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Large animal vet? There's an App for that, Local app entrepreneurs developing mobile solution for cattle, livestock producers

by John Dahlia EDITOR Mar 21, 2017



WVU Extension Service Agent Bill Shockey runs with the steer at the Preston Farmers Market in Terra Alta.

Staff photo by John Dahlia



Shockey

Staff photo by John Dahlia



Hartley

Staff photo by John Dahlia

KINGWOOD — Most mobile devices, either the smartphone or the tablet, have access to millions of applications, commonly called apps. The categories are endless, ranging from every sort of game imaginable to business productivity to health care. But out of all the apps available, nothing seems to be available for the rural cattle or livestock farmer desperate to help his sick animal.

Enter West Virginia University Extension agents Bill Shockey and David Hartley. Both work out of the Kingwood office in Preston County and have spent nearly six years working to provide what they call state-of-the-art technology to the West Virginia cattle producer.

“We designed the app concept to allow veterinarians to prioritize on-site visits, diagnose and direct treatment remotely,” Shockey said.



In the simplest terms, a cattle farmer or producer would use the app on his or her smartphone or mobile device to transmit a description of the animal's ailment and vital statistics. Then, using the same device, the farmer would record and stream video of the sick or injured animal to the veterinarian.

Aside from giving potentially life-saving treatment for the farmer's animal, the technology also would document the veterinarian-client relationship, as well as increase number of clients or patients he or she can serve.

The idea for the mobile solution mainly grew out of necessity.

Every cattle producer or farmer in West Virginia, at one time or another, needs the help of a large animal veterinarian. These specialized animal doctors typically travel great distances to get to a rural farm so they can diagnose and treat illnesses that affect livestock species. Large animal practitioners commonly treat cattle, horses, sheep, goats, and pigs.

But the number of veterinarians focusing on large animals, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, has been steadily decreasing during the past 20 years from a high of 6,000 in 1990 to fewer than 4,500 in 2012. Today, the percentage of veterinarians working exclusively or predominantly with large animals such as cows, horses, sheep, goats and swine, make up only 7.5 percent of the veterinary workforce.

West Virginia is right in the middle of this national dilemma.

Preston County, for example, ranks fourth in the state in cattle production. Yet, despite the high number of livestock, there are no local veterinary practices that specialize in large animal care.

"Most veterinarians who do support our local producers drive an hour or more, one way," Shockey said.

Shockey added that over the years, most cattle farmers, especially those in rural parts of the state, share a common complaint of not having fast access to a large animal vet.

"Producers have learned to handle most common situations

on the farm themselves,” he said. “But when an emergency situation does develop, the farmer must determine if an expensive trip to the veterinarian is actually worth the cost.”

All this, Shockey explained, can have a huge impact on the value of the animal. Given the distances involved, in some cases many miles along rural roadways, even if a specialist is called, he or she may arrive too late.



“Euthanasia is often the only choice,” he said.

Shockey said he and Hartley have been receiving help from various software developers and other experts in developing their app.

“We keep applying for grant funding, and hopefully that will come through in the next year or two,” he said.

But the would-be app entrepreneurs have made progress. The application has been written, which has enabled the team to make improvements to the software’s functionality and usability.

However, there is one particular hurdle Shockey said could prevent the deployment of their innovation — high speed broadband/internet and cellphone service.

"Internet services are not the best in the state," Shockey said.
"But they are getting better, and this is one example of why internet access in rural areas are necessary."



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