AFRI STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK (abstract) – the full report is available @ http://escop.ncsu.edu/Viewcommittees.cfm?comid=23

Results of an AFRI Gap Analysis conducted by the ESCOP Social Science Subcommittee on February 21-22, 2012.

In response to NIFA's call for stakeholder feedback to the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), the ESCOP Social Science Subcommittee (SSSc) conducted a gap analysis of recent AFRI RFA's to identify ways these could solicit more robust contributions from social scientists. Suggestions are provided to help AFRI envision the signature and foundational programs in ways that better address the human and social dimensions of the grand challenges and foundational research that shape AFRI priorities. The purpose of the ESCOP SSSc is to "Recommend specific actions to help the Land-Grant system address high priority research and education issues leading to outcomes that deal with social issues in a significant, measurable way and that will generate sustained financial support."

The SSSc reviewed the science priorities of available 2012 RFAs, including Food Safety, Agricultural and Natural Resources Science for Climate Variability and Change, Food Security, and Sustainable Bioenergy, as well as the 2011 RFA for foundational programs, including Plant Health and Production and Plant Products; Animal Health and Production and Animal Products; Food Safety, Nutrition, and Health; Renewable Energy, Natural Resources, and Environment; Agricultural Systems and Technology; and, Agriculture and Rural Communities. The comments and suggestions are offered as a means to continually improve the science enterprise and to assist NIFA to remain nimble in response to dramatic changes in food, agriculture, natural resources, and the environment, and the coupled natural and human systems we are all trying to better understand.

Most RFAs are quite prescriptive, requesting an assumed solution to a problem rather than eliciting projects that propose a new way to solve the problem or that represent an array of potential solutions. Moreover, the assumed solutions solicited by the RFAs are almost always of a technological nature, which do not derive from an understanding of social systems and human behavior. If the human needs are assumed, they are implicit, not explicit, as though all RFA developers agree on the problem. The outcome of science application may be a product OR a process. Examples of some vexing paradoxes that require research on the human and social dimensions rather than technological fixes include: food processers and preparers frequently neglect even basic food safety practices; farmers do not automatically switch production to a carbon sequestering cultivar; consumers often do not select the healthiest foods on the grocery shelf; and, increasing the food supply does not ensure food security or feed the hungry.

We would recommend that NIFA create some mechanism to provide a summary of the human and social dimensions solicited by the aggregate of NIFA RFAs. We believe this would facilitate more robust contributions from social scientists in the competitive process and, ultimately, to the outcomes of AFRI investments. RFA developers need to integrate the social sciences in the framing of the issue, rather than bringing them in at the end to evaluate behavioral change. Ask "How does this RFA address the human condition?" by making the answer explicit in the solicitation and in the proposed projects. Inclusion of a social impact assessment requirement for AFRI-funded projects would go a long way to strengthening the human and social dimensions of AFRI investments and solving human problems.

The RFAs frequently rely on social science buzzwords without defining them. For example, what is meant by cost-benefit analysis or social, economic, and environmental sustainability? What are the components? What are the benchmarks? Costs to whom? Benefits for whom? How will we know when we've achieved sustainability? Without defining and providing benchmarks, how can we evaluate whether a proposed project is designed to achieve it? This repetition of buzzwords gives the impression that RFA developers don't understand the incredible potential of social science research or the nuanced approaches that each science can contribute. The social sciences can do so much more than cost/benefit analysis! If behavior change is an end goal, it is essential to understand the drivers of human decision-making, adoption and diffusion, and action to change conditions. Where do the RFAs (and the proposed projects they solicit) consider producer or consumer adoption? What cultural elements contribute to variability in acceptance, response, choice, etc.? What are the barriers that thwart and enhancers that facilitate changes in human behaviors, policies and institutions, and social systems?

RFA developers need to consider a number of questions, including: Who are the intended users of AFRI-developed technologies? Who will adopt this technology? Is this a farmer decision, consumer decision, voter decision, manufacturer decision? Whose behavior needs/is going to change? Who will implement this change? And what are the implications of these changes for individuals, communities, institutions, governments, and social systems? Involving social scientists during all phases of the development and reviewing process will ensure a more comprehensive and realistic solution.

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