



Northeastern Regional Association of State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors

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TO: Dr. Scott Angle, Director – NIFA
FROM: Dr. Rick Rhodes, Executive Director – NERA
RE: Assistance for Research, Graduate Students and Post-Docs

NERA met recently to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on our research operations. Several important themes emerged:

- Domestic travel for all institutions is prohibited until further notice.
- Laboratory research not deemed essential or critical has been placed on hold.
- Policies on field research vary widely. Some states allow with the caveat of social distancing while others utilize the same policies as indoor labs, i.e., non-essential and non-critical work is prohibited. The prospect of a rapid ramp-down of any field research is imminent in several states.
- Research efforts across all stations have been significantly impacted. While full efforts will resume once the pandemic is behind us, the length of the impact is unknown.
- A key resource adversely impacted by the research limitations are our graduate students, both M.S. and Ph.D. and Post-Docs.

Like our colleagues in the other regions (ARD, NCRA, SAAESD, WAAESD), NERA Directors believe that NIFA should undertake across-the-board actions to preserve grant-funded research and support graduate students and Post-Docs adversely impacted by the research slowdown/shutdown caused by the pandemic. For preservation of our research endeavors, we respectfully seek a 1-year, no-cost funding extension for both capacity and competitive funds. I see that NIFA posted an FAQ on March 30th indicating that NIFA intended to follow OMB circular M-20-17, which provides awarding agencies with the option to extend expiring awards automatically, at no cost for a period of a year. We suggest that stipulation includes carryover funds.

Second, as our LGUs shut down and curtail laboratory and field work, graduate students are at risk of not completing their research and their degree programs. Likewise with Post-Docs; they are in jeopardy of not completing research that they had undertaken. During this crises, we must honor the financial support obligations that we have with our graduate students and Post-Docs. Hence, we suggest that NIFA authorize supplemental funding awards to support graduate students and Post-Docs on both competitive and capacity grants via the most expeditious and easily accomplished means possible.

We all appreciate that research outcomes will be delayed and project funds expended during the COVID-19 associated stoppages. We encourage NIFA to broadly consider any support options for our research and for our future workforce: the current cadre of graduate students and Post-Docs. Last, NERA directors, with our other regional colleagues, stand ready to work with NIFA to craft a means to move these support initiatives forward.

I share these reflections on behalf of the Directors from:

Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, Cornell University, The Pennsylvania State University, Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey, University of Connecticut, University of Delaware, University of the District of Columbia, University of Maine, University of Maryland, University of Massachusetts, University of New Hampshire, University of Rhode Island, University of Vermont, West Virginia University.