

NERA Business Meeting Minutes September 23, 2024

In attendance: Anton Bekkerman (Chair-New Hampshire), Wendie Cohick (Vice Chair-New Jersey), Jason Hubbart (Officer at large-West Virginia), Margaret Smith (New York-Ithaca), Chris Smart (New York-Geneva), Lynne McLandsborough (Massachusetts), Eric Bishop von Wettberg (Vermont), Blair Siegfried (Pennsylvania), Beth Gugino (Pennsylvania), Rick Rhodes (NERA Executive Director), David Leibovitz (NERA Coordinator)

Meeting Administration

- NERA's Executive Committee rotates as of the end of this meeting, and an Officer-at-large needs to be nominated. **Eric Bishop von Wettberg was nominated to serve as the next Officer-at-large and the nomination was approved unanimously.**
- NERA is seeking a representative to serve on the agInnovation Finance Committee, as a member-at-large for a two-year term. **Jason Hubbart volunteered to serve on the Finance Committee and his appointment was approved unanimously.**
- **The minutes of the last [NERA business meeting of June 5, 2024](#) were approved unanimously.**

Multistate Activities Committee Discussion

- The MAC last met on September 11, 2024, and a [report and recommendations](#) was shared with NERA. Three proposals were discussed at the MAC meeting:
 - NE_TEMP2401 *Urban Agriculture: Equity, Sustainability, and Community Development*
 - This proposal was drafted out of a unique scenario; NERA initiated this activity by hosting a multistate writing workshop in April 2023 with a group of urban agriculture professionals who did not have deep familiarity with capacity funds.
 - NERA Directors will need to play an active role in promoting the opportunity to join this project team and demonstrating how to engage in multistate activities.
 - If approved, this would be the first urban agriculture focused Multistate Research Project in the national portfolio.
 - The technical team refined the methods section in response to peer reviewers' comments.
 - **A motion was introduced to approve NE_TEMP2401 as recommended by the MAC. The proposal was approved unanimously.**
 - NE_TEMP2438 *Carbon Dynamics and Hydromorphology*
 - Six peer reviews were received. One reviewer had issues regarding site selection, and those issues were addressed by the technical team.
 - This is a long-standing project with merit and its leadership is in flux for the first time in two project cycles.
 - **A motion was introduced to approve NE_TEMP2438 as recommended by the MAC. The proposal was approved unanimously.**
 - NE_TEMP1 *Northeastern Regional Center for Rural Development (NERCRD)*
 - Off-the-top funding supports NERCRD. A 5-year project activity will designate NERCRD as part of the national portfolio, provide the center with a

mechanism for reporting multistate activities, and provide a way for investigators to report on activities associated with the center.

- This off-the-top proposal seeks \$100k annually; historically they requested \$41k annually. NERCRD has hired new personnel, and a budget increase currently is seen as an opportunity to better stabilize the center staff and its activities.
 - The center has a successful history of leveraging its funding (20:1)
 - The budget increase will come from the multistate research allocation to the Northeast. This increase will be offset by a decrease in national off-the-top funding in the upcoming year.
 - **A motion was introduced to approve NE_TEMP1 as recommended by the MAC. The proposal was approved unanimously.**
- Administrative adviser assignments: NERA seeks AAs for two current projects; NE2201 (*Mycobacterial Diseases of Animals*) and NRSP8 (*Genomic Capacity: Building Applied Genomic Capacity for Animal Industries*). NRSP_TEMP13 is a new proposal in development (*Artificial Intelligence for Agricultural Autonomy*) and also seeks a northeast AA.
 - Margaret Smith volunteered to serve as northeast AA for NRSP_TEMP13.
 - Eric Bishop von Wettberg volunteered to serve as northeast AA for NRSP8.
 - **A motion was introduced to approve both of these AA assignments, and the motion was approved unanimously.**

Evaluation of the Office of the Executive Director

- [A tabulation of the accomplishments of the Office of the Executive Director](#) is posted on the NERA website. After a discussion of the roles, responsibilities, and accomplishments of the OED, the Directors expressed appreciation to Rick and David for their work on behalf of the association over the past year.

A visit with Deborah Thompson, NC State University

- In 2014, Deborah was charged by NC State AES Director Steve Lommel to “Help me build deep and enduring relationships with our industry partners.”
- Deborah is beginning a personal coaching endeavor, using her expertise to help other professionals in the domain of relationship building.
- [Deborah’s slides are posted on the NERA website.](#)

Station Profile – University of Massachusetts (Lynne McLandsborough)

- Lynne delivered an organizational and programmatic overview of UMass Research and Extension, part of the Center for Agriculture, Food, and the Environment. Lynne also presented some individual research highlights from the Experiment Station.
- [Lynne’s slides are posted on the NERA website.](#)

A Conversation with NIFA Partners: Kevin Kephart, Deputy Director, Institute of Bioenergy, Climate, and Environment; Rubella Goswami, Deputy Director, Institute of Youth Family and Community; Faith Peppers, Director of Communications

- FY2025 President’s Budget proposal: Submitted to Congress in February 2025. Not yet approved, a continuing resolution is incoming.
 - \$1.7B is allocated for discretionary programs (\$53M above what was enacted in 2024)

- Funding opportunities (Keep track of published RFAs on Grants.gov)
 - USDA Nutrition Hubs - \$4.5M is allocated to establish three new hubs. First new hub is at Southern University. Hubs are being established on a competitive basis. Applications are currently being accepted.
 - RFAs coming soon: Foundational and applied research, sustainable ag systems (anticipated for release Jan-Feb 2025)
- Area of growing concern: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). NIFA will partner with APHIS to create collaborative activities with the AFRI program that are relevant to animal diseases. APHIS is willing to dedicate \$10M in funding to impact research in that area. Another HPAI collaboration is being established with CDC (also \$10M).
- Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK): NIFA established a task force to formally define the term “indigenous knowledge.” As the definition emerges and NIFA gains clarity on this, there will be ITEK components incorporated into future RFAs.
- Due diligence process for foreign influence: spelled out in the SBIR STTR reauthorization act, funded proposals are now being reviewed out of concern about foreign influence (e.g. China, Russia, North Korea).
- Environmental Justice Implementation Plan is currently being drafted, with the goal of submission to NIFA administration by February 2025. (note: Justice40 is a different initiative.)
- Climate Change: NIFA has stepped back to assess what accomplishments have been made in climate mitigation areas. Reflection has revealed that a lot of progress has been made, and NIFA is drafting a report to showcase these accomplishments which will soon be posted on its website.
- Food Loss and Waste: This RFA has been renewed, and the program area has received two new staff members from the Office of the Chief Economist.
- NIFA Grants Modernization Initiative (modeled after the NIH’s grant submission system): Pilot programs will be rolled out during FY2025 and further commitment to modernization will rise in the years to come.
- All NIFA RFAs will have required technical assistance webinars. On-site training is being offered on technical assistance and impact writing. NIFA encourages Directors to share these opportunities with new faculty.
- NIFA Impact writing trainings can be offered either virtually or in-person, at no cost to institutions. Directors can contact Faith Peppers if interested.

NERA Chair’s Perspective (New initiative: Northeast Asset Mapping)

- Current Research Information System (CRIS) is a database with all project-level data from across the AES system. The Northeast has ~1,000 current projects across McIntire Stennis and Hatch/Hatch Multistate.
- Anton Bekkerman reached out to colleagues in the UNH College of Engineering and connected with an Associate Professor with an interest in large language learning models and AI.
- NERA elected to fund this UNH Associate Professor to employ large language learning models to organize project information by topic area (Climate Change, Sustainable Food Systems, and Health/Well-being, as defined by the priority areas in the [Northeast Agenda](#)), and assess our success in each topic area.

- The generated dataset should reveal the institutions, investigators, and specific projects that have connections/overlap, and will help NERA define where expertise lies across the region in each topic/priority area.
- The dataset may also reveal additional major topic areas for the region, if there are projects that don't necessarily fall into one of the three currently defined categories.
- One goal of this project is to rapidly identify the people across Northeast Experiment Stations that can best work together and be most competitive in a particular topic area in response to RFAs.

National Research Support Project Vote Preparation

- The NRSP Review Committee will introduce a motion to approve the NRSP3 proposal (National Atmospheric Deposition Program/NADP), which has received \$50k annually in off-the-top funding over the past 15 years. The group has been highly successful in leveraging its funding and the OED recommends approval of the proposal.
 - \$1.7M in inter-agency funding is awarded annually to the NADP; the group also pursues competitive funding opportunities beyond this amount. University of Wisconsin is the coordinating campus for the NADP.
 - NADP examined emissions resulting from the fire and spills associated with the 2024 Ohio train derailment and was able to map the geographic extent of the impact of that event (reaching as far as NY State and Canada).
- New NRSPs Coming in 2025:
 - NRSP_TEMP12 *National Urban Agriculture Research and Extension Center*
 - NRSP_TEMP13 *Artificial Intelligence for Ag Autonomy*

Capacity Funds Best Practices

- A whitepaper is being drafted to serve as a compendium of resources and best practices for management of capacity funds.
- NERA would like to assemble a dataset of State vs Federal funding appropriations for all institutions in the LGU system, to assess the match situation across the country. The Southern region has been collecting this data for the past 20 years – all institutions report.
 - **This data is of particular interest to central administrators, and it would be helpful if NERA institutions felt comfortable reporting similar data.**
- The allocation of funds toward salary/research projects/facilities will also be gathered to compare investments across institutions.
- The intent for this document is to help guide Directors on the topic of “What should Ag Experiment Stations do?”
- **OED will come up with a format for NERA Directors to engage in this initiative. A template for reporting this data will be developed, rolled out regionally, and then nationally.**

Changing of the Guard

- NERA thanked Anton Bekkerman for his service as Chair over the past year. The NERA officers formally rotated, and Wendie Cohick was sworn in as Chair.
- The meeting adjourned at 12:00 pm ET.