PLAN OF WORK PANEL OF EXPERTS

Final Report and Recommendations to NIFA
August 2015

The Plan of Work (POW) Panel of Experts convened on June 16-18, 2015, and was composed of representatives from Land Grant Universities (LGUs) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). The Panel identified streamlining tactics to improve data quality in reports while reducing duplication and burden on LGUs and NIFA. This report contains specific recommendations to NIFA for further developing those tactics and putting them into practice.

Plan of Work Panel of Experts

FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO NIFA

Contents

Background

A Plan of Work (POW) Panel of Experts was first convened in May, 2010 in response to the 2008 Farm Bill which required that the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) work with its Land-Grant University (LGU) partners to continually improve and streamline the POW reporting process for funds appropriated under the Agricultural Research, Education, and Extension Reform Act (AREERA) and the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act (NARETPA). NIFA determined that a multi-day meeting of a panel composed of representatives from Research and Extension in all five regions as well as National Program Leaders from its own organization would best meet this requirement. It was also determined then that such a meeting would be held every five years.

On June 16-18, 2015, the second POW Panel of Experts convened to discuss streamlining strategies and improvements to the data collection and reporting process surrounding AREERA and NARETPA funds (including Hatch, Hatch Multistate, Smith-Lever 3b&3c, Evans-Allen, and 1890 Extension). The panel was a true demonstration of the federal-state partnership that exists for sustaining and uplifting agricultural research and extension initiatives that make a difference in the lives of citizens across the country. By working together to find innovative solutions to meet the legislative requirements of AREERA, improve data quality, and lessen reporting burden, the Land-Grant University representatives and federal employees on the Panel of Experts demonstrated how such a partnership leads to more efficient use of taxpayer dollars. Consult Appendix A for a brief fact sheet on the Panel.

Objectives

The overall goal of the panel was to take a critical look at the type of data being collected in the current POW reporting process as well as when and how the data are processed so that the panel could develop a list of recommendations for how the process should be streamlined. Ultimately, the recommendations could address anything from software/system changes to business rules and policies, but their implementation would result in a process that meets legislative requirements while reducing reporting burden on the LGUs and increasing NIFA's ability to provide leadership and justification for the use of AREERA and NARETPA funds. This goal was supported by the following objectives:

1. Identify where there is an unreasonable time and/or administrative burden on the LGUs in collecting and aggregating data currently required for the Plans of Work and Annual Reports.
2. Identify where there is duplicity in the data being reported in the POW and REEport systems and perhaps other federal or state-level systems.
3. Identify current aspects and data elements of the AREERA reporting process that are not legislatively mandated and thus offer the opportunity to be eliminated or reduced if the need for them is no longer justified.
4. Help the LGUs gain a better understanding of NIFA's need for more detailed, granular data in certain areas and how it is used on a scheduled or ad-hoc reporting basis.
5. Help NIFA gain a better understanding of the process (including similarities and differences) that Research and Extension organizations at the LGUs must go through in order to report the data currently being asked for; identify new ways in which Research and Extension can report at the level of detail and classification needed by NIFA.

The final deliverable from the panel is a set of recommendations (included in this report) for how each of the aforementioned objectives can be achieved and/or continue to be operationalized after the

panel's initial assessment of the current process. The panel expects NIFA to use these recommendations to improve business procedures and data collection, including but not limited to: modifying existing business rules/policies, implementing new ones, and/or altering software systems (platform, format and data fields) to improve data quality.

Panel Composition and Methodology

The panel was comprised of 14 people, with representation as follows:

- **10 professionals from the Land Grant University partners**: 1 Research and 1 Extension person from each region of the four 1862 State Agricultural Experiment Station (SAES) regions as well as the Association of 1890 LGUs; these professionals were selected by their regional Executive Directors and had voting authority on the panel.
- **4 NIFA National Program Leaders (NPL):** 1 NPL from each of NIFA's four institutes; these NPLs were selected by the Deputy Directors for their Institutes and had voting authority on the panel.

Panel facilitation was managed by two co-moderators, one from the LGU partners and one from NIFA. Also contributing to the panel were representatives from NIFA's Office of Information Technology Applications Division, Office of Grants and Financial Management Policy and Oversight Division, and the Planning, Accountability and Reporting Staff. These representatives did not have voting authority on the Panel but were present to provide expertise in various subject areas discussed by the panel.

Discussion Format and Decision Making Process

Prior to convening for the panel in June, the fourteen panelists were asked to solicit feedback from their respective regions and stakeholder groups in response to general topics, questions, and ideas for consideration that were provided by NIFA (see Appendix B) This allowed for each panel member to come to the meeting with certain themes and "pain points" about the current reporting process already identified. The discussion over the course of the 2.5 day meeting was in a round table format and generally proceeded as follows:

- To begin, each panelist was asked to describe how they collected feedback and how they developed a sense from colleagues in their regions on what aspects of the current POW reporting process needed improvement (most reported that they surveyed their constituencies). They were also asked to identify, where possible, what the most burdensome or duplicative elements were. This allowed all panelists to hear where there was already some agreement about which areas of the reporting process needed to be addressed most.
- The information reported out by the panelists was recorded by the facilitators and was organized into some general themes and categories that could inform further discussion and lead to specific recommendations (see Discussion Themes section below).
- Next, NIFA's Director of the Planning, Accountability and Reporting Staff gave a presentation to the panel detailing the challenge NIFA has faced in not being able to report on the return on investment of certain capacity funds at a detailed-enough level. The purpose of the presentation was to help the panel members start brainstorming about ways that LGUs can report at a more granular level that is needed by NIFA but at the same time remove the extraneous data elements currently reported that NIFA does not use.

- The flow of discussion after NIFA's presentation on the first day and throughout the second day of the meeting was organically driven by the panel focusing a lot on the inherent differences between Research and Extension but acknowledging that there needed to be a way for both sides to report data to NIFA at a similar level, in one place, and specific enough for NIFA to aggregate those data in reports that the agency prepares for defending and promoting the capacity funds. General themes and pain points in the current process that arose from this discussion are identified in the next section of this report.
- As the discussion moved toward identifying specific recommendations and talking about potential solutions to the pain points, the decision making process became iterative in nature. That is, a list of recommendations started growing, and each time consensus was reached on a new idea, the facilitators checked in with the panel members on 1) did they agree to add it to the list of recommendations?, and 2) were they still comfortable and in agreement with how the current list of draft recommendations stood?
- At the end of the meeting, all panelists were given a final opportunity to voice any questions or clarifications needed on the draft list of recommendations they had developed. During this time, panelists agreed that although they felt comfortable with the recommendations, they were only nominated representatives for their regions and couldn't verifiably say that they spoke for all the Directors and counterparts in their respective regions. It was agreed that the list of recommendations would remain as draft only until they were able to vet them through various Director-level meetings and other channels in their regions. Panel members would then report back to each other at virtual meetings they would hold in July and August, 2015. The timeline agreed upon was that the list of recommendations, after being vetted through the Research and Extension Directors and being further refined during the virtual meetings would be presented to NIFA as final (as part of this report) by September 1, 2015.

Discussion Themes

There were many topics discussed by the panelists over the course of the multi-day meeting, and they could be grouped into five main themes:

- **Duplication and Redundancy;**
- **Integration between Research and Extension;**
- **Return on Investment;**
- **Utilization of Data; and**
- **Necessity of Data**.

These themes were informed by surveys and pre-work done by the panelists to get feedback from their constituencies as well as written exchanges between some of the Research and Extension Directors and NIFA prior to the panel convening.

Duplication and Redundancy
One of the most discussed themes during the panel was that of duplication. Referring to "redundancy between systems" or "redundant reports or data elements in reports" were other phrases used by the panelists when talking about duplicative requirements in reporting. Concern about duplicative reporting was also voiced prior to the panel convening in a letter from the Northeastern Regional Association of SAESs to NIFA (see Appendix C). The letter stated that "there is duplication among the

reporting systems for capacity funds and this leads to unnecessary time spent on entering redundant data. The POW software should "pull" information from the REEport system and it cannot."

Recognizing the redundancy between NIFA's two main systems, REEport and POW, the discussion on this topic naturally centered on identifying which elements in which system were essential to keep and which were redundant and could be eliminated. For example, research projects funded by Hatch and Evans-Allen are required to enter "accomplishments" for each project annually in REEport, but similar "accomplishments" (i.e. outcomes) are asked for annually at the program level (which is informed by the research projects, hence the duplication) in the POW system. Taking this discussion a step further, LGU representatives asked NIFA staff which data were more useful, given the similarities in the elements between the systems. NIFA responded that the agency tends to use data from REEport more often because it is reported at a level of specificity that NIFA needs; namely, projects in REEport are classified not just by Knowledge Areas (KAs), which are also used in the POW, but also by Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) and Fields of Science (FOS). Projects in REEport are also associated with keywords where programs in POW are not. NIFA relies heavily on the classifications and keywords in REEport to do its reporting up through the Department and to Congress.

The exception to the above is the accomplishments statements (also referred to as "outcomes" or "impact stories") NIFA requires annually. For these, NIFA tends to rely heavily on what is reported in the "outcomes" section of the POW system (in the Annual Report of Accomplishments and Results). Anecdotally, there seemed to be agreement that one of the reasons for this is that the "outcomes" or "impact stories" entered into the POW reports are written by one primary person who ensures it is a high quality outcome written at a level that can be understood by many different types of audiences. This led the panelists to the idea that the National Impacts Database (NID; housed at Texas A&M University) could be utilized by NIFA and LGUs to tie impacts already entered into the NID to projects and programs in NIFA's system(s). This would eliminate duplication and maintain high quality impacts being available to NIFA for its own reporting. It was also noted that the NID should never become mandatory, as that would affect the quality of how the NID is utilized and who is entering what types of impacts there.

Tied to the theme of duplication was the technical discussion on why the systems don't share data with one another. One of the reasons is the difference in age and platforms of the two systems. REEport is on a modern platform while POW is very dated. Investing the resources in making the two systems share data between one another is hard to do because NIFA's resources are already being spent at their limit just to keep the two running separately with each of their own needed improvements and upgrades. Ultimately, this led the panelists to question why two systems are needed and sparked the idea that a single system approach would be a better use of resources.

Integration between Research and Extension
The panelists emphasized during the meeting that they and their constituencies recognize the efficacy and benefit to planning and carrying out work that is integrated among Research and Extension. While the two sometimes appear disjointed, both sides constantly look to each other to inform their programming; Research looks to Extension for outreach and dissemination and Extension relies on Research for research-based information and curricula. The panel was unanimous in its determination that integrated reporting does not necessarily equate with well-planned, integrated work. Both Research and Extension representatives on the panel felt strongly that NIFA's current requirement for integrated reporting does not result in high quality data that truly represents the specificity of work

being done on both sides. Conversely, the panelists felt that an unintended consequence of integrating their programs (in the current reporting process/model) has been a loss of the granularity that NIFA says it needs. Each side feels there is some level of their having to "fit" into the planned programs identified as "joint" when in fact the programs may be heavily influenced more by one side than the other and/or programs they'd prefer to report into were not agreed upon by both sides to be part of the joint POW. Panel members felt NIFA will get better, more accurate data by restoring an institution's ability to choose whether to submit separate or joint reports from Research and Extension.

Given the above, panelists also acknowledged that there are inherent differences between research and extension that will always exist. Most specifically, Extension representatives talked about how Extension does not, and really should not, operate at a "project" level that has defined start and end dates with specific objectives for the project duration. Rather, Extension conducts work in larger initiatives or programs that are usually ongoing and address broad objectives that involve many more people than a single primary Project Director (i.e. researcher/scientists) and his or her Co-Project Directors. Because of this paradigm difference in how work is managed and conducted, panelists cautioned that there should not be an expectation that Research and Extension will ever be able to report at the same exact level of detail (such as how Research currently reports on projects in REEport). However both Research and Extension understand the legislative requirement for grouping research and extension work into "planned programs" and agreed that the LGUs can do that in a more meaningful, specific way that NIFA needs if they have more flexibility in choosing whether or not to submit reports together. Additionally, Extension representatives agreed that there are elements in the current REEport system that Research uses for reporting that they could use as well, such as NIFA's classification schema of Knowledge Areas (KAs) tied with Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) (Extension currently reports using only KAs in the POW system).

Return on Investment
A question brought up by each of the regions and in much of the panel discussion was: "what data does NIFA need, and why?" NPLs on the panel as well as other NIFA representatives explained that NIFA has an essential need to be able to talk about the agency's return on investment from the capacity funds. One of the major challenges NIFA has had in doing this is being able to query and report on data from both Research and Extension at the same level of specificity. Currently, the project level reported on by Research in the REEport system is at the level most helpful to NIFA's reporting needs. Additionally, NIFA has a technical challenge in how its reporting systems feed into multiple databases. While that technical challenge was not for the panel to solve, NIFA representatives did make the point that it is a reality of the current software systems that cannot be eliminated soon, so a recommendation to help alleviate this challenge would be desired. This discussion supported the idea of using one system/database for both Research and Extension capacity and competitively funded projects/programs. Ultimately, the panel agreed that moving to one system/database would enable both sides (research and extension) to report at a level of granularity more similar to each other (although not exact) in order to provide NIFA what it needs to track its investment while reducing the cost and administrative burden on the federal side to review and track data (some of which is duplicated) in two different systems.

Utilization of Data

One of the sentiments expressed by panel members from the LGUs was that every additional report or format in which data is requested, no matter how small, adds to the feeling of burden and the inability for an institution to be able to refer back to "one spot" or "one report" that contains useful data. In a letter from the Northeast Extension Directors to NIFA (see Appendix E), this reality was emphasized: "The more we ask people to report in multiple formats the less reliable the data will be. The more a state can report what is required as well as what is useful to the state, the more reliable the data are." The panel's discussion around the concept of how data are utilized really focused on ways in which the POW reporting process could be streamlined so that the projects and programs can be reported on in a way that is meaningful and "easy" for the LGUs. If the data are grouped into programs and/or initiatives that make sense to the people (researchers and extension personnel) who are providing the data, then there will be stronger feedback loops in the future for them to be able to look at what was reported, understand it, and improve upon it; there will be incentive for them to improve upon it if they can also use it for other state or federally required reports. This discussion ultimately led to the recommendation that LGUs have the freedom to identify their own programs and NOT be required to report against any federally defined programs or challenge areas. It also supported the recommendation of LGUs having the flexibility to report singly or jointly between Research and Extension.

Necessity of Data

When discussing workload burden, the panelists acknowledged that burden is not always directly correlated to the amount of data elements being asked for or their complexity. In fact, some panelists pointed out that reporting at a more detailed level with potentially more complexity would be acceptable to the LGUs *as long as they can be confident it is needed and know that it is being used by NIFA.* Likewise, reports are more easily reviewed by NIFA NPLs and are not seen as such an administrative burden when they are of high quality and contain all useful data that NPLs can disseminate and use for contributing to data calls. So, when talking about reducing burden, panel members agreed that the specific data elements reported for POW funds should be reduced by determining each element's (in the current system) level of necessity. The panelists identified three levels: legislatively mandated by AREERA; absolutely needed by NIFA to report to the President, Congress, and other important stakeholders; and nice to have. Ultimately, panel members agreed that "nice to have" elements contribute to reporting burden and should be eliminated. This decision was supported in the letter sent by the Western Regional SAESs to NIFA (see Appendix F), which stated: "We believe that USDA could obtain the information it *deems absolutely essential* while minimizing its administrative overhead costs and those of the Experiment Stations." NIFA's written response to this statement (see Appendix D) also voiced agreement, stating: "…all elements –Merit and Peer Review, Stakeholder Input, and Planned Programs description—of the current Plan of Work are required. It is the format and type of data under the Planned Programs that are discretionary, and we can alter what is needed and useful in the Planned Programs section." Thus, the Panel's recommendations work in concert to eliminate portions of the Planned Programs sections of the current POW that are not *required* by AREERA or *essential* to NIFA's reporting needs and business operations.
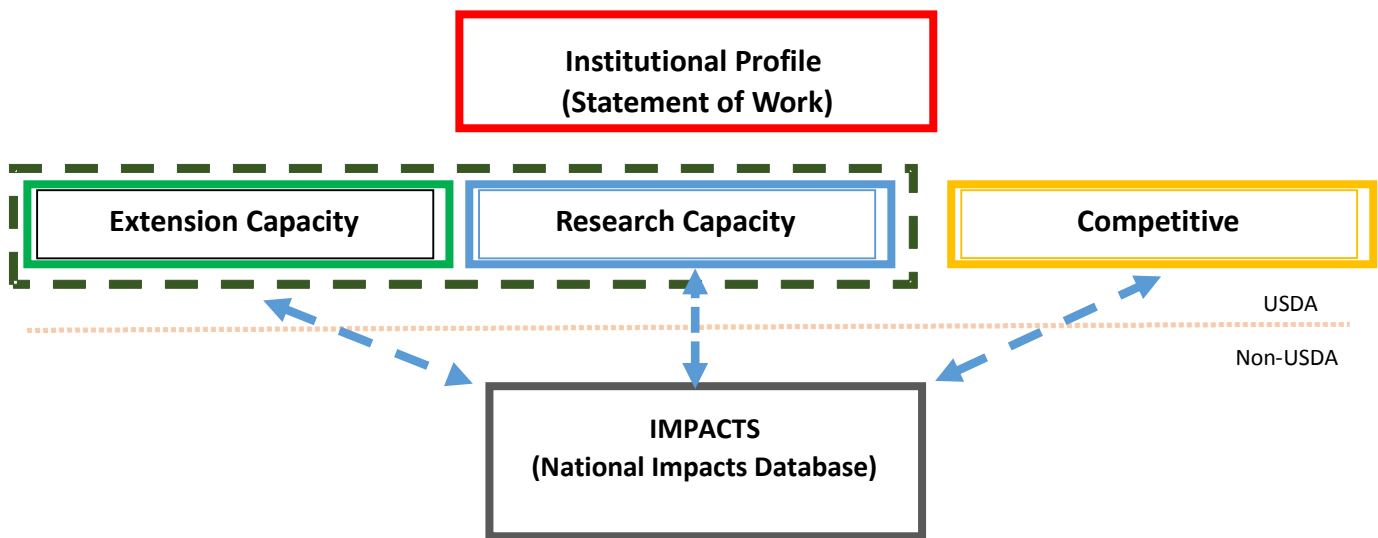
Recommendations

The Panel makes the following recommendations to NIFA so that the POW reporting process may be streamlined in a way that reduces the reporting burden on the LGU partners as well as the review burden on NIFA National Program Leaders. These recommendations have been vetted by the LGU panel members to Research and Extension Directors in their regions and by NIFA panel members to their Institutes. The Panel convened for two virtual meetings in the summer of 2015 to refine the recommendations throughout the vetting process. The Panel believes that these recommendations will streamline the POW reporting process and will improve data quality, resulting in a data collection that meets legislative requirements while providing NIFA what it needs to continue to promote the effectiveness of the AREERA and NARETPA capacity funds.

The following recommendations are classified under two categories: system-specific and general.

SYSTEM-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There should be one reporting system with a stable platform that has the elements depicted in the graphic below. The existing Plan of Work and Annual Report of Accomplishments reporting system should be eliminated concurrent with the introduction of the new system.

a) In support of this recommendation, NIFA should invest in human capital and hardware/software to improve the current and future reporting system (or its replacement for the single system/database approach) and make plans to discontinue support of the older and less flexible POW platform. The "single system" approach should be developed in a way that allows for aggregation of all numerical data wherever possible; it should also be able to prepopulate qualitative/descriptive data wherever possible.

b) Concurrent with the recommendation above, technical issues currently present in REEport, including but not limited to the excessive time needed to upload and download documents, formatting issues, and the tendency for the system to crash should be addressed, especially if the REEport platform will be leveraged for the single

system approach recommended here; the system needs to be a robust and high-performance platform.

c) The future system (whether REEport or other) should include the capability for advanced querying of all data elements and the ability to export data in desired formats.

2. The Institutional Profile module in the new system should contain those elements mandated by AREERA and other data elements deemed essential by NIFA, including:
   a) a Short Programmatic Overview of the submitting institution(s);
   b) a Short Annual Programmatic Summary covering Research, Extension, and Integrated program and project accomplishments (the summary should highlight those programs and projects that have realized significant accomplishments and impacts in the previous year);
   c) description of Merit and Scientific Review processes;
   d) description of Stakeholder Input and utilization processes;
   e) Multistate Extension and Integrated Research and Extension components as required by AREERA;
   f) a list of "planned programs" (or whatever they will be called in the new system).

3. The Institutional Profile module should be structured so that it may remain relatively unchanged from year to year and will repopulate annually for the institution; this results in a 5-year dynamic, rolling "plan" for all 1862 and 1890 Institutions (both Research and Extension).
   a) If an institution wishes to make changes to their profile annually, they should be able to do so (both add and subtract program elements), and a mechanism to highlight such changes for the NIFA reviewer should exist.

4. The listing of "planned programs" that is entered into the "Institutional Profile" should allow tagging to NIFA's topic areas; this will allow entered data to be rolled up for NIFA's use.

5. The Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules should function in a manner similar to how they are currently accounted for. The Extension Capacity reporting module should be developed to include planning and reporting related metrics needed by NIFA to assess progress and to promote the accomplishments of capacity-funded programs.

6. The Extension and Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules should be linked to the National Impacts Database (NID) so that users of the system are not required to enter impact statements that are already documented in the NID.
   a. The potential for linking to the Excellence in Extension database should be explored as well in order to determine if there is any opportunity to further reduce duplicative reporting.

7. Participation in the National Impacts Database should be optional, not mandatory. The NID will be informed by the Extension and Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules of the single system. Language in the NID should be updated to link to NIFA's topic areas so that NIFA may properly associate impacts to agency's areas of focus.

8. Knowledge areas (KAs) and Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) should be expanded and/or modified to meet both Research and Extension's needs.

9. NIFA should restore the flexibility of a state to report by institution (1862, 1890), organization (Research, Extension), or jointly.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

10. The following sub-groups should be created in order to ensure all recommendations of the Panel of Experts are carried out accurately and efficiently (note that a Panel Expert may serve on one or more sub-groups):
    a) a sub-group to define the Extension Capacity program reporting module; the group will clearly define data fields/elements that need to be included in the new module;
    b) a sub-group to operationalize the data elements and functionality of the "Institutional Profile;
    c) a sub-group to identify new Knowledge Areas (KAs) and Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) for addition to NIFA's Manual of Classification so that both Research and Extension can classify projects and programs accurately;
    d) other sub-groups as needed; for example, fiscal monitoring/tracking (the Panel of Experts will serve as a committee for determining when a new sub-group is required.

11. Reporting Deadlines: NIFA should keep all capacity reporting deadlines with the due dates that currently exist but should re-visit this issue once the new "single system concept" has been implemented (currently Feb 1 for Research REEport Financial Report; Mar 1 for Research Progress and Final Report; April 1 for all other capacity reporting).

12. A permanent accountability and reporting track (akin to the fiscal track) for the National Extension and Research Administrative Officers' Conference (NERAOC) should be implemented. NIFA should send Representatives from the Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff (PARS) to the meeting annually so that feedback can be gained and improvements made to the database, by both sides, without waiting for the Panel of Experts to convene every five years.

13. A commitment should be made by NIFA to work with Land Grant partners to ensure that the resultant system is fully searchable by (but not limited to) author, keyword, topic, programmatic classification, and location of work, and that the information within the modules will be effectively linked within the larger system.

14. NIFA should strengthen the State Liaison Program to more effectively build and maintain relationships between program leaders and state institutions.
    a) NIFA should clarify, standardize, and communicate the review criteria NPLs use to review programs/projects.
    b) NIFA should clarify and communicate/educate its LGU partners how data are used to report out to various audiences and stakeholders.

15. Non-AREERA programs, such as McIntire-Stennis, should not be included in the new reporting model proposed in these recommendations at this time, but the Panel acknowledges that the new "single system" approach, combined with NIFA's grants modernization initiative, could eventually result in a framework that may be applied to all NIFA funding programs.

Issues for Further Consideration

The panel identified some issues of which it would like to make Directors of Research and Extension as well as NIFA senior leaders aware for further attention and analysis. These issues shaped the discussion of the multi-day meeting and, in turn, some of the recommendations made by the panel, but final conclusions were not reached on them due to limitations such as time, scope of panel objectives and not having all the right people present to inform a decision.

Application Process and Tracking NIFA's Return on Investment for Capacity Funds

Discussion on the theme of "Return on Investment" was broad and resulted in some specific recommendations included in this report, but portions of the discussion left the panel inconclusive about how to improve NIFA's ability to link technical content reported in the POW and Annual Reports with an institution's application for the funds each year. There are three specific challenges with linking these two things that the panelists identified: timeline, joint reporting, and utilization of funds. The panelists representing the LGUs felt strongly that the April timeframe each year was the ideal time to be submitting updates to the POW and Annual Report, but this is well-ahead of when the Request for Applications (RFA) is released each year. When it comes to joint reporting, it becomes complicated to allow institutions to submit joint POWs/ARs (per the panel's recommendation) yet also tie those joint reports to separate applications for funding. Regarding how funds are utilized by the LGUs, most institutions use them to fund either the salaries or projects/programs of many faculty/researchers and extension agents in their organizations (some spread it out evenly while some award it competitively via an internal process). The result is capacity building and a foundation for those faculty and agents to pursue other federal, state and private funding for their work. It seems that any push on the federal side to move toward identifying "budgets" as part of tying technical content to an application for funds would make it easier to track NIFA's investment dollar for dollar, but the capacity building nature of the funds would be lost. Furthermore, the breadth of research and extension that is currently carried out and reported on for these funds would be reduced greatly by nature of the LGUs responding to this by using capacity dollars to fund just on a small set of projects/programs. Ultimately, the panel members representing the LGUs felt strongly that NIFA should not require a specific budgetary link between POW technical content and the application for funds, but if that conversation needs to be extended further, then it should occur between NIFA leadership and Research and Extension Directors.

One other question that came up around the topic of tracking investment was: when reporting on programs in the POW, how much information should be included, given that most programs are funded by multiple funds, not just the federal capacity funds? It seems that the more complete picture with all dollars and FTEs included should be reported to NIFA, as that's how the capacity-building nature of NIFA's funds can be demonstrated, but there is concern among some LGUs that this is "double counting" in reporting. Some panel members expressed a desire for more guidance from NIFA on this topic. The panelists strongly encourage more discussion at the Director's level in order to answer this question, as it would result in a better understanding of what should be reported, consistency among LGUs in what's reported, and better utilization of the information.

Joint Programming between 1862 and 1890 LGUs

When talking about restoring a state's flexibility to determine whether or not to submit POWs and reports jointly between Research or Extension, the discussion came up questioning if the same expectation (that the work is planned jointly even if not reported on jointly) exists for those states with multiple LGUs (an 1862 and 1890; two 1862s; or two 1890s). While some institutions have very good working relationships with their colleagues at their counterpart 1862/1890 institution, some institutions have traditionally remained less integrated and focused on their own programming. Conversely, there are some institutions that are state-mandated to carry out joint work between multiple institutions. Thus, there is a wide array and extent to which work between multiple LGUs in a state is integrated, and it was unclear to the panel how to handle that at a federal reporting level. The panel encourages NIFA leadership to have that conversation with 1862 and 1890 Research and Extension Directors in order to determine and clearly define and communicate the agency's expectation of how research and extension work in those states with multiple LGUs are integrated and leveraged between the institutions.

NIFA's State Liaison Program

Another issue the panel discussed was: How can NIFA's State Liaison program be strengthened? One of the Panel's recommendations is to improve communication between each LGU and its NIFA Liaison, but the Panel was inconclusive in identifying how that, realistically, should be done. There was discussion around some of the specific challenges that prevent a Liaison from fomenting strong relationships with their designated state, namely: restricted travel funds, frequent changing of state assignment (mostly due to retirements and employee attrition), as well unclear expectations of the level of support a Liaison is supposed to provide to his or her assigned state. Many panelists agreed that their institutions would like to have more conversations up front with their Liaison *before and during* the annual submission of their POW or Annual Report (AR), but currently, the process is set up so that the conversation only occurs after, if at all. One of the main problems with this is that the LGUs are in a position of trying to decide what pertinent information to include in their POW/AR (and also in what strategic organizational pattern) but they don't feel they are able to get feedback from their Liaison before making those decisions and submitting the required reports. The LGUs want to know that what they are submitting is what NIFA needs and not hear after the fact, during the review process, that they spent time reporting information that is not really needed or helpful to NIFA. Additionally, the Panel discussed the fact that there is inconsistency in the level of attention and leadership NPLs provide to their states, whether in their annual review comments or in their efforts to schedule phone calls, virtual meetings, or site visits. The Panel's wish is that NIFA leadership re-evaluate the State Liaison program - its goals and expectations - so that both the LGU partners and the NPLs understand what is expected of them in the relationship and can see value in continuing it.

Software Systems

The "one system approach" described in the recommendations section of this report does not assume the use of any one system. While the Panel acknowledges that REEport is NIFA's largest data collection/transactional system, it does not assume that the "one system" NIFA should or will use is REEport. During the meeting, representatives from NIFA informed the panel a bit on where NIFA's grants modernization effort stood and made it clear that the future direction of applications, awards, and reporting for capacity funds is somewhat unclear at this point. The panel strongly encourages NIFA to move toward a system that is high-performing, dependable, and agile. The agency must ensure that

it/USDA has the necessary resources to continually improve the system and fix issues in a timely manner.

Next Steps

This report has been provided to NIFA containing the panel's final recommendations as of September 1, 2015. The panel acknowledges that NIFA will provide an official response to each of the discrete recommendations within 60 days. In the response, the panel expects NIFA to identify which recommendations it agrees to implement in short, medium, and long term timeframes, providing rationale where applicable. The panel expects that NIFA will also identify recommendations which it agrees to implement but that also require approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) before they may be acted upon.

After an official response from NIFA has been disseminated and there is agreement on moving forward with certain recommendations (fall of 2015), the panelists have agreed to continue providing support in operationalizing and carrying out those recommendations. Some tactics that were discussed are as follows:

- Panel members agreed that periodic virtual meetings with the core panel group will be helpful through the end of federal fiscal year (FY) 2016 (the need for additional meetings in FY17 will be assessed at the end of FY16). The first two meetings were held in July and August, 2015. Virtual meetings will serve as an opportunity for the panelists to check in with one another and ask questions/report back about what they have learned at regional meetings and from other stakeholder groups; they will be able to continue to receive and provide feedback, encouraging communication between and among the LGU community and NIFA throughout the implementation process. The meetings will also be an opportunity for NIFA to gain insight and understanding as to how the LGU system is reacting to and understanding the major changes in POW reporting moving forward.

- Sub-committees: In building new modules within the "one system approach," the Panel agreed that smaller sub-committees composed of people with expertise in certain areas would be the best way to determine requirements and business processes for those new elements. These sub-committees will be able to report back to the larger group at the periodic virtual meetings to keep everyone informed. The sub-committees may also serve in a "consultant" capacity for NIFA when the agency has questions or needs clarification on developing certain new elements or implementing new procedures for data collection.
    - Sub-committees may be composed of anyone who has an interest and experience in the particular objective(s) of the committee; sub-committee members may include panelists themselves or any other volunteer from the LGU community or NIFA staff.
    - Timeline: Sub-committees that have been identified in the official recommendations will commence after NIFA has provided an official response. Thus far, three sub-committees have been identified to:
        1. define the Extension Capacity program reporting module; the group will clearly define data fields/elements that need to be included in the new module;
        2. operationalize the data elements and functionality of the "Institutional Profile;
        3. identify new Knowledge Areas (KAs) and Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) for addition to NIFA's Manual of Classification so that both Research and Extension can classify projects and programs accurately.

Each sub-committee will be definitively ended once its objective(s) is met. Needs for other sub-committees not yet identified may arise at a later date and will begin and end as applicable to its objective(s).

- Panel members may continue to serve as resources for providing insight or opinions to NIFA; they may act as "beta testers" of the new system once there are modules to begin testing and may work with NIFA's Planning Accountability and Reporting staff as well as the Office of Information Technology (OIT) to determine or refine specific requirements of the new system and new modules.

Timeline for Implementation of Recommendations

Action	Date Range	Recommendations Supported
Improvement of REEport performance (speed, stability, etc.)	July 2015 and onward	1, 1b, 13
National Extension and Research Administrative Officers' Conference (NERAOC) – submissions or new accountability and reporting track/topics	July 2015 and onward	12
National Impacts Database – begin discussion about addition of new fields and linkages with NIFA systems	Fall 2015	6, 7
Expand NIFA's Knowledge Area (KA) and Subject of Investigation (SOI) classifications to include Extension work	Fall - Winter 2015	8, 10
Evaluation and improvement of NIFA's State Liaison Program	Winter 2015	14
Federal Register Process for new data collection in REEport	January – November 2016	1, 1a, 2, 3, 4
Design Team for new system modules and data collection (including Institutional Profile and Extension Module sub-committees)	January 2016 through December 2017	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, 15

Conclusion

The panelists believe that the recommendations in this report will contribute to an overall more effective data collection process for required Plans of Work which reduces burden and duplicity on all individuals and organizations involved. The panelists are confident that each of the objectives outlined in this report have been addressed by the final recommendations. In addition, the panelists acknowledge that the recommendations do not wholly address all of the issues and themes discussed during the two and a half days of the panel meeting. It is important for NIFA and Land Grant University senior leaders to recognize the additional issues detailed in this report and try to find the proper groups and vehicles to address them. The panelists and their constituencies look forward to receiving NIFA's official response to the recommendations so that they and others may continue partnering with NIFA to implement short and long-term improvements to the Plan of Work reporting and review process.

Appendices

PLAN OF WORK PANEL OF EXPERTS – FACT SHEET

BACKGROUND

The 2008 Farm Bill included a requirement to work with Land-Grant University partners in extension and research to review and identify measures to streamline the submission, reporting under, and implementation of AREERA Plan of Work requirements. May, 2015, will mark 5 years since NIFA last held a Panel of Experts, and the agency agreed to run such a panel every five years in response to the Farm Bill requirement.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Panel is to have research and extension representatives from each region, as well as NIFA National Program leaders, engage in taking a critical look at the type of data being collected via the POW software, how and when it is collected, and how it is disseminated and used for reporting purposes, both at the state and federal levels.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The final deliverable from the Panel is a set of recommendations for how each of the aforementioned items can be streamlined and improved. NIFA will use these recommendations to improve business procedures and data collection, including but not limited to: modifying existing business rules/policies, implementing new ones, and/or changing the software format and data fields to improve data quality.

LOGISTICS

Dates: June 16 – June 18, 2015

Location: NIFA, Waterfront Centre, Room 3455

The panel will convene the morning of Tuesday, June 16 and will adjourn by noon on Thursday, June 18th. The travel, lodging, and per diem costs, as well as an honorarium of $250 per day for all non-federal panelists ($500 per day for the Co-Moderator) will be covered by NIFA.

PANEL COMPOSITION and EXPECTATIONS*

The panel will be comprised of 14 people, with representation as follows:

- **10 professionals from the Land Grant University partners**: 1 Research and 1 Extension person from each region comprises the 10 LGU representatives; these professionals have voting authority on the panel.
- **4 NIFA staff**: 4 National Program Leaders representing all four institutes.

- **2 Co-Moderators**: 1 from NIFA Planning & Accountability staff and 1 from LGU partners; the moderators do not have voting authority on the panel.
- **An OIT Liaison** will also be present during the panel to hear discussion and offer feedback on technical questions.

All Panelists are expected to be physically present for the Panel from 6/16-6/18. They are also expected to spend some time before the Panel soliciting feedback from their respective regions/stakeholder groups/colleagues in response to general topics and questions the PARS POW Business Leader will provide in March (e.g. reporting preparation and submission timelines/due dates, how can we improve the quality of outcomes data collected, what about the software is working/not working…? etc.)

PROCESS FOR SELECTING PANELISTS

The process for selecting panel members for the NIFA-led 2010 Panel of Experts was successful, so a similar model was followed for the 2015 Panel. To identify LGU partners, we asked the Regional SAES Executive Directors and Extension Executive Administrators to identify one person each from their respective regions. To identify the outside Co-Moderator, we asked the Extension EAs to provide potential candidates who have the facilitation expertise and knowledge of AREERA reporting to help guide the Panel; we are in the process of contacting the folks who might be interested. To identify NIFA Staff, the PARS POW Business Leader has contacted the appropriate Directors in Policy and OIT for them to select a representative. We are in the process of contacting the Institute Deputy Directors to select representatives for their Institutes.

List of Panelists and Participants:

LGU Co-Moderator: Bruce Haas, Michigan State University
NIFA Co-Moderator: Karl Maxwell
External Panelists:

Region	Research	Extension
Northeast	Cameron Faustman	Lisa Townson
North Central	David Jackson	Deborah Lewis
Southern	Jody Jellison	Scott Cummings
Western	Steve Loring	Debbie Carter
1890 LGUs	Maifan Silitonga	Benjamin Forbes

Internal NIFA Panelists and Supporting Staff:

Role	Name
National Program Leader	Marty Draper (IFPS)
National Program Leader	Edwin Lewis (IYFC)
National Program Leader	Ray Knighton (IBCE)
National Program Leader	Jeanette Thurston (IFSN)
OGFM Policy Liaisons	Maria Koszalka and Lisa Scott-Morring
OIT Liaisons	Bill Bristow and Joe Barbano
PARS Director	Bart Hewitt
PARS Coordinator	Katelyn Sellers

Agenda Topics

The following topics will guide the panel discussion over the two and half days we are together in Washington, D.C. (not necessarily in the order they appear here). Panelists, both LGU partners and NIFA staff, are expected to come to panel prepared with their own and their respective colleagues' (other regional LGU partners, stakeholder groups, etc.) thoughts organized in a way that allows them to contribute to the panel discussion in a fruitful and efficient manner.

TOPIC: Timing of Submissions

The current due date for the POW and Annual Report each year from the states is April 1. Are there different dates that would make more sense for when the Plan and Annual Report should be due to NIFA? Consider the following:

- Having an approved POW in place is a requirement for being eligible for receiving the applicable capacity funds; the capacity RFAs come out each year in the August/September timeframe. In this regard, the POW is functionally part of the "application" to the RFA; essentially, it serves as the project narrative.
- For most other NIFA programs/projects, annual progress reports are due within 90 days after the period of performance being reported on. The AREERA Annual Reports are currently due approximately 180 days after the close of the previously federal fiscal year's period of performance (related: the individual Hatch and Evans Allen Project Progress Reports in REEport are due by March 1 annually, 120 days after the close of the previous federal fiscal year).
- Workload Burden: Having the same due date requires the states to work on both the POW and AR report submissions at the same time each year; could workload burden be reduced if they could work on and submit the two reports separately/consecutively? Also, the same submission date means that NIFA NPLs have to work on their reviews of each submission simultaneously, effectively cutting their allotted 60 day review period for each report in half and reducing the opportunity for meaningful feedback.

TOPIC: Connecting Projects to Programs

- This currently applies to Hatch/Hatch Multistate and Evans Allen research funds only; individual projects of each PD (or co-PD) at an institution being supported by these funds must have a documented project in REEport.
- The Programs in the Plan of Work should encompass all of the projects an institution has submitted to REEport.
- How can we do a better job of showing how each project supports a particular program?
  - What challenges do states face when trying to associate projects in REEport to Planned Programs in the POW (currently a requirement at project initiation)?
  - What challenges do NPLs face when reviewing a POW and trying to understand how all of an institution's research projects support a program?
  - How can we assure that Annual Reports clearly show activity and results of both research and extension functions, as appropriate to the various planned programs?

- How can we standardize reporting between Research and Extension? The first bullet above of this topic says "projects to programs" applies to Research only, but what if it could apply to Extension (Smith-Lever 3b&c and 1890 Extension) as well?
  - Let's consider a scenario where the work being done, both in Research and Extension, is documented via "projects" in REEport while the "Programs" in the POW are significantly pared down into lists of those projects (states would no longer need to include such lengthy narratives of activities being done in those programs):
    - Could this reduce reporting burden in the POW and Annual Report?
    - What would be the benefits of this approach?
    - What would be the negatives of this approach?

TOPIC: Software Functionality

- Is there anything about how the software functions that you particularly like? Why?
- Is there anything about how the software functions that you particularly do not like? Why and what about it would you like to see changed?
- For LGU partners: Is there anything about the software that impedes your institutions from reporting high quality data?
- For NPLs: Is there anything about the software that impedes your ability to provide a comprehensive, high quality review of the POW and Annual Report?

TOPIC: Reporting Outcomes

Ensuring that high quality outcomes are present in Annual Reports is in the best interest of the states and NIFA. Successful impacts can be reported in the form of an aggregated national number or individual qualitative story by NIFA to defend and support the capacity funds and their importance to agricultural research and extension and subsequently link those outcomes to higher level impacts. What can we do to collect outcomes and impacts in a better way, both at the nationally aggregated level and individual state level? Consider the current ways each of these is reported on:

- National Outcomes:
  - The national outcomes are quantitative only; the purpose is to be able to aggregate them so that NIFA can report a "national" impact.
  - NIFA has used Google Forms for three years now; does this positively or negatively affect a state's option to report on any of the indicators?
  - There are just over 200 disparate data points that make up the national outcomes and indicators; is this too many? Is it overwhelming to know which ones are or are not important?

- State-Defined Outcomes
  - Currently, the software is set up with a 1:1 ratio for quantitative measure to qualitative story (i.e. for each outcome measure a state enters into their Annual Report, they are able to report a success story related to that one measure); there is no ability for a state to relate multiple quantitative measures with one qualitative statement.
  - Should we change the software to collect these data differently? If yes, how?
    - Consider: For reporting purposes (to USDA, Congress, etc.) , NIFA's view is that the most useful qualitative data the agency receives in the Annual Reports are those that truly follow reporting on; 1) what the "issue" was, 2) "what was

done" about it, and 3) what the "results" were. Further, linking such an alliterative to quantitative data adds power to the personal.

TOPIC: What does NIFA need?

Plans of Work and Annual Reports should serve the specific purposes of allowing states to meet the legislative requirements for receiving the applicable capacity funds and allowing NIFA to monitor and report out on the impacts of those funds. In thinking about those two purposes, we need to ask the question: what data does NIFA really need to carry out its "monitoring"?

- There are only two components in AREERA reporting that are legislatively required: Stakeholder Input and Merit Reviews; all other data currently collected in the POW and Annual Report are discretionary.
- Are there parts of a POW/AR that the states find burdensome to report on? Why? Let's consider if any of those overlap with NPL reviewers' perception:
  - Are there parts of a POW/AR that NPLs do not find very useful in determining if a state is producing useful outcomes and meaningful impacts?
  - Are there parts of a POW/AR that NPLs rely on in order to determine overall acceptability of a state's programming and integration of research and extension?

March 27, 2015

To: Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy
Director, USDA-NIFA

Bart Hewitt
Director, Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff

Katelyn Sellers
POW & REEport Business Manager

From: NERA Station Directors/Associate Directors
Dr. Ted Andreadis, Connecticut Agric. Experiment Station
Dr. Greg Weidemann and Dr. Cameron Faustman, Univ. of Connecticut
Dr. Mark Rieger, Univ. of Delaware
Dr. Sabine O'Hara, Univ. of the District of Columbia
Dr. Ed Ashworth and Dr. Fred Servello, Univ. of Maine
Dr. Dr. Cheng-i Wei and Dr. Adel Shirmohammadi, Univ. of Maryland
Dr. Patricia Vittum, Univ. of Massachusetts
Dr. Jon Wraith, Univ. of New Hampshire
Dr. Brad Hillman, Rutgers State Univ. of New Jersey
Dr. Michael Hoffmann, Cornell University - Ithaca
Dr. Susan Brown, Cornell University - Geneva
Dr. Gary Thompson, Pennsylvania State University
Dr. Rick Rhodes III, Univ. of Rhode Island
Dr. Tom Vogelmann, Univ. of Vermont
Dr. Dan Robison and Dr. Tim Phipps, West Virginia University

Re: Plan of Work (POW) Panel of Experts Meeting on June 16-18, 2015

The Northeastern Regional Association of State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors (NERA) recently met for our annual winter meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, and discussed the Plan of Work (POW), the upcoming POW Panel of Experts Meeting, and impacts reporting. NERA members have reviewed this letter and agree that it represents the discussion and recommendations that took place at the Baltimore meeting. In addition, we have unanimously instructed our representative at this meeting, Cameron Faustman (Associate Director, CT-Storrs Agric. Experiment Station), to pursue the concerns/suggestions/ideas outlined below.

There is a recognition among all NERA members that there must be accountability for capacity (formula) and competitive funds provided to Experiment Stations and PIs through USDA programming. USDA is under legislative mandate to provide reporting on these funds and their ability to fulfill that obligation depends on input provided by the Experiment Stations.

We also recognize that it is critical for USDA to demonstrate to the President and Congress that their funding programs have impact and we would like to facilitate this through an efficient and meaningful mechanism. However, we believe that the current POW and annual reporting system is inefficient, unnecessarily complex, and does not focus on delivering impactful products useable by USDA and our institutions.

The following concerns/suggestions/questions were expressed by NERA members:

- It is not clear what information NIFA needs and how it is subsequently used. The NERA membership reviewed the Agenda Topics for the POW Panel of Experts (attached as Appendix) meeting and were uniformly surprised to learn that "… there are only two components in AREERA reporting that are legislatively required: Stakeholder Input and Merit Reviews; all other data currently collected in the POW and Annual Report are discretionary". The qualitative and quantitative aspects of the material required for input by Experiment Stations, and the format in which it is requested represents a significant time commitment of questionable value. We believe that stories of successful impact(s) are important but much of the required information is not relevant to that purpose.
- There is duplication among the reporting systems for capacity funds and this leads to unnecessary time spent on entering redundant data. The POW software should "pull" information from the REEport system and it cannot. Perhaps there's an opportunity to employ provisions in the federal Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) to help justify changes to OMB?
- The POW is designed as a 5-year plan but the reporting is treated as a rolling 5-year plan. Why not allow the POW to be implemented with an option to modify along the way and minimize the interim reporting until the 5-year period is completed and fully reported on?
- Our impression is that USDA needs to be able to tell stories regarding the impacts of funded research and the National Impacts Database could serve this function. Why not limit reporting to Impacts and discard the majority of other information currently requested?
- Clerical notes. (1) The software for entering POW and annual report data is poorly constructed and not user-friendly, (2) we recommend that the annual meeting of managers (San Diego in May) be used as a forum for getting feedback on the many clerical aspects of POW reporting that are listed on the draft agenda in the Appendix to this letter.

We believe that the POW Panel of Experts meeting should be redirected to consider more fundamental questions of the reporting paradigm. There are five topics currently listed on the draft agenda and the first four (i.e., *Timing of Submissions, Connecting Projects to Programs, Software Functionality, Reporting Outcomes)* are clerical in nature. Clearly, there is value in helping USDA and the Experiment Station/Extension system work through them, but they are easily addressed. And they assume continuation of the current reporting model.

We believe that the system of reporting needs extensive modification to reduce the burden of time required for preparation, to deliver the needed information to the USDA and to provide

a reporting strategy that is mutually beneficial to USDA, Experiment Stations and Land Grant universities. Hence, the USDA could obtain the information it deems truly valuable while minimizing its administrative overhead costs and those of the Experiment Stations. It is our hope that the Panel of Experts meeting will be a start to reinventing the reporting system for a modern world and we are prepared to help facilitate the adoption of a reasonable, efficacious reporting system.

March 31, 2015

To: NERA Station Directors/Associate Directors

From: Sonny Ramaswamy, Director, NIFA-USDA

Subject: Plan of Work (POW) Panel of Experts Meeting on June 16-18, 2015

Thank you for your memorandum dated March 27, 2015, on your concerns and recommendations regarding the Plan of Work and Annual Report of Accomplishments.

We have an opportunity at the POW Panel of Experts meeting in June to significantly streamline the POW and its Annual Report of Accomplishments, focusing on what is required by legislation in regards to accountability, and require what is needed for NIFA to effectively evaluate the use of the four Capacity funds.

Bart Hewitt met with me last month and shared much of the same concerns and recommendations you make in your memorandum. Our hope is that during the June meeting, we can collaboratively develop a path forward, resulting in the replacement of the Planned Programs data now required, significantly reducing the redundancy of data requested for the research programs, and finally reducing the reporting burden.

Please note that all parts—Merit and Peer Review, Stakeholder Input, and Planned Programs description—of the current Plan of Work are required. It is the format and type of data under the Planned Programs that are discretionary, and we can alter what is needed and useful in the Planned Programs section. The data format of the Merit and Peer Review and Stakeholder Input sections, along with the Multistate Extension and Integrated Research and Extension, are mandatory under AREERA. This section was separate from the Plan of Work previously and has now been integrated into the Plan of Work software. Although the Executive Summary is a discretionary part of the Plan of Work, it is useful to the National Program Leaders in understanding the breadth of your programs.

The impact stories provided currently in the Annual Report are extremely useful; the inputs (i.e., dollars expended, FTEs, volunteers) and the standard outputs (publications, extension participation contacts, patents, student numbers, etc.) are also critically important because they are a part of reports NIFA is required to submit to the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, the White House, the USDA Secretary's office, and to Congress. These inputs and outputs can be obtained (with some tweaking) from REEport if we can get the Extension programs to be entered there, as well. Thus, if Extension were to enter their programs and projects into REEport, all we would need for Annual Reports are impact stories.

The base of the software is now going into its ninth year, as it was implemented in its current format in 2006. So we agree now is the time for a software upgrade to make it more user friendly.

The timing of submissions will also be part of the discussion in June. We believe requiring annual progress reports earlier is in keeping with the terms and conditions for all grants, which are technically due within 90 days of anniversary date. The anniversary date on all capacity grants is October 1. Moreover, the Plans of Work should not be due until about June 1 of each year if we continue with the rolling 5- Year Plans of Work. No matter which way the Panel of Experts recommends on continuing with rolling Plans or bringing back the concept of single 5-Year Plans (or 4-Year Plans), we still need to receive Annual reports for inputs, standard outputs, and impact stories because of the reasons noted above.

We look forward to the meeting in June and hearing from NERA and the other regional research and Extension representatives.

May 11, 2015

TO: Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy
            Director, NIF A-USDA

            Bart Hewitt
            Director, Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff

            Katelyn Sellers
            POW & REEport Business Manager

FROM: NEED Directors / Administrators and Associate Directors:

            Dr. Dan Lerner, University of Vermont
            Dr. Nancy Bull, NEED Executive Director
            Dr. Michael O'Neill, University of Connecticut
            Dr. Michelle Rodgers, University of Delaware
            Dr. William Hare, University of District of Columbia
            Mr. John Rebar, University of Maine
            Dr. Stephen Wright, University of Maryland
            Dr. Enrique Escobar, University of Maryland Eastern Shore
            Dr. Patricia Vittum, University of Massachusetts
            Drs. Ken La Valley, Lisa Townson, University of New Hampshire
            Dr. Larry Katz, Mary Jane Willis, Rutgers University
            Dr. Chris Watkins, Cornell University
            Dr. Denis Calvin, Pennsylvania State University
            Dr. Deborah Sheely, University of Rhode Island
            Dr. Doug Lantagne, University of Vermont
            Dr. Steven Bonanno, West Virginia University
            Dr. Ami Smith, West Virginia State University

SUBJECT: Plan of Work (POW) Panel of Experts Meeting on June 16-18, 2015

We are in receipt of your March 31, 2015 reply to the Northeast Experiment Station Directors/ Associate Directors. We appreciate that federal law and regulation dictates what is needed to be reported. Focusing on what is required and needed to evaluate the use of the Capacity funds is understood. A component of the reporting burden is the redundancy of reporting tools and mechanisms. As you well know, not only does Extension report to USDA-NIFA but also to county officials, state legislators, and University leadership. The ability to access data from one database for multiple functions allows for efficiency of resources as well as consistency in data collection and quality. We would like to suggest that one database from which a wide variety of reports might be programmed would result in greater efficiency than submitting to multiple databases as is now the practice. While coming to agreement on a single database might not be

simple or quick, we do have some models from which to build. By working collaboratively across the land grant system and USDA-NIF A, we can more efficiently utilize our resources. While the NIF A website states that REEport is NIF A's primary grant reporting system, we understand from your response to NERA Directors that the system is 9 years old and time for an upgrade and a new look.

The land grant university system has developed a data collection system which allows for impacts to be collected based on teaching, research, and extension (http://landgrantimpacts.tamu.edu) and includes the ability to search the database. While a voluntary system, this extensive database might be considered as a foundation for as a new NIF A data collection tool. Additionally, it might be fruitful to consider a single reporting system that enables integration of Extension and Research.
Efforts have been made within the Extension system to educate on what is an effective impact statement.

The more we ask people to report in multiple formats the less reliable the data will be. The more a state can report what is required as well as what is useful to the state, the more reliable the data are. Coming together, as one system, to report data once would be a giant step forward. We ask for your sincere consideration and for the agenda of the June meeting to be adjusted to allow for this critical conversation among all partners to occur. We look forward to participating in that important conversation. We look forward to partnering with USDA NIFA as we make the adjustments necessary for much needed improvements.

**Western Association of
Agricultural Experiment Station Directors**

Office of the Executive Director

Memorandum
May 13, 2015

To: Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy
                   Director, National Institute of Agriculture

                   Bart Hewitt
                   Director, Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff

From: WAAESD Members

Subject: Plan of Work (POW) Panel of Experts Meeting on June 16-18, 2015

The Western Association of Agricultural Experiment Station Directors (WAAESD) met in Portland OR April 28- May 1. Discussions included the Plan of Work (POW), the upcoming POW Panel of Experts Meeting, and impacts reporting.

The WAAESD is in receipt of the letter developed by the Northeast Regional Association (NERA) that detailed a number of concerns relating to reporting requirements. We have endorsed the NERA memo and have instructed our representative at this meeting, Dr. Steve Loring (Associate Director, NM State Agricultural. Experiment Station), to pursue the concerns/suggestions/ideas outlined by the NERA.

We recognize the need for accountability for both capacity and competitive funds. It is critical for USDA to demonstrate to the President, Congress and OMB that funding programs have impact and we would like to facilitate this through an efficient and meaningful mechanism. However, we believe that the current POW and annual reporting system is inefficient, unnecessarily complex, and does not focus on delivering impactful products useable by USDA and our institutions.

Like the NERA, we believe that the POW Panel of Experts meeting should be redirected to consider more fundamental questions of the reporting paradigm. There are five topics currently listed on the draft agenda and the first four (i.e., *Timing of Submissions, Connecting Projects to Programs, Software Functionality, Reporting Outcomes)* are clerical in nature. Clearly, there is value in helping USDA and the Experiment Station/Extension system work through them, but they are easily addressed. And they assume continuation of the current reporting model.

We believe that the system of reporting needs extensive modification to reduce the work burden required for preparation, to deliver the needed information to the USDA and to provide a

reporting strategy that is mutually beneficial to USDA, Experiment Stations and Land Grant Universities.

We believe that USDA could obtain the information it deems absolutely essential while minimizing its administrative overhead costs and those of the Experiment Stations. It is our hope that the Panel of Experts meeting will be a start to reinventing the reporting system for a modern world and we are prepared to help facilitate the adoption of a reasonable, efficacious reporting system.