

Strengthening Virginia's Animal Health Laboratory System

- A multi-year, producer-focused approach to improve the system in order to achieve top-tier, best in class status of Virginia's Animal Health Laboratory System
- Animal agriculture is the largest component of Virginia's agriculture sector, the single most economically important industry in Virginia
- Providing support to livestock and poultry health through the operation of the lab system is one of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' top priorities
- A best in class lab system is essential to optimally support Virginia's thriving animal agriculture industry

Background:

- In 2021, meetings were held with stakeholders, including Virginia Farm Bureau, Virginia Agribusiness Council, Virginia Poultry Federation, Virginia Cattleman's Association, Virginia Dairyman's Association, Virginia Veterinary Medical Association, and Virginia Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine to consider the state of the lab system in Virginia, and determine if changes were needed.
- As part of that, stakeholders requested an independent review of the lab system, to include recommendations for improvement
- VDACS engaged the services of two nationally known animal health laboratory experts to conduct the review and make recommendations:

Dr. David Zeman, DVM, PhD, DACVP

- Auditor (has audited 50+ animal health laboratories in the US and Canada)
- Provides input into operations, assessments, and recommendations
- 20 year + Director of premier animal diagnostic laboratory in South Dakota
- Past President of AAVLD, numerous committees including Accreditation
- Boarded Pathologist

Dr. Bruce Akey, DVM, MS

- Has supervised and participated in development and implementation of multi-year strategic plans for veterinary diagnostic labs in VA, NY, and TX.
- Has worked with USDA with scoping and planning efforts
- Numerous laboratory operations reviews
- Past President of AAVLD, numerous committees

The review included the following observations:

1. Proper staffing is key
2. The lack of career advancement opportunities puts the VDACS Lab System at a disadvantage
3. There are unreasonable technical expectations, high turnover of staff, retention/recruitment failures
4. It would be beneficial to formulate two career tracks for technical and supervisory employees
5. Current salary structure is a significant challenge to recruitment and retention
6. American Association of Veterinary Diagnosticians (AAVLD) accreditation is premier and most comprehensive option for overall diagnostics, quality, and operational management
7. Some testing fees were below average, some higher than average
8. Virginia is among the last states to have multiple small labs scattered throughout the state
 - Nearly all states have transitioned to one or two strategically located laboratories
 - More efficient, successful, sustainable model with staffing and equipment

9. Many animal health laboratories, and the majority of the best labs, are operated in coordination with the land grant university and/or veterinary school in the state
10. “The RAHLS would rank as Middle Tier in its strongest areas and Bottom Tier in others”
 - This refers to the overall system, including support provided to all of animal agriculture throughout the state, and does not apply to specific labs or reliability of results, which are assured by accreditation of the lab system.

The review included the following strategic recommendations:

1. Develop a multi-year transition plan to move from the current structure to one comprised of two, state-of-the-art, facilities at Harrisonburg and Blacksburg in collaboration with the Virginia Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine (ViTALS Lab)
2. Seek full AAVLD accreditation as quickly as possible
3. Improve staff recruitment and retention
4. Optimally functioning laboratories need adequate administrative support staff to perform the duties that will allow analysts to remain at their primary analytical testing tasks
5. Develop a training program for new employees with proper steps performed and documented before any new analyst is released to perform tests for clients without supervision
6. Establish Subject Matter Experts
7. Implement reasonable levels of cross-discipline training, utilization, and rotation
8. Establish an External Advisory Committee
9. Change workflows to improve testing turnaround times
10. Enhance the annual formal fee review process
11. Consolidate testing to take advantage of sample processing and testing
12. Upgrade the existing Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS)
13. Increase support and resources for Quality Management and streamline the system
14. Explore additional outreach and communication efforts
15. Improve the laboratory safety program

A Proposed Framework for Advancement:

Phase 1: Share the report and gather feedback from Virginia’s agriculture industry

- External Advisory Committee being formed
- Also implement recommended changes that are possible within the existing lab system

Phase 2: Expand the Harrisonburg Laboratory

- Capital funding for this was allocated in the 2022 Budget
- Hopeful to break ground in 2024, with completion by 2027-2028

Phase 3: Explore opportunities for closer or more formalized collaborations with the Virginia Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine that benefits lab users, VDACS, and ViTALS

- The College is raising funds for a capital expansion project as part of their overall plan

Phase 4: Evaluate the structure of the VDACS lab system and where various tests and services can be most efficiently conducted, while maintaining accessibility and convenience for lab users

- “Where along the possible spectrum between separate-but-collaborative and fully integrated with the VMCVM the system ends up should be thoughtfully explored with all parties, with the goal to maximize the benefits to all (RAHLS, VMCVM, and stakeholders).”
- “Part of the development will be determining the preferred level of collaboration or integration between the RAHLS and the VMCVM.”