WASHINGTON, Feb. 12, 2010 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced today that USDA had taken the first step toward implementing a plan to address veterinary shortages throughout rural America by repaying the student loans of qualified veterinarians in return for their services in areas suffering from a lack of veterinarians.

"USDA can help ensure there is a first line of defense against animal diseases across the United States by placing qualified veterinarians in areas where there is a critical need," Vilsack said. "This program will help reduce veterinary shortages, especially in the area of food animal medicine, which will reduce stress on producers and improve the health of the livestock industry."

USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) administers the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP), which was established in the National Veterinary Medical Services Act of 2003. NIFA issued an interim rule for the program on July 9, 2009. Implementation of the program began on Jan. 22, 2010 when NIFA released a Federal Register notice asking for comments and nominations for shortage situations from the chief animal health official from each state and insular area and appropriate federal animal health officials. Guidance on what constitutes a shortage situation and nomination forms can be found on the NIFA Web site. Nomination forms are due March 8, and can be returned via email to vmlrp@nifa.usda.gov
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NIFA will convene a panel of federal and state animal health experts to recommend submitted nomination packages for official designation as a veterinary shortage situation. The public will be able to review designated veterinary shortage situations in list and/or map form, along with information describing the nature of the shortage situation.

NIFA expects to begin accepting applications from veterinarians wishing to participate in the program on April 30, 2010. In return for a commitment of three years of veterinary services in a designated veterinary shortage area, NIFA may repay up to $25,000 of student loan debt per year. Loan repayment benefits are limited to payments of the principal and interest on government and commercial loans received for the attendance at an accredited college of veterinary medicine resulting in a degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine or the equivalent. NIFA projects applications will be due June 30, and that offers will be made by September 30.

Veterinarians are critical to the national food safety and food security infrastructures, and to the health and well-being of both animals and humans; however, major studies indicate significant and growing shortages of food supply veterinarians and veterinarians serving in certain other

high priority specialty areas. A leading cause for this shortage is the heavy cost of four years of professional veterinary medical training, which can average between $130,000 and $140,000. Congress established the VMLRP as a way to remedy this growing need.

Through federal funding and leadership for research, education and extension programs, NIFA focuses on investing in science and solving critical issues impacting people's daily lives and the nation's future. For more information, visit www.nifa.usda.gov .

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