

Public Veterinary Medicine: Regulatory

New directions for the National Veterinary Accreditation Program

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The Veterinary Services (VS) division in the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has a long history of cooperation with the veterinary community in performing important regulatory work nationwide. Although a simple accreditation process of lifetime certification (without recertification of credentials) has worked well in the past, the National Veterinary Accreditation Program (NVAP) needs to be enhanced to ensure that accredited veterinarians have the tools needed throughout their careers to meet the challenges of disease prevention and emergency preparedness in the United States. Increased world trade, travel, and foreign and emerging diseases and organisms put our country at risk for the introduction of a threat to animal and human health. The agency's recommended revisions to the accreditation program represent a new direction that will enhance the knowledge base of accredited veterinarians, which is necessary in today's fast-paced global environment.

This article provides an overview of the current thinking for NVAP policy before drafting a proposed rule on accreditation. The AVMA, through the AVMA-USDA Relations Committee, recognizes the need to modernize the accreditation process to reflect the complexities of today's veterinary environment. Veterinary Services consulted extensively with AVMA entities (AVMA-USDA Relations Committee, Council on Veterinary Service, and Council on Public Health and Regulatory Veterinary Medicine)

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to develop the changes described in this article. These changes were designed to increase the effectiveness, credibility, and quality of the veterinary accreditation program. Veterinary Services will continue to consult with state animal health officials regarding the veterinary accreditation program and its implementation.

The overriding goal of the program is for VS, veterinarians, state animal health officials, and veterinary colleges to work cooperatively toward the goal of protecting and improving the health, quality, and marketability of US animals. Increased collaboration, particularly with schools of veterinary medicine and their students, will be crucial to the success of this new program.

Veterinary accreditation violations have had no bearing on the recommendations for the program. By and large, the 60,000-plus accredited veterinarians uphold the standards for accredited veterinarians with diligence and honor. The rationale for enhancing the accreditation program is based on international and domestic developments including the following:

- Implementation of trade agreements recognized by global organizations (eg, World Trade Organization)
- Increasing international market potential for US producers
- Development of export regions based on risk and disease status (regionalization)
- Increasing demand for industry-driven quality-assurance programs
- Increasing need for uniformity and consistency in the administration of NVAP policy
- Completion of current animal disease eradication programs
- Increasing need for knowledge of emerging and foreign animal diseases and preparedness in the event of a foreign animal disease incursion
- Increasing need for involvement of accredited veterinarians in integrated surveillance activities

Because of the increased threat of emerging and foreign animal diseases, accredited veterinarians must expand their knowledge of, and their vigilance for, dis-

eases not known to exist in the United States and recognize emerging animal health conditions. The NVAP is designing an enhanced program to increase training and awareness of prevention and preparedness for animal health emergencies in the United States. The program will develop high-quality training modules for accredited veterinarians focusing on the latest scientific information on the transmission, recognition (clinical signs and diagnosis), and reporting of exotic and emerging diseases, NVAP policy, and other issues. The NVAP can then build on this concept to broaden and strengthen the accreditation program with minimal interruption or burden to most accredited veterinarians. Additionally, the new program initiatives for NVAP will be phased in over time so that changes will not have to be made all at once. Veterinary Services has made a strong commitment to support NVAP to ensure the needs of the US agricultural industries, other stakeholders, and the USDA are met. Most of the funding for the new program initiatives will be borne by the USDA.

Minor changes will be made in the current operating procedures for initial accreditation, core orientation, and other standard duties for accredited veterinarians. New program initiatives will be an addition to the current system. These recommendations include incorporating a 2-category system of accreditation, required supplemental training, accreditation renewal, and accreditation specializations to substantially strengthen the current program.

Two Categories of Accreditation

The NVAP will offer a 2-tiered system of accreditation for limited and extended activity (**Appendix**). Veterinarians selecting category I will be certified only to issue official documents for companion animals. This category does not include accredited work activities with equine, food animal, or livestock species. Veterinarians selecting category II will be certified to perform all accredited activities for all animal species and participate in other specialized accreditation activities, such as certification as a Qualified Accredited Veterinarian for Trichinae Safe Herd Certification work, or other specialties as appropriate (*See Veterinary Accreditation Specializations*).

Veterinary Accreditation Renewal Every Three Years

The first phase of the new program institutes a 3-year renewal period for veterinary accreditation for all veterinarians. During this period, veterinarians will select an accreditation category to which they would like to belong. To maintain accreditation status, all veterinarians will need to answer an annual or semiannual questionnaire. If the renewal form, documented supplemental training, and questionnaires have not been received or verified before the renewal period expires, the accreditation status of the veterinarian will be inactivated.

Required Supplemental Training for Accredited Veterinarians

The second phase of the new program calls for veterinarians in both categories to complete supple-

mental training modules during their renewal period. Category-I veterinarians will need to complete 4 supplemental training modules during their 3-year renewal period to maintain their accreditation status. Category-II veterinarians will be required to complete 9 supplemental training modules during their 3-year renewal period.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the program is that all supplemental training will be Web-based through the NVAP Web site (www.aphis/usda/vs/nvap), with no charge for the training. This will eliminate the need for additional funding and travel and will allow veterinarians to fit training into their schedules at their convenience. Each module will be designed to be completed in an hour or less. If desired, a hard copy version of the Web-based training will be available for a modest fee.

Veterinary Accreditation Specializations

Veterinary accreditation specialization will serve the interests and marketability of the professional services of individual participants. The USDA foresees that accreditation specializations will become important to meeting the changing needs of industry and fulfilling the APHIS mission and proposes to offer training in specialized areas. Generally, fees associated with this portion of the accreditation program will be borne by the veterinarian seeking certification. Examples of the types of specialization that might be considered include the following:

- Quality control certification programs (eg, herd certifications, such as on-farm animal production and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points [HACCP], trichinae, toxoplasmosis, salmonella)
- Emergency management, foreign animal diseases
- Aquaculture
- Scrapie testing
- Cervidae testing

A good example of accreditation specialization can be found in the newly developing Trichinae Herd Certification Program. Under this pilot program, accredited veterinarians receive training to audit good herd production practices that preclude trichinae infection. The audit, which can only be performed by accredited veterinarians with higher-level training, is an essential requirement for the herd to receive its trichinae safe certification. The producer, in turn, compensates accredited veterinarians for the time taken to conduct the audit, which typically takes 1 to 2 hours.

Benefits for the Accredited Veterinarian

The new NVAP will provide veterinarians with the ability to enhance their knowledge base and keep current on important animal health issues while saving them time and money on supplemental training. Key benefits will include the following:

- No fees for the core program
- Increased marketability of the veterinary medical services that can be provided to clients through certification in specialized areas with potential for additional income

- Ability to choose the level of program activity, which allows more control for individual veterinarians to tailor their accredited activity to the work in their practice
- No travel associated with the supplemental training, so there will be no need for veterinarians to take time away from their practice to complete the requirements

Sequence of Events for Implementation

Once the new program initiatives have been fully developed and approved, the following events will take place within 2 to 3 years:

- Development of an implementation plan for new program initiatives
- Development of a regulatory work plan
- Publication of a Proposed Rule with comment period
- Publication of a Final Rule
- Implementation of new program initiatives

The increased awareness of the need to improve US biosecurity goes hand in hand with the effort to increase the effectiveness of the veterinary accreditation program. Trained accredited veterinarians are our first line of defense for identifying emerging and exotic diseases. The recommendations outlined in

this article work to expand the accreditation program to bolster emergency preparedness and response as recommended in the Animal Health Safeguarding review produced by the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture for the USDA in October 2001.

Appendix

Accreditation activity categories

Category I—limited, veterinarians certified to:	Category II—extended, veterinarians certified to:
Issue international animal health certificates for companion* animals only	Issue international animal health certificates
Participate in emerging and foreign animal disease surveillance	Participate in emerging and foreign animal disease surveillance
Issue companion* animal health certificates for interstate movement	Issue animal health certificates for interstate movement
	Perform emergency animal disease management functions
	Conduct Veterinary Services program activities
	Perform other specialized accreditation activities, such as herd health certification work, as appropriate

*Companion animals do not include horses, food animal species, or other livestock animals.



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