

# National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education and Economics Advisory Board

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## REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH, EXTENSION, EDUCATION AND ECONOMICS ADVISORY BOARD – SPECIALTY CROPS COMMITTEE

### Fiscal Year 2015 Consultation of the Specialty Crops Committee on the Relevancy Review Process for the Specialty Crop Research Initiative

October 2014

#### ***Background***

The Specialty Crop Committee (SCC) was established as a subcommittee of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board by the Farm Bill in 2004. The committee was initially charged to study the scope and effectiveness of research, extension, and economics programs affecting the specialty crops industry. Within the recently passed Agricultural Act of 2014, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) was required to establish a relevancy review process for the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI), a granting program, and to consult with the SCC on this process.

In the first year, the SCC was required to provide the Secretary recommendations for conducting the relevancy reviews and in subsequent years, the SCC will provide an assessment of the relevancy review process and provide comments on grants awarded by the SCRI Program.

This requirement establishes a new role for the NAREEE Advisory Board and its subcommittees and is precedent-setting. In the development of these recommendations by the SCC, it is important to look toward establishing a clear delineation of the specific roles and responsibilities of the SCC and the SCRI.

The SCC met on October 1-2, 2014, with the SCRI program managers and relevant National Program Leaders from NIFA. The purpose of the meeting was to perform the consultation with NIFA on the relevancy review process for the FY2014 grant cycle and to review the grants awarded in FY2014. The FY2014 grants were announced on October 2, 2014.

In the first year, the program managers for SCRI presented the following major themes to be considered in the SCRI relevance evaluation criteria:

- The issues and challenges being addressed are significant on a state, regional or national scale.
- The stakeholders are involved in identifying and developing project goals and objectives.

- Plans are in place for stakeholders to remain actively engaged in project activities.
- Information developed by the project team will be delivered to stakeholders in ways that allow them to implement new and/or improved practices.
- Stakeholders are involved in the evaluation of the program.
- The project team has at least some members who worked with target stakeholders in the past and have experience with the described research approach. The described research approach will result in an outcome that is important to target stakeholders.

Applicants were required to submit their stakeholder relevance statement, which included the problem being addressed, rationale, significance and hypothesis, prior to the submission of the full proposal. The stakeholder relevance statement was provided to the relevancy review panelists for review. Only those applications that scored highly enough were invited to submit full applications.

The SCC supported the proposed approach for the FY2014 SCRI grant cycle. However, the SCC recognizes that the majority of the recommendations identified by the committee in the preceding year (FY2014) are still relevant and applicable. In addition, for FY2015, there were several lessons learned and additional recommendations developed by the SCC. These recommendations should be considered by NIFA leadership and by the SCRI program managers.

It is important to reemphasize that adding the relevancy review process to the evaluation of SCRI grants is groundbreaking. The committee, in our recommendations, is seeking to provide options for NIFA to continue to improve and evolve the process. It is critical for all stakeholders to have confidence that the importance of relevancy and scientific merit reviews are balanced. We emphasize that the relevancy review process should not be simply a yes or no evaluation; the participants in the relevancy reviews are in a position to establish and prioritize the importance/relevance of proposals to stakeholder interest. Research committees in industry and commodity commissions are continually evaluating proposals against the most pressing and highest priorities for research. The committee also recognizes that while many recommendations have been made, some recommendations may not be feasible within constraints of which we are unaware. We look forward to continuing to work with SCRI to develop a process for reviewing SCRI grants where all interested parties are confident that the highest priority, scientifically sound research proposals are being funded.

### ***Recommendations from the SCC***

For the FY2015 grant cycle, the Specialty Crop Committee recommends that the ultimate **goal** should be for the relevancy review to carry equal weight as the scientific review during the review and selection process for SCRI grants. Consistent and effective communications forms the foundation for success.

The following are the recommendations from the SCC for the FY2015 granting cycle.

***The USDA should improve their overall communication of the purpose of the relevancy review, and the communication between the USDA and the review panel members.***

There were considerable breakdowns in communication noted by NIFA Program Leaders, relevancy reviewers, and scientific merit reviewers in the FY2014 granting cycle. The reported breakdown in communication with relevancy review panel members must be corrected. The failure to complete the loop and ensure completed reviews undermines the thoroughness of the review process and reduces confidence in the process among participants.

- The language in the Request for Proposal (RFP) must clearly reflect that the relevancy review will represent 50% of the selection process and the scientific review will represent 50% of the selection process.
- In the RFP, NIFA should not include specific examples in the listing of the Legislative Focus Area Priorities. The inclusion of specific examples could influence potential proposals to those specific topics used as examples and skew the ultimate relevance of the proposals received. The SCC recommends that if NIFA includes the specific examples, there should be an established process to develop those specific research priorities in advance of the RFP.
- NIFA should improve communication to participants in both the relevancy review and the scientific merit review. Specifically, NIFA should ensure that the scientific merit review panelists are provided all relevancy review information and that the importance of the relevancy review is explained to all scientific reviewers.
- Written feedback on the review process should be sought from participants in both reviews. A summary of this feedback should be provided to the SCC.

***NIFA should take steps to improve the relevancy review process.***

In general, the SCC identified several areas where NIFA could greatly improve the actual process of the relevancy review in order to provide a more substantial review of the stakeholder relevancy statement.

- NIFA should consider employing an industry representative(s) to act as manager(s) of the relevance review panel(s).
- NIFA should extend the duration of the review process and make greater use of conference calls or webinars in the review process.
- The review process for relevancy reviews should be strengthened with more rigor in the criteria of the reviews. (Draft *recommended* criteria attached). The committee notes that the program managers found a high quality of research proposals in the scientific merit reviews after approximately 20 % were eliminated during the relevancy review process. While not possible to

correlate the relationship, stronger relevancy reviews are likely to result in further overall improvement in final proposals that are submitted.

- The stakeholder relevance statement should include information on the anticipated impact of the project (e.g. number of acres/tons/boxes). Reviewers should be able to evaluate both relevancy and impact.
- NIFA should require letters of industry support for the relevance statement, as well as the scientific proposal.
- NIFA should require letters of intent from collaborators and more biographical information on project personnel. It should also conduct due diligence on proposed collaborators.
- Invited (full) applications should include a response to the relevance review.
- The SCC remains concerned that relevancy reviews are being done ‘independently’ and without a face-to-face panel. As an alternative, panels could be convened by a conference/video conference.

***NIFA should strive to improve the integration of the relevancy and scientific merit reviews.***

- Communication of the results of the relevancy reviews to the scientific reviews must be improved. While making the results of relevancy reviews more visible in the scientific review process, scientific reviewers should receive a detailed summary of the relevancy review results.
- The relevancy and scientific reviews need to be connected and more transparent. One possible approach is to convene a third panel consisting of representatives from both the relevancy and scientific merit reviews. A second approach might be a combination ranking based on the two reviews. This ranking could be based on algorithm for combining the results of the two reviews or based on combined ranking categories (4-5) from the two reviews.

***NIFA should evaluate the procedure for identifying priority areas for funding.***

- NIFA should evaluate the impacts of the requirements for support of projects at 10% in the identified priority areas. If these are preventing the funding of the best proposals based on relevancy and scientific reviews, NIFA should work with the specialty crops community to change this requirement.
- NIFA should consider establishing a procedure within the SCRI to solicit proposals on targeted emerging issues and global challenges (i.e. powdery mildew, *Botrytis*, etc.) established with input from industry information as provided by the specialty crops community.

The members of the SCC thank the SCRI personnel for their input into this consultation and look forward to future consultations and assessments of the SCRI program.

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**REPORT DEVELOPED BY THE NAREEE ADVISORY BOARD – SPECIALTY CROP COMMITTEE**

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