

NERA Spring Meeting

March 26-27, 2024

APLU Conference Room, Washington, DC

In attendance: Anton Bekkerman (Chair-New Hampshire), Wendie Cohick (Vice Chair-New Jersey), Puneet Srivastava (Past Chair-Maryland), Blair Siegfried (Officer-at-large-Pennsylvania), Eric Bishop von Wettberg (Vermont), Jason Hubbart (West Virginia), Beth Gugino (Pennsylvania), Chris Smart (New York-Geneva), Wendy Fink (APLU), Rick Rhodes (Executive Director-NERA), David Leibovitz (Coordinator-NERA)

Tuesday, March 26, 2024

Call to Order and Introductions – Anton Bekkerman

- The group went through a series of introductions.
- **The agenda for this meeting as presented was approved unanimously.**
- **The minutes of the December 7, 2023, NERA meeting were approved unanimously.**

NERA Executive Committee Updates – Anton Bekkerman and Rick Rhodes

- agInnovation Branding Initiative
 - NERA Directors received agInnovation branded clothing as part of an effort to promote the brand that represents the Experiment Stations as a national organization.
 - Follow-up activities related to agInnovation branding will be held at the [Association for Communications Excellence annual conference, June 23-25 in Salt Lake City](#), to develop a roadmap for agInnovation to improve storytelling and impact communications.
 - Northeast Communicators have been meeting regularly since our joint summer meeting 2023.
 - The issue that stations are dealing with is how to effectively engage in regional communications. This requires:
 - Clear, demonstrated buy-in from leadership to communications staff.
 - Dedication of resources to communication
 - Not duplicating activities
 - Sensitivity to the observation that communications staff members may not be located within “the station”. They may be embedded in the college, CE, or the University.
 - NERA is interested in committing funds to support the development of regional stories.
 - **Directors are asked to share news articles, station images, and archives of news/images from university webpages with the NERA office of the Executive Director, anytime. Articles may be featured on [agInnovation.info](#), and images may be featured on the NERA website ([nerasaes.org](#)) in the [NERA News](#) “Parting Shot”, or in regional communications materials yet to be designed.**

Multistate Activities Committee – Puneet Srivastava, MAC Chair

- The MAC recommends to NERA the approval of *NE_TEMP2439: Improving the health span of aging adults through diet and physical activity, 10/2024 – 09/2029* [Renewal of NE1939, AA: Ingrid Lofgren – Rhode Island]

- **The project was approved by the NERA Directors unanimously as NE2439. The MAC Chair will follow up with the Administrative Adviser and technical team, and the NERA OED will approve the projects in NIMSS.**
- The MAC recommends sending the NRSP3 proposal back to the technical team for revisions prior to approval. This recommendation was guided by the reflections of Northeast Administrative Adviser Jason White.
 - **The NRSP3 MAC recommendation was approved unanimously by NERA. The NERA OED will follow up with the NRSP Review Committee to share this feedback from the region.**
- AA Assignments
 - NRSP11: *Building Collaborative Research Networks to Advance the Science of Soil Fertility: Fertilizer Recommendation Support Tool (FRST)*
 - **Jason White was approved unanimously to serve as the Northeast AA on NRSP11.**
 - NE2202: *The Equine Microbiome* is seeking an administrative adviser to replace Calvin Keeler (retired-Delaware).
- MAC Informational items:
 - NE_TEMP1 (Northeastern Regional Center for Rural Development; regional Off-the-top project) out for peer review
 - [Guidance for Administrative Advisers and Multistate Project leadership is posted on the NERA website.](#)
 - NE2334 (Avian Disease) and NE1939 (Nutrition) are drafting nominations for the 2024 Northeast Excellence in Multistate Research Award. **The NERA OED can share examples of successful award nominations to inform submissions.**
 - The Multistate Research Fund Impacts team is seeking nominations from each region to hold impact writing workshops at an annual multistate project meeting. **NE9 (Germplasm Center, Geneva), NE2334 (Avian Disease), and NE2335 (Controlled Environment Ag) are being nominated for the 2024 impact writing workshop.**

All Things APLU, NERA, and agInnovation: A conversation with Wendy Fink

- APLU represents 250 universities, of which 1/3 are Land-grant universities.
- NERA engages with the APLU Board on Agriculture Assembly (BAA), which is housed within the Commission on Food, Environment, and Renewable Resources (CFERR)
- Roles of the BAA include overseeing advocacy, communications and marketing, and interaction with the federal government.
- The BAA has been trying new communications/marketing strategies, e.g. “whiteboard videos” to explain capacity funding to a public audience. See [Investing in People](#).
- Capacity Funds initiative
 - A committee within APLU is developing a comprehensive dataset to articulate the value of capacity funding to support advocacy efforts.
 - Directors would like to see a graphical representation of what capacity funds do for each funding source (e.g. Hatch, Hatch Regional), evergreen material that can be used year to year in support of these funds. The challenge is telling a story that is compelling to

legislators and compelling to faculty. Capacity funds management is not consistent across institutions.

- George Smith (Michigan) and Steve Lommel (North Carolina) represent agInnovation on the BAA Capacity committee.
- AG-NGINE is continuing, APLU is going to examine the value of the initiative and host a graduate education summit in the future.
- Succinctly, APLU is creating connections by convening its members with the goal of sparking collaboration and communicating impact.
- APLU recognizes the need for a solid pipeline/pathway to leadership. Award nominations, leadership programs (LEAD21/FSLI) are successful in that area. Recognition goes a long way.

The NERA Value Proposition. Where are we and where are we going? – Anton Bekkerman and Rick Rhodes

- Pillars of the [NERA Value Proposition](#) have been identified as:
 - Administration (regional portfolio administration)
 - Information Commons (sharing information, a forum for candid conversation among Directors)
 - Collaboration (working together across institutions)
 - Representation (representing the region at National venues)
- The group walked through the [NERA Value Proposition Survey Results \(posted on the NERA website\)](#).
- Directors suggested getting out in front of NEASDA or other influential regional groups to present the Northeast Agenda.
- From the survey: “High Value” activities which NERA should “Increase Emphasis”
 - NERA serving as a co-laboratory, facilitating and promoting multi-institutional initiatives.
 - NERA representing Northeast stations at regional and national levels.
 - What types of NERA activities can benefit our stations and what roles can NERA’s OED serve to facilitate success?
 - Educate groups (e.g. NEASDA, State Governors) on what the “Ag Experiment Station” is. Communicating the mission/vision/purpose of the AES.
 - Share examples of regional research and shining light on the attribution to states. Finding common denominators between states, e.g. dairy in PA and VT.
 - Arrange a meeting of Directors and institutional Government Relations staff. Find commonalities between institutions and identify which states don’t have an advocate identified.
 - NERA as a group should meet more frequently with government affairs consultants (e.g., Lewis-Burke Associates).
 - Identify single focus areas for regional initiatives (e.g. Organic produce, PFAS, etc.).
 - **NERA directors would like to use the website to access guidance documents, archival materials, and any other information Directors want to know.**
 - **A “From the Archives” section will be added to NERA News, highlighting something from the recent past which has relevance to Directors today.**

- **Future meeting topic suggestion: Multistate Project Roles and Responsibilities (How should participants engage, what is the responsibility of an AA, what are the requirements for annual reporting). [A document outlining some of these activities is posted on the NERA website.](#)**

Penn State AgScience Research – Blair Siegfried, Beth Gugino

- Blair and Beth presented an overview of the Experiment Station, College of Ag Sciences, Research Administration at Penn State, Priorities, Directions, and Future Challenges.
- [Slides from the Penn State presentation are posted on the NERA website.](#)

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 pm Eastern Time.

Wednesday, March 27, 2024

Report of the Office of the Executive Director – Rick Rhodes and David Leibovitz

- An update on OED activities and budget status were provided to the Directors. NERA is in sound financial position currently and is prepared to invest funding into initiatives of interest.
- Opportunities for investing NERA funding:
 - Graduate student experiences (e.g., station site visits for professional development)
 - Regional Communication (e.g. video or print materials to support NE agenda, news articles). We would carefully consider audiences and think about what is required. What is already happening in the communications space across the region, and use that to drive the outputs we need to provide.
 - Monetary incentives for regional multistate research award submissions
 - Station visits from Directors, outside of the traditional meeting schedule.
- **NERA Directors would like to pursue an organizational name change from NERA to agInnovation Northeast.**
- Future NERA Spring Meetings
 - Directors are interested in meeting on an experiment station rather than in DC.
 - Alternative locations could suit this group as well; e.g. major points of ag industry in the states.
 - Some quick suggestions offered at the table: Howard County (Maryland), Lancaster County/Hershey (Pennsylvania), Rhode Island (Campus, farms, agritourism)
 - Meeting on a campus could open interactions between faculty and Directors on the AES enterprise, its value and its function.
 - Proposed future session topic: Rebranding the experiment station – how? How to modernize, best practices.

Washington Partnerships and NERA –Christina Laridaen, Senior Associate, Lewis-Burke Associates

- All appropriations bills are signed for FY24.
- FY24 and FY25 have both been subject to the Fiscal Responsibility Act, capping discretionary spending to 1%.
- Capacity funds are being kept flat, AFRI is being cut by ~\$10m to FY22 levels.

- The argument we should make: Flat capacity funds have given way to lost jobs, cuts to capacity funds will do greater harm.
- An FY24 placeholder for infrastructure is in place at \$1M. Per Christina, it's easier to add to an account that has some money (i.e., \$1M) than an account that has been zeroed out.
- Presidential election years are good opportunities to engage with congressional delegations in-state rather than in DC.

Critical Issues: Preparing for a NIFA Financial Audit – Susan Rice, Division Director for the Policy and Oversight Division, Office of Grants and Financial Management, NIFA

- [The information in this presentation is all contained in the NIFA slide deck, which is posted on the NERA website.](#)
- Each year, NIFA awardees are selected for compliance reviews based on a risk assessment matrix. All NIFA grantees are included in the annual risk matrix review process, with selectees published on the NIFA website each year for awareness. **NERA is seeking more information on the risk assessment matrix process from NIFA.**

NRSP4/IR-4 Overview and Update – Jerry Baron, Executive Director, IR-4

- Background: The IR-4 Project was established in 1963 by the USDA and Land-grant universities to ensure that specialty crop farmers have legal access to safe and effective crop protection products.
- [Slides from the NRSP4/IR-4 presentation are posted on the NERA website.](#)

The meeting adjourned at 1:45 pm Eastern Time.

Future Meetings

- National Extension and Research Administrative Officers' Conference, Wilmington, DE, April 7-10, 2024
- Northeast Joint Summer Session (NEED/NERA), Providence, RI, June 3-5, 2024
- Association for Communications Excellence Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 23-25, 2024
- 2024 BAA Summer Leadership Meeting (formerly Joint COPS), Providence, RI, July 16-18, 2024
- agInnovation Annual Meeting, Raleigh, NC, September 22-25, 2024