

A Response from NERA to the NRSP-Review Committee (NRSP-RC)

NERA is responding to the solicitation by the NRSP-Review Committee for a regional reply to the request to renew NRSP-8: *National Animal Genome Research Program* and to the mid-term reviews of NRSP-4: *Enabling Pesticide Registrations for Specialty Crops and Minor Uses*, NRSP-6: *The US Potato Genebank: Acquisition, Classification, Preservation, Evaluation and Distribution of Potato (Solanum) Germplasm*, and NRSP-9: *National Animal Nutrition Program*.

Overall Reflections:

During its Spring meeting, NERA considered the request by the NRSP-RC. After extensive deliberation, NERA asks the NRSP-RC to “reimagine” NRSP processes. While we understand that the NRSP-RC is an advisory group to ESS and ESS is the ultimate decision maker, the NRSP-RC is the gatekeeper of support projects for the state agricultural experiment stations.

Concern: Once an NRSP is underway, a mid-term review is undertaken by the Administrative Advisers of the project. While the AAs are Directors, they may not be discipline experts and, hence, are not in the best position to evaluate the project.

NERA recommends that an external panel of independent experts perform the mid-term evaluation of the NRSP. An external reviewer could be characterized as an expert in the field of study, without a conflict of interest or direct interaction with the project, able to provide an independent assessment of the current and future need for the project, and level of investment. Likewise, we recommend that the expectation of the review be clearly described to the reviewer (e.g., does the reviewer recommend continued funding, etc.) The AAs would then use the external evaluations and their personal expertise in administration to frame the overall evaluation of the project.

Concern: The NERA directors reflected that once an NRSP starts, it never ends. NERA believes that there are research support endeavors that are worth funding. Further, we appreciate the accomplishments of many of the NRSPs. However, there must be a sunset on the Off-the-Top (OTT) funding of an NRSP.

NERA recommends that NRSPs be limited to a 5-year funding period with an option to renew once and only once. The one-time renewal would be based on a robust mid-term review (as described above) and peer evaluation of the project renewal proposal.

Concern: NERA directors noted that NIMSS is a resource that supports the management of the Multistate Research Fund (MRF.) Is the use of OTT funds to support NIMSS, in perpetuity, the best funding model?

NERA recommends that the NRSP-RC consider alternative strategies to support NIMSS other than using OTT funds.

Concern: NERA notes the use of regional OTT funds to support gene resource bases across the country. While NERA appreciates the value of these resources, we question the strategy of using OTT regional funds to support these endeavors. Here in the Northeast, the absurdity of

the funding strategy is magnified at the project management level: federal employees, primarily senior scientists, effectively direct the work of Cornell University technical staff which has and can lead to human resource policy violations for both USDA and Cornell.

NERA recommends that the NRSP-RC in consultation with the regional Executive Directors develop alternative strategies for funding these important resources.

Last, NERA's concerns above, are reflected in our recommendations on the renewal of NRSP-8 and the mid-term reviews of NRSPs- 4, 6, and 9.

NRSP-8: *National Animal Genome Research Program* renewal:

The NE Multistate Activities Committee reviewed the renewal proposal of NRSP-8 and NERA discussed the reflections of the MAC. The association appreciates the need to develop and sustain crucial infrastructure components to support genomic discoveries in livestock, poultry, and aquaculture species. Likewise, we appreciate the breadth of accomplishments of NRSP-8. We argue that the Off-the-Top (OTT) venture capital that supported this national effort constituted dollars well-spent. However, we do not see the compelling argument to continue using OTT funding to support these efforts. As the proposal indicates, the project has leveraged \$94 million. Why is the continuation of OTT funds essential for the project? We understand that the request of NRSP-8 is for salaries of "species coordinators" and a bioinformatics coordinator; why is the contribution from OTT funds required? The Business Plan notes that the NAGRP Director in consultation with the Administrative Advisors makes the final decision as to the actual distribution of salary funds to the species coordinators. What criteria is used for making that decision and are the OTT funds truly needed? Further, the Business Plan seeks the option of carrying funding over, one year to another. Again, why is another 5-year tranche of OTT funds required for this endeavor? We believe that this project would exist in the absence of the OTT contribution.

NERA also expresses a concern about what the species coordinators will do. The proposal indicates that "these funds likely will support the development and annotation of their respective genomes, subsidizing the generation of shared reagents (e.g., SNP chips), support to produce preliminary data for grant submissions, travel to PAG or other relevant meetings..." Why are OTT funds needed to subsidize these activities?

We also suggest that the project renewal be reviewed by external, discipline experts, not related to the project. If a review has been completed by content specialists, the reviews should be made available to the regional associations. NERA does not have the expertise to critically evaluate the science of the project nor does NERA have the expertise to assess the critical function of this NRSP.

NERA recommendation: reject the proposal.

NRSP-4: *Enabling Pesticide Registrations for Specialty Crops and Minor Uses*, midterm review:

The NE Multistate Activities Committee reviewed the mid-term review of NRSP-4 and discussed those reflections with NERA.

NERA recommendation: NERA approves the recommendation of the Administrative Advisers, continue funding the project. We also recommend that the project team consider strategies to become self-sufficient; that is, no OTT funding after the end of the project period.

NRSP-6: *The US Potato Genebank: Acquisition, Classification, Preservation, Evaluation and Distribution of Potato (Solanum) Germplasm*, midterm review:

The NE Multistate Activities Committee reviewed the mid-term review of NRSP-6 and discussed those reflections with NERA. NERA recognizes a failed assignment of this NRSP, the development of sustainable business plan.

NERA recommendation: NERA approves the recommendation of the Administrative Advisers, continue funding the project. We also recommend that the project team consider strategies to become self-sufficient; that is, no OTT after the end of the project period.

NRSP-9: *National Animal Nutrition Program* midterm review:

The NE Multistate Activities Committee reviewed the mid-term review of NRSP-9 and discussed those reflections with NERA. NERA noted that the outputs of the project were poorly described or weak.

NERA recommendation: NERA approves the recommendation of the Administrative Advisers, continue funding the project. We also recommend that the project team consider strategies to become self-sufficient; that is, no OTT funding after the end of the project period.