

Summary of the APHIS Consultation held on March 4th in Washington DC

By Dr. M. J. Gilsdorf, NAFV EVP

The APHIS representatives, Mr. Bill Hughes, and Dr. M. J. Gilsdorf met with Acting APHIS Administrator Kevin Shea at 9 a.m. Mr. Shea brought up issues that he wanted to discuss with the group and we were pleased with his interest in sharing information with us. We talked about maintaining on-the-farm expertise, how VS can position itself to meet future demands and adapting the workforce to meet emerging public health needs. We briefly discussed farm animal welfare. Mr. Shea said that if animal welfare standards are developed for farm animals, APHIS can help guide it in the right direction.

Mr. Ted Gutman Esq., Deputy Director, Employee and Management Services, presented a draft APHIS Directive on the classification of employees as supervisors and managers. The classification will allow partial reimbursement of liability insurance for anyone that is temporarily put in a management position. This could range from an acting AVIC position to a acting supervisor position on task force. NAFV had brought this issue to the attention of APHIS in a previous consultation. Mr. Shea asked that NAFV provide comments on the draft within the next 2 weeks.

The next item on the agenda was an update on the direction that Animal Care (AC) will be taking in the next few years, the potential for future increases in staffing within the field positions of AC, and the purpose of the Animal Care Center in Kansas City. Dr. Chester Gipson, Deputy Administrator for Animal Care, told the group that AC has 106 inspectors nationwide with thousands of facilities to inspect, which is a concern because of the number of inspections that can be conducted on each facility in a year. The average number of inspections conducted is one per year. AC is emphasizing education and outreach to the regulated public. The AC budget has increased by \$6 million over the past few years. We discussed the Animal Welfare Center being built in Kansas City, Horse Protection and slaughter horse transport issues. More information on the Center will be coming soon.

Mr. Shea discussed information technology (IT) security concerns. He mentioned that it seems like the security issues are overriding the usage of computers. We all agreed. He suggested that we talk with the Department on any specific IT issues that we had and work with the Department to see what can be done to improve them. He also suggested that we talk with the Department's Chief Information Officers about issues that were above the APHIS level. We discussed the procedures involved in updating computers and what is involved if a laptop is lost. Lost laptop investigations are conducted like a federal crime investigation, so it is a serious matter for which even the Administrator is held accountable. All laptops are required to be encrypted.

The group met with Dr. John Clifford at 2 pm. We briefly discussed the hearing on the federal veterinary workforce. Dr. Clifford explained that 2009 will be a tough year funding needs in the agency. He stated that VS has a 25 million dollar short fall compared to VS unit needs. The CVB and NVSL cost to move into new laboratory facilities were not in the appropriation that VS received. VS has developed a plan to address this issue which will not include reductions in personnel. However, as people leave the agency their positions will be evaluated to determine the need to fill behind them. Dr. Clifford said the NAHMS goat study is on hold for budgetary reasons. He also indicated that NAHMS would be a critical part of VS in 2015. We suggested ways to improve NAHMS by including VMO's from the field to help develop the pre-test; scheduling the interviews outside of planting and harvest times. Another issue regarding NAHMS involves allowing/ promoting the VMO to discuss biological sampling results with interested producers. VMOs have been asked by producers in the past to discuss results of biological sampling that had taken place on the producer's premise. That has been difficult to do because the VMO has not been receiving the results from CEAH. Dr Clifford concurred with sharing results. Sensitive results such as fecal sampling for *E. coli* would probably not to be shared.

Mr. Carlo Broglio discussed Information Technology (IT) issues. He identified that many of the IT projects came to a halt last year in VS. Funding was limited. Mr. Broglio explained that VS has instituted a procedure for IT proposals that is outcome based. He stated that the VSMT must approve all IT requests. Dr. Clifford said they have developed a roadmap for IT processes which will be made

available in 60 days. It has 5 initiatives: software data standards and delivery; security; governance (compliance with rules and regulations); and transformation of legacy systems. VS will concentrate on the top priority needs.

As far as the 2015 prospectus is concerned, Dr. Clifford stated that they are still working on ways to accomplish the new vision for VS. Dr. Clifford has not changed his vision for VS in 2015, which is to position VS to meet an expanded agency mission and future Congressional expectations. However, Dr. Clifford stated that he understands the importance that VS animal disease eradication programs have meant to the VS mission in the past. He also added that the way the future of VS disease eradication programs was framed in previous discussions, specifically concerning “turning the programs over to the States”, was not correctly interpreted.

Dr. Clifford feels that VS will need to focus on more zoonotic disease issues in the future. He does not foresee Congress authorizing funds for long-term animal disease eradication programs in the future. Therefore, in order to keep the workforce viable within VS, especially the field veterinary workforce, he feels VS needs to form better partnerships with industry and others and expand its focus. Within these partnerships, Dr. Clifford feels VS would help set the standards to follow and how to proceed with new programs. VS will continue their role to certify animals for export.

Dr. Clifford feels that VS's role, especially in zoonotic and emerging diseases, is still prevention, detection, and response. In the future, depopulation of infected herds and flocks will still be a tool used by VS, but used less. This means that VS will not have the funds for depopulation of very large herds and flocks. Instead of destroying large numbers of animals, Dr. Clifford stated that VS will have to find more effective ways to address disease threats by utilizing new technologies, including vaccination and controlled slaughter.

Dr. Clifford wants to expand field activities within VS. However, he does not feel VS can rely on any one program to carry the agency through the next 20-30 years (such as occurred with the brucellosis program from the 70-90's). Dr. Clifford stated that VS will involve NAFV in the development of the 2015 plan. He asked NAFV members to provide more suggestions and submit those directly to Dr. Nora Wineland or through the NAFV office. Dr. Clifford stated he recognizes that it is “important to have buy-in of employees and stakeholders” in this effort.

On other issues, the APHIS/NAFV representatives suggested that VS establish assistant area veterinarian in charge (AAVIC) positions in every State for succession planning purposes and as backups to the AVIC during emergency task force operations. Dr. Clifford agreed with the concept, but had concerns about the cost involved. To address the cost, it was suggested that in some States the Area Epidemiology Officer position could be combined with the AAVIC position. The representatives also pointed out that the strength of VS is the ability to respond to outbreaks of animal diseases and these efforts provide good training opportunities for employees. They suggested that veterinarians and animal health technicians remain in positions that require experience in handling livestock. Dr. Clifford said he understands these concerns and that it is important to maintain experience and expertise in this area. He indicated that VS will continue to have employees working with producers on the farms and maintaining a presence in the field.