

NERA Business Meeting Minutes

December 15, 2020

In attendance: Matt Wilson (West Virginia-Chair), Eric Wommack (Delaware), Anton Bekkerman (New Hampshire), Jan Nyrop (Cornell), Margaret Smith (Cornell), Wendie Cohick (Rutgers), Leslie Parise (Vermont), Mark Hutton (Maine), Darrell Donahue (West Virginia), Jody Jellison (Massachusetts), Jason White (Connecticut-New Haven), Rick Rhodes (NERA), David Leibovitz (NERA), Mark Carter (NIFA)

Call to Order – Matt Wilson, Chair

- Agenda modification (additions/deletions) and approval
 - **Mark Carter's session was moved up front to follow the series of introductions, and the agenda was approved unanimously.**
- Approval of the 9/22/2020 NERA Business Meeting minutes, teleconference
 - **The minutes were approved unanimously.**

Mark Carter, Regional NIFA Liaison – NIFA Update

- Mark has previous experience in Food Safety Inspection Service and ARS.
- NIFA now has 200 employees on board (150 hires since FY19, mostly remote), about 2/3 staffed at NIFA.
- Recruitment is the highest priority for NIFA and will continue to be – there is a wave of personnel expected to leave over the summer 2021.
- Competitive response funding program for COVID-19 (~\$14M) rolled out in 2020.
- NIFA is following up internally on tasks learned during the CAFÉ program.
- NIFA Director position is a political appointment and a new one may be selected to replace Parag Chitnis.
- REE Director is also a political appointee and will likely be replaced (currently Scott Hutchins.)
- Mark would like to spend more time with NERA and NEED to figure out what NIFA can do to support the region better – it's more than making sure funds arrive on time.
- What programs might the Northeast provide leadership? What makes the NE unique? Local/regional food systems, ag innovation, etc.
- Mark will be participating in LEAD21.
- How can Directors seek information in writing? There has been inconsistent guidance from NIFA staff on a number of issues (e.g. allowable match, timekeeping for remote employees, infrastructure needs using which subsets of NIFA funding.)
 - NIFA is working to get its new personnel up to date with pertinent policy guidance to provide to Directors.
 - A list of personnel names with roles and responsibilities within NIFA is not yet compiled.

NERA Work Session: Northeast Strategic Communications Plan – Anton Bekkerman

- NH AES is developing its own strategic communications plan and had some initial questions.
 - What needs to be identified? What are our priorities?
 - Who are the stakeholders? Are they evolving?
- A new national communications plan for Land-grant universities is being rolled out by the APLU BAA Communications and Marketing Committee.

- To ensure our voice is heard, we need to consider a broader, region-wide strategy, and identify areas of overlap between our institutions.
- Northeast communications representatives planned to meet in NH in summer 2020 (postponed to summer 2021).
- If we are going to compete for funding with other larger Land-grant institutions, we need to communicate our priorities as a region rather than as individual institutions.
- Can we use complementary communications skills and resources between our institutions to create a regional model?
- The APLU is advocating for an \$11B funding opportunity to support infrastructure.
- WVU met with NIFA in DC a few years ago, and the communications Director at the time gave a plea to WVU for more information and more stories to share. We should share those stories with Faith Peppers (current NIFA communications Director, formerly UGA.)
- Could a communications director sit in the Executive Director's office to glean the region for stories to share?
- Things to consider:
 - What do you want from a communications plan?
 - Seek to touch people in a personal way with stories being shared.
 - Consider brand and marketing, but these are different from the communications plan.
 - Bring AES Directors and communications representatives together to hold a workshop.
- Does the AES communicate just "what they are doing" as it happens? OR do they communicate around a thread on a particular issue where they can show progress made over a given time period?
- Northeast has small states, small farms, huge push to address environmental issues (e.g. water quality)
 - Our brand could be that we have targeted solutions for problem areas affecting the rest of the country.
- Consider internal stakeholders: Delaware has been pushing faculty to join multistate projects
 - Can NERA provide more resources for faculty to explain the multistate research program and how capacity funds work?
 - Can NERA provide more targeted messaging to faculty rather than more heavily targeting Directors?
- How can the region get social media exposure across institutions around priority areas? Can a collective hashtag be used consistently across the region to show a thread of activity between states? #NERA or #NERASAES?
- Can research impacts be gleaned and shared at a regional level? (*MRF Impacts is doing some of this but through the lens of multistate projects - <https://www.mrfimpacts.org/>*)
- Consider aligning research success stories with Extension success stories – Extension tends to be more successful in their communications at the local and state level.
- Maine asks researchers to provide paragraph blurbs about the relevance of their research to their community or the state.
- Is there any value in selecting priority areas to rally around as a region?
 - Every story that touches on [topic area x] would be tied to this broader regional thread.
 - Consistent messaging across the region toward achieving a particular outcome in a research area.
 - This is just a communications approach for the region, not a way to drive or restrict research priorities at NERA institutions.

- Marketing is important, and we need to identify a common language to make a communications plan successful.
- NERA Directors can identify 4-6 common strategic themes to rally around
 - Institutional communications officers can work to tie their stories to a particular strategic theme.
 - A consistent cadence of communication is essential.
- NERA has considered the development of a formal Northeast agenda and it might be time to work on that again.
 - Where does the region want to be in the next 3-5 years?
- When priority overlaps are identified, we can take them to communications personnel and develop strategies to achieve particular goals.
- Rick will recirculate the “Northeast Whitepaper” from which NE priority areas might be identified. Examples of the those areas could include:
 - Urban Ag
 - Controlled Environment Ag
 - Specialty Crops
 - Water Quality
 - Local Food/Regional Food Systems
- **Anton drafted a Google Doc for the NERA Directors to share goals, priorities, and institutional communications resources after this discussion.**
 - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1i3mXpCcubsPBwLs_wBa_K2hBcBt9wJkRig0YD7AF4Q/edit?usp=sharing

NERA Business

- MAC update (Jan Nyrop, MAC Chair)
 - MAC met on 10/26 ([click to view report and recommendations](#)).
 - NERA Administrative Advisers are asked to nominate multistate projects for the 2021 Excellence in Multistate Research award.
 - Five Administrative Adviser assignments are ready for NERA approval:
 - NRSP3 (National Atmospheric Deposition Program), Jason White
 - NECC2001 (Sustainable Farm Energy Production and Use), Puneet Srivastava
 - NEERA1604 (Northeast Regional Technical Committee on IPM), Margaret Smith
 - NECC_TEMP2103 (High tunnel specialty crop production), Anton Bekkerman
 - NE1701 (Mycobacterial Diseases of Animals), Rick Rhodes
 - **A motion was introduced to approve these AA assignments by Eric Wommack, seconded by Jody Jellison, and the assignments were approved unanimously.**
- ESCOP Committee updates that require NERA input (CMC, BLC, STC, DCC, Infrastructure)
 - CMC – a new communications roadmap has been released. The committee is working on a position description for a new communications Director to be housed at APLU. The new position is expected to be filled during Q1 2021.
 - BLC – recent discussion has revolved around advocacy for deferred maintenance / infrastructure funding.
 - STC – for the 2021 Excellence in Multistate Research award, more emphasis will be placed on demonstrated impact. STC is exploring how ESCOP can support the infrastructure ask – how can it be advocated for, and what exactly are we asking for?
 - **The most recent advocacy materials for infrastructure are enclosed with this document.**

- **The APLU is hosting a webinar on Agricultural Research Infrastructure Advocacy on January 11, 2021 at 4:00 PM ET. Registration is required:**
https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJEtcuuqrikoH9O_Sld9zyO5kCDky4w-yWGa
- DCC – meeting today 12/15/20 to review and approve a new plan of work.
- NRSP RC – new guidelines are now adopted, and the Northeast was instrumental in changing the philosophy on NRSPs.
- Transition to a new administration, opportunities?
 - New USDA Secretary nominee is Tom Vilsack (former Secretary under Obama)
 - [Climate 21 Project](#) is a priority for the USDA under the incoming administration. This could provide funding opportunities for Northeast institutions.
 - Moving NIFA back to Washington DC is a possibility for the new administration transition.
- 2021 Face-to-face meetings: decision points?
 - Spring meeting, Philadelphia, PA, March 2021 – *face to face meeting will not move forward.*
 - NEED/NERA Joint Meeting, Portland, ME, June 2021 – *unlikely, but too early to tell.*
 - NEED/NERA Ecosystem Services, Newport, RI, November 2021 – *still moving forward.*
- 2021 Q1 Teleconference date/time setting
 - **NERA OED will work to identify a date for the Q1 2021 meeting.**

The meeting adjourned at 10:31 am.