The Task Force was assigned to consider the challenges facing rural veterinarians in Colorado. Many organizations and individuals have studied and written about the changes occurring in rural veterinary practice. A brief review follows.

State governments, USDA, AVMA, veterinary colleges, and others have documented the shortage of veterinarians entering food animal practice and related fields. Whether or not this is a shortage of manpower or an economic failure is a moot point as one follows the other. If compensation is inadequate fewer students enter the field, existing practices cannot be sold, and public sectors cannot compete with more lucrative professions.

For the purposes of the CVMA it is important to distinguish between rural veterinarians and the relative new term food systems veterinarians. Food systems veterinarians are those veterinarians who work in food safety and inspection, public health, academia, basic research, and industry. The shortage of veterinarians for these areas is being vigorously addressed by federal and state governments and veterinary colleges by incentive programs that include reserving positions in each class for students committing to a career in food systems medicine, tuition and boarding stipends, and educational loan forgiveness. Significantly, the State of Kansas offers $20000 per year for tuition and living expenses. A similar program in Colorado would benefit rural veterinarians.

Rural veterinarians practice traditional veterinary medicine in a clinical setting in communities of less than 10000 population. Typically these practices have earned their livelihood from beef cattle, dairy cattle, swine, and other small ruminants. These practices also treat companion animals to a greater or lesser degree and have evolved to be truly mixed practices. These practices also face economic challenges as the ag economies that have supported practice continue to evolve. Some of these changes are vertical integration of livestock production, larger and fewer operations, genetic selection, improved management, nutrition, and disease prevention, and the underlying financial weakness in the beef cow sector.

One of the largest challenges facing rural veterinarians is adequate financial compensation. Compensation impacts life style, perceived value as compared to other professionals in rural communities and ultimately the succession plan for practice. Prospective students have significant educational debt and want to be compensated on a par with their peers. If rural vets could promise compensation of $100000 annual salary and benefits after 5-10 years in practice there would be students interested in rural practice. By today’s standards these are lofty goals but attainable if veterinarians are willing to adopt and follow good business plans.

I recommend that the CVMA address the challenges of what I have defined as rural veterinarians in the following ways:
1. Keep members informed through the CVMA Voice about the issues impacting rural veterinarians.

2. Keep members informed about sources of information such as avma.org/fsvm a website dedicated to food animal issues and ruralvets.com a website that promotes rural practice and externships for students interested in rural practice. The Academy of Veterinary Consultants also sponsors externships.

3. Encourage participation in the CVMA mentoring program. The current senior class at CSU has 80 students in the general curriculum. Students seem to be interested in all species.

4. One of the biggest challenges facing rural veterinarians is financial compensation. Rural veterinarians should consult references such as the AVMA Report on Veterinary Compensation and the AAHA Veterinary Fee Reference for guidelines. Rural veterinarians need to expand their services to include all species and utilize existing financial benchmarks.

5. The CVMA should pursue legislation that would provide educational stipends or loan forgiveness for students committing to careers in rural or underserved communities or as food systems veterinarians. Similar programs exist in the States of Wyoming, Washington, North Dakota, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Maine, Louisiana, Ohio, and Kansas. CVMA may want to partner with producer groups or let producer groups lead such an effort.

6. CVMA needs to be supportive of rural veterinarians and aware of the tenuous financial circumstances of some practices. Free mobile or low fee spay and neuter clinics can unfavorably affect rural veterinarians. The Pet Overpopulation Fund is a better partner for rural veterinarians and the low income community.