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Research, Education, and Economics (REE)  
National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board

**Executive Committee (EXECOM) Meeting – February 11, 2025, Minutes**

**NAREEE Committee Members Present:** Dr. Kenrett Jefferson-Moore (Chair), Dr. Sreekala Bajwa, Dr. V.M. “Bala” Balasubramaniam, Ms. Donnell Brown, Ms. Vanessa Garcia Polanco, Dr. Ellen Harris, Dr. Edwin Kitzes, Dr. Jane Kolodinsky, Dr. Mark Lawrence, Dr. William Lytle, Dr. Natasha Mast, Dr. Jane Schuchardt - 12

**Members Absent:** – Richard De Los Santos, Dr. Mario Ferruzzi - 2

**Guest** – Mr. Christopher Alvarez, Chief Data Officer, USDA, Dr. David Butruille, National Genetics Resources Advisory Council (NGRAC) Mr. Casey Foster, Specialty Crop Committee (SCC) Dr. Lorin Harvey, SCC, Dr. James McFerson, NGRAC Chair - 5

**NAREEE Board Staff Present:** Ms. Kate Lewis, NAREEE Board Executive Director/Designated Federal Officer (DFO) and Ms. Michele Simmons, Program Specialist

**I. Welcome from DFO Kate Lewis, Roll Call, and Quorum Check. Quorum was met.**

DFO Lewis noted that the January minutes were approved with no comments or revisions. Ms. Simmons will have the web team post the January minutes and agenda to the NAREEE website.

**II. Report/Remarks from the Chair Dr. Jefferson-Moore, Chair**

Dr. Jefferson-Moore welcomed the group. She thanked the Board members that were able to participate. Dr. Jefferson-Moore noted that her time to Chair the NAREEE Advisory Board will soon come to an end and hoped that the Board can meet one more time in person. She thanked all the Board members for their service. Dr. Jefferson-Moore noted that the agenda for this meeting was rather full so noted to move forward with the meeting.



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**III. New Business**

**FY25–26 USDA AI Strategy:**

Mr. Alveraz discussed the following from a PowerPoint slide.

- AI Strategy – Timeline & Process
  - Planning, Compliance, and Benchmarking – Late fall and winter 2023
  - Current State Assessment – Spring 2024
  - Future State Visioning and Brainstorming Implementation – Summer 2024
  - Publication – Fall 2024
  - Implementation and Delegation – Winter and spring 2025
- FY25–26 AI Strategy Development: Stakeholder Engagement
  - Departmental Workshops between April and May with over 140 data and AI stakeholders
  - Mission Area Workshops between May and June with 70 data and AI stakeholders across all 8 Mission Areas
  - AI Current State Survey – Survey responses indicated growing momentum around AI at USDA
  - AI Strategy Taskforce – Help develop actionable goals and objectives that become the foundation of the FY25-26 USDA AI Strategy
- FY24-25 USDA AI Strategy at a Glance and Accomplishments so Far
  - AI Governance and Leadership – Established the USDA AI Council and stood up the Generative AI Review Board
  - Workforce Readiness for AI – Invested in early career talent (e.g. USDA Digital Corps, Pathways interns, hackathons at universities)
  - AI infrastructure and Toolset – Launched the USDA Innovation Hub and AI Lab and developed the Generative AI Innovation Adoption Pipeline Framework
  - Data Readiness and Access – Published the FY-24-26 USDA Strategy
  - Trusted and Scalable AI – Published the Framework for State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial Use of Artificial Intelligence for Public Benefit Administration



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- FY25 Priorities
  - Standardize contract language
  - Provide guidance and inventory in-use and approved AI and GenAI tools
  - Provide more rational opportunities
  - Explore using AI and GenAI to improve data management
  - Expand partnerships
  - Expand AI training
  - Expand network of internal testers for red teams
- Research AI and Accomplishments
  - Built AI expertise in the Agricultural Research Service
  - Invested in infrastructure and training
  - Supported five USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture AI Institutes
- Our Approach to Implementation
- How to Get Involved

Some of the Board members submitted questions for Mr. Alvarez prior to the meeting which he addressed.

- Previous use of AI by USDA was referenced [*in the plan*] several times. What are examples of these applications?
  - The Aphis program is using AI to help identify high risk imports.
  - National forests are using AI to look at satellite imagery of forests to assess forest health.
  - Forest Service is also looking to use AI in wildfire prediction.
  - Groups are using generative AI to create training content and training materials
- Will job announcements include a requirement for experience with AI?
  - Depending on the job, you may have to have AI training and/or experience. Currently there's not a blanket requirement that all jobs have AI experience.



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- How will USDA keep up with the rapid changes expected with AI?
  - The best way is staying engaged through conferences, vendors, and relying on academic communities
  
- Is there a total U.S. government AI strategy and, if so, how does the USDA strategy align?
  - The white House has issued an executive order around artificial intelligence and has directed the Office of Management and Budget to update some policies related to the adoption of AI. I think that will align all federal agencies, including USDA in terms of how we move forward.
  
- What concerns do you have about AI for USDA moving into the future and how will these concerns be addressed before a problem occurs?
  - Tools can be put in the hands of non-technical such as program administrators, administrative support folks, etc. that don't really understand how to use these tools. Training is key to help prevent problems.

For the sake of time to cover the remaining agenda items, DFO Lewis shortened the Board's discussion with Mr. Alvarez. She asked Mr. Alveraz to send a short summary to answer the remaining 2 questions. Mr. Alvarez also informed the Board that they could contact him if they had additional questions. DFO Lewis thanked Mr. Alvarez for his time and sharing AI information with the Board.

**Vote - Optimizing Deployment of Genetic Resources report (NGRAC)**

Dr. McFerson summarized the Deployment report for the Board. They had an opportunity to review the report prior to the meeting. He asked if there were any questions.

A member asked if the Deployment report is an action plan or recommendations?

Dr. McFerson stated that they're recommendations for the USDA Secretary. If decisions are made, USDA scientist would be responsible for following through with the recommendations. He asked if there were any more questions. There were none.



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DFO Lewis asked for a motion and a second motion to approve the Deployment report. All Board members approved and none opposed.

DFO Lewis thanked Drs. Butruille and McFerson for attending the meeting and sharing information with the Board.

**Vote – NIFA Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) FY25 Program Recommendations (SCC)**

DFO Lewis shared her screen the SCC's summarized recommendations. The SCC would like to transmit the five recommendations to USDA related to the FY SCRI FY25 granting program which is administered by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. She introduced Drs. Foster and Harvey, Members of the SCC, to the Board. The Board had a chance to review the SCRI recommendations prior to the meeting. DFO asked the Board if they had any questions for Drs. Foster and Harvey.

A member asked if it's normal that there is an industry scientific review for the selection process?

Dr. Foster stated that there are folks involved in both the industry and the scientific community that serve as reviewers. There are different representations for reviewers.

Ms. Brown also stated that there are two reviews. Industry relevance and then scientific merit.

A member asked what if there is a new specialty crop that doesn't have an industry?

Dr. Foster stated that he would like to have every crop industry represented, but it's not possible. That's why there are review committees formed that do their best in researching and looking at each project individually.

DFO Lewis stated that the NAREEE Executive Committee did approve SCRI's 5 recommendations in January of 2025. She asked for a motion and a second motion for approval. All Board members approved except for Dr. Jane Kolodinsky who opposed. Since most of the Board approved, the recommendations will be packaged and transmitted through the REE Mission Area and then to the Secretary



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of USDA.

**Next Steps: FY25 Relevancy & Adequacy (R&A) report topic – majority voted on Extension/Research into Action**

Since time was running short, DFO Lewis asked the Board if she could send them a one pager of proposed next steps for the FY25 R&A report. No one opposed.

**Discussion: letter to incoming USDA Sec Rollins from farmers on prioritizing diversification of agricultural production**

Dr. Lytle mentioned to the Board that he discussed the Secretary Rollins' letter to the NAREEE Executive Committee last month. They suggested that he talk about the letter to the entire NAREEE Advisory Board. He explained that the letter was written by the Agree, DFS Working Group. Dr. Lytle presented a PowerPoint about diversification of agricultural production. The new administration would like to make sure profitable crops are grown here at home and have new markets for farmers and ranchers. They were asking producers to sign the letter which will be sent to the incoming USDA Secretary. Dr. Lytle stated farmers had to sign the letter before January 15, 2025. As of today, some of the language might be irrelevant or outdated.

DFO Lewis thanked Dr. Lytle for presenting the letter information to the Board for their awareness. She also asked him to please forward the PowerPoint slides to Ms. Simmons so they can be forwarded to the Board.

**IV. Wrap-Up/Adjourn**

Approved meeting minutes may be found [here](#)

Recurring EXECOM meetings will take place the 1st Tuesday of each month

Next meeting: Tues 3/4/25, 12:00 – 1:00 pm ET

The meeting adjourned at 1:39 p.m. ET.