deliver specialised training to those who wish to pursue a career in farm animal practice.

The rural areas of **Scotland** are experiencing an acute shortage of veterinarians. There is also a general lack of veterinary professionals across the whole county, mainly because they prefer urban life and small animal practice. Increased pressure experienced by veterinarians currently in rural practice, retention problems and difficulties identifying and managing disease in time are the most worrying consequences.

To address the issue, the Scottish government is reducing the level of qualifications required for certain positions: for example, surgeons are not required to perform testing. The profession is concerned that this will lead to a lack of sufficiently qualified staff to carry out certain duties, such as control of disease outbreak. The Highlands and Islands Veterinary Service Scheme (HIVSS) offers grants to small-size veterinary practices in rural areas to cover for disease prevention and eradication services. It benefits both ends because it covers the costs for farmers while it generates demand for veterinary services. In general, the scheme scores high satisfaction rates among farmers and veterinarians.

²³ Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. *The 2019 survey of the veterinary profession. A report for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons* (2019, p11)

²⁴ British Cattle Veterinary Association (2019), *Survey of the Profession*.