

*“Kia whakatomuri te haere whakamua”
– I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past.*

Who We Are - Public Partners of Primary Industry

The Professional Verifiers Institute (PVI) is the enterprise union representing approximately 200 verifiers, including meat establishment veterinarians, live animal veterinarians and service delivery science and technical people, within the Verification Services (VS) Directorate of the New Zealand Food Safety Branch of the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI). PVI also extends its representation to a crucial team of ~ 16 Animal Health Veterinarians and Epidemiologists working in the Surveillance Incursion and Investigations (Animal Health) Group of the Biosecurity Branch of MPI.

In essence our members are the public sector partners and enablers of primary industry and agri-business.

What our Members Do - Growing and Protecting Trust in New Zealand Primary Products

Verification Services

Verification Services is a complex technical business responsible for ensuring the trust in New Zealand's food safety system internationally and domestically . PVI members play a vital role in upholding promises made to overseas trading partners regarding the safety of New Zealand primary products. They safeguard against profit imperatives taking precedence over the safety and provenance of these products, ensuring that consumers can trust the safety of their food and will continue to demand New Zealand grown products. Live animal and germplasm export/import and certification is also a part of the work.

Current international agreements for export of red meat products alone are worth \$12 billion to the New Zealand economy and currently require the continuous presence of a veterinarian on one of the 60 meat establishments across New Zealand - in a nutshell meat companies cannot process or produce food unless a MPI VS veterinary verifier is present and onsite.

Animal health Surveillance and Incursion Investigation (SII) team - Biosecurity

PVI members also play a pivotal role in New Zealand's post border pest and disease surveillance system. Their work focuses on the early detection of exotic or emerging pests and diseases, ensuring freedom from specified pests, monitoring endemic patterns, supporting international reporting obligations, and reporting to domestic animal health stakeholders. Their work is essential for maintaining biosecurity, responding to potential threats, and upholding international standards in disease prevention.

This ensures that New Zealand conducts our international trade in animals and animal products in accordance with international rules and guidelines set by the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) - worth \$56 billion per annum in trade to New Zealand.

PVI members as the Vanguard of Emergency Response and Preparedness

Together PVI members from across Verification Services and the Animal Health SII Team, and wider MPI form a "leadership hub" for New Zealand's "thin green line" of the rural and government veterinary workforce. They engage in the under-recognised, financially constrained but critical domains of animal welfare, traceability and responses to complex and or emergency events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, incursions like the M Bovis outbreak. PVI members also play a significant role in getting primary industry and businesses back on their feet during the increasing number of adverse climate, environment and weather events.

Where We Come From - A diverse community of science led practitioners

PVI members are a culturally and generationally diverse community of veterinary, science and technical workforce located across rural New Zealand from Moerewa in Northland to Bluff in Southland and key urban centres from Auckland to Dunedin. The workforce continues to experience ongoing challenges related to the shortage of veterinary and science professionals, compounded by changing demographics, career patterns, immigration trends, and the impact of overseas trade agreements on the demand for veterinary and scientist services.

The market for veterinarians, scientists, epidemiologists and verifiers is dynamic, including frontline meat establishments, support teams, technical leadership and specialists positions.

How We Are Funded - Cost Recovered and Crown Funding

PVI Verifiers' frontline work is almost fully cost-recovered from primary industry, involving consultation with industry sectors groups including the Meat Industry Association (MIA), Dairy, Fisheries, Apiculture and other Processed Food and products representatives. Other key aspects of food safety and animal health are funded by the Crown including animal welfare and traceability systems and responses.

However, after a period of 5 years in which our verifier and veterinary members have been working in an under-resourced and highly pressured environment, there are now gaps in the investment of people capability and resourcing. It is our view there is significant under-funding in the area of food safety across all programmes with evidence that highlights the urgent need for a review of a sustainable funding model for the continued viability of service delivery.

Any government policy which ministerially directs cost cutting and efficiency in this workforce, in the current context risks failure and reputational damage with international trade partners. For example there are 60 processing plants across New Zealand and each represents a potential single point of failure in the system. Furthermore the risk for failure across the Animal Health SII team are exponentially greater when understood in the context of a team of only 16 whom over the 2022 year alone covered 341 notifications and undertaking 199 investigations.

Criticality of the Work

The critical work and context of PVI members is largely invisible to the public and is poorly understood or appreciated when considered alongside what is generally understood to be the role of a public servant.

In our long experience of representing and advocating for the professional interests of our members, it is rare for policy advisors, public sector leaders, industry and professional stakeholders and Ministers to be fully cognisant of the implications, potential consequences and risks of even seemingly small technical or operational concerns within this combined veterinarian and technical workforce.

The complexity of the work of veterinarians and science and technical specialists across Verification Services and Animal Health SII Team and wider MPI cannot be recruited as “off the shelf” vets or science graduates straight out of University or from countries experiencing exodus of their skilled professionals due to geopolitical issues, without necessary investment and potential risk.

New Zealand is recognised as a country where veterinarians are most needed, however it is sobering, when you compare our need versus our key trading partner the United States, who are projected to require 41000 vets by 2030 and to fall short by about 15000. It could not be clearer that innovative, nuanced, and dynamic approaches to attraction, retention, capacity and capability expansion for our people are **urgently** required.

Furthermore, it is imperative in the current global and domestic context to understand that our people form an interconnected web of knowledge, skills and expertise that extends beyond their mere “job descriptions”, “pay scales” or “conditions” as public servants - they also contribute and serve New Zealand and international consumers, producers, industry and more broadly human health when they are understood as key contributors to the *One Health* initiative “*an integrated approach to understanding, preventing and controlling infectious disease*”.

PVI Strategic Focus and Direction

Our own research interviews, survey of members and dialogue with key stakeholders have highlighted several key strategies and areas of exploration that we wish progress on behalf of our members with MPI VS and other stakeholders. These include the following:

- Facilitate Communication and Collaboration:
- Ensure Consistent Regulatory Decisions:
- Adapt Training Methods for Evolving Workforce:
- Proactively Address Market Changes and Policies:
- Advocate for VS Alignment with Industry Needs:
- Prioritise Technical Training and Staff Development:
- Prepare for International Visits Post-COVID:
- Maintain a Holistic Approach to VS:
- Ensure Right-Sized Resourcing:

This further supports the criticality of investment in Verification Services and Animal Health SII workforces.

Concluding Remarks

PVI understands the expectations outlined in the Government Workforce Policy Statement Document but urges policymakers to recognize the exceptional nature and dynamics of Verification Services and Animal Health Surveillance and Incursion Investigations Team (and wider government veterinarian and science workforce).

The importance of protecting trade relations, ensuring the integrity of New Zealand's primary products, and acknowledging the specialised intelligence and skills required by PVI members should be at the forefront of considerations when implementing workforce policies. The utmost care must be taken to avoid inadvertently affecting trade relations or commercial markets adversely.

We would welcome any opportunity to discuss or further elaborate on any aspects of our submission.

Nāku noa, nā

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Professional Verifiers Institute

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