

CSREES/NIFA Portfolio Review Panel Report

Sustainable Farm Enterprises Portfolio

CY 2004-2009

REPORT

External Review Completed: October 2009

Portfolio Overview:

This portfolio encompasses agency-wide activities that address a broad range of research, education, and extension topics related to the sustainable health of the farming enterprise, the health and safety of those working in the farm enterprise, and the financial health of the farm and owner family. This is an agency-wide group that takes into consideration the interconnectedness of all programs, functions, funding resources and program leaders involved in research, education and extension activities related to sustainable agriculture, farm and risk management, beginning farmer programs, programs for socially disadvantaged farmers, and farm safety. The portfolio supports the Agency's strategic goals 2 "Enhance the Competitiveness and Sustainability of Rural and Farm Economics" and 3 "Support Increased Economic Opportunities and Improved Quality of Life in Rural America".

The portfolio addresses the following knowledge areas:

Primary Knowledge Areas:

KA 601: Economics of Agricultural Production and Farm Management
KA 602: Business Management, Finance, Taxation, and Estate Planning
KA 723: Hazards to Human Health and Safety
KA 902: Sustainable Agriculture

Secondary Knowledge Areas:

KA 607: Consumer Economics
KA 801: Family Resource Management
KA 610: Domestic Policy Analysis
2501 Program
Small Farms Program

Panel Review – Overview and Assumptions:

In 2009, a panel of reviewers (Appendix A) was assembled with expertise representing the wide variety of programs within the portfolio, the diversity of the audiences addressed by these programs, and a range of organizational connections/partnerships with the portfolio and the agency. This report includes three sections: the assumptions that the panel used in conducting the review and completing the scorecard, the themes

that the panel identified during the discussions of the scorecard, and the scores and comments related to each scorecard component.

The assumptions were derived from those that we understood from the program managers of the portfolio, instructions from the Office of Planning and Accountability, and those that the panelists employed in the panel's deliberations.

Assumption 1: The portfolio review panel applauded the portfolio's broad perspective as embraced in its stated goal of realizing "...an economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially responsible farm business." The panel also highly valued the portfolio's mission addressing human dimensions of agriculture. This assumption was key to the panel's interpretation of the report and many of the overall themes and scorecard component comments.

Assumption 2: The review panel's intent was to be constructive in improving the portfolio team's ability to connect very important programs, align these programs with Agency goals and objectives, coordinate and assess the programs' outcomes into cohesive measures that can quantify and document the programs measurable/overall impact, and effectively communicate these major outcomes to secure and improve its position in the Agency. This assumption was very important in that it set the context for the scorecard and further suggested the potential for the portfolio's future.

Assumption 3: The review panel focused on the overall portfolio, keeping its perspective at the "30,000 foot level". Each panel member had knowledge of one or more of the portfolio's programs, which was useful in the scorecard dialogue. However, the review in general and the scorecard in particular reflects the portfolio's overall performance and potential.

Assumption 4: The review panel understood that 96% of the portfolio funds leave the Agency and are managed by various university, community-based organization, and non-profit entities. This assumption had implications for the themes that the team developed and the panel's scorecard deliberations. The team focused on the portfolio program managers' circle of influence, thus keeping the focus on the overall portfolio.

Assumption 5: The review panel used the current Agency's strategic plan as a gauge in theme development and scorecard deliberations. The team recognized the Agency's transition to the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and its evolution in the new administration. The team believes the portfolio is well-positioned for these changes.

Assumption 6: The review panel assumed that the portfolio will retain its current composition into the future. This assumption was necessary for us to focus on how the overall portfolio could improve its management across the programs.

Assumption 7: The review panel recognized that the current portfolio has been evolving since the last review and includes many long term programs imported into the portfolio

during the last 1-2 years. This was an important assumption in the interpretation of the recommendations included in the themes.

Assumption 8: The review panel recognized that the portfolio report to the panel was completed in the spring, 2009 and did not capture program results and outcomes from the last reporting cycle nor significant recent developments in the U.S. farm economy, such as the sharp decline in some commodity prices, increased input costs, and labor force changes.

Assumption 9: The review panel recognized that there has been a void in portfolio and program leadership over the past several months. The team was appreciative of the energy and passion that the program managers displayed in the report development and presentation. The panel's recommendations were made to take strong programs and make them better through development of stronger relationships, improved outcome measurements and increased communication.

Review themes and recommendations:

The panel approached the review using the following framework:

Collaborative Strategic Planning and Portfolio Programmatic Review Process that assessed the following questions:

- What is the portfolio doing that it needs to continue doing?
- What is the portfolio doing that it needs to modify?
 - For example assess the role of human health in the portfolio
- What is the portfolio doing that has reached maturity and needs to be retired?
- What is the portfolio not doing that it should consider doing?

This section is organized into themes that the review panel developed during the scorecard deliberations. The recommendations are indicated in italics.

Theme #1: Alignment – *The review panel recommends a continued emphasis on better aligning the portfolio's activities and outcomes with the mission, vision, and goals for the agency (CSREES/NIFA) and across all portfolios.* This recommendation relates to the development of outcome measures across the programs and effective communication of these outcomes to internal and external audiences and key decision makers. A strong and consistent strategic direction will enable better development and coordination of over-arching outcomes that the portfolio, in partnership with the Agency, can achieve.

Theme #2: Partnership utilization – *The review panel recommends continued emphasis on developing a comprehensive approach to utilize the immense resources of the partners that receive funding by capacity (formula) or competitive programs that are part of or connected to the portfolio.* The team sees several advantages to this recommendation including improvement in defining overall and consistent outcomes,

sharing and leveraging resources, reducing duplication, and improved capacity to communicate the value of the portfolio. Strategies to employ with respect to this recommendation include improved communication with partners including increased coordination across regions in the SARE and RME programs and with ANR program leaders in the institutions receiving formula/capacity funds, as well as continuing the positive advances being made in the competitive funding projects within the portfolio to collect outcomes and to combine outcomes into categories for better communication of overall impacts.

Theme #3: Accountability – The panel recommends that the portfolio team blend the recommendations from the first two themes as accountability can be best realized by aligning the mission, vision, and goals throughout the agency and by working with the partners in determining these metrics and working within the portfolio to best communicate the portfolio’s value to the agency with respect to mission, vision, and goals. The review panel recommends (more specifically) that the portfolio work with its partners to continue the evolution of logic model adaptation by moving from outputs to outcomes, standardizing measurable indicators, and developing the outcomes/indicators in ways that best communicate the value of the portfolio. The panel recommends that funds for evaluation, importantly to include evaluation by independent, third-party experts, be increased both within the competitive programs and within the portfolio to better capture and communicate impacts from the regional programs (SARE and RME) and the programs resourced by competitive and formula/capacity funds at the 1862, 1890, and 1994 institutions. The panel also recommends that the portfolio remain engaged with the agency with respect to improvements in the reporting system to better meet the needs that are aligned with outcome-based programs and effectively communicate the impacts from these programs.

Theme #4: Integration – The review panel recommends that the portfolio build on its inherent capacity to better address the holistic, systems impacts in sustainable farming enterprises. In particular, the panel recommends that outcomes be developed with consideration of socioeconomic implications (e.g., production impact on prices, farm structure impacts on communities and producers); the portfolio strengthen its interdisciplinary emphasis in the interrelated areas of food production, water, and bioenergy; and the portfolio take advantage of the crosswalk between economics and health (as broadly defined in the portfolio’s mission).

Theme #5: Linkages – The review panel recommends that the portfolio managers continue to strengthen the portfolio’s relationship and interactions across agencies, in particular with the Department of Health and Human Services with respect to the human and occupational health portions of the portfolio’s mission statement.

Theme #6: On-Going and Emerging Issues – *The review panel recommends that the portfolio improve on its current capacity across its formula/capacity and competitive funding programs to address on-going and emerging issues.* These include both audiences (American Indians and other people of color, where programs are addressing, yet under serving issues and audiences) and issues (e.g., sustaining land in agriculture – taking care to do this in context of implications for farm structure and rural communities – and input and output price risk management). *In addition, the review panel recommends that the portfolio consider allocating resources to issues where the panel members perceived gaps.* These include consideration of the increasing role of hired and contract labor in U.S. agriculture, stronger emphasis on input cost risk management and value-added alternatives, climate change, economic environment, health care reform implications, occupational health and safety (for all labor), and environmental safety.

Theme #7: Utilizing Information and Communicating Value – *The panel recommends increasing awareness and developing a paradigm of communicating with the end in mind.* While freely admitting that most of the panel members continue to struggle with the paradigm, we all agree that developing relationships with key decision-makers and communicating value that reflects the portfolio's core values and impacts aligned with agency mission is critically important. In fact, one of the challenges the review panel frequently had to overcome was the fact that the portfolio report was communicated as a general overview of the portfolio (which works for that purpose) but not to the metrics of the scorecard used by the Office of Management and Budget in its evaluation.

Theme #8: Multiculturalism – *The review panel recommends that the portfolio take advantage of this important agency core value.* The panel believes that the portfolio is ideally positioned to develop outcomes and communicate the impact of its work with respect to diversity and inclusion across gender, race/ethnicity, age, able-bodied differences, etc.

Theme #9: Portfolio Resources – *The review panel recommends that the portfolio redistribute and, if possible, garner resources to align funding with agency/portfolio mission, address emerging issues outlined above, and build a stronger evaluation/communication capacity in the portfolio.*

Scorecard – Scores and Comments:

Introduction and theme #10: Report Improvements – The panel, as mentioned above, struggled with being able to adequately address the scorecard components. The report, while informative with respect to the portfolio's programs, activities, outputs, and good case study examples of impact, was not as strong in addressing the scorecard components. The scorecard is dominated by the '2' score. The review panel members frequently found evidence in the report that pointed out positive results and challenges. Frankly, the scores were probably higher due to the experience and knowledge of various panel members about most of the programs. In the final analysis, the lack of communicated value in the report left too much doubt for at least some '3' scores. However, the panel conversation about the scorecard was very helpful in developing its themes and recommendations.

Section 1 – Relevance

1.1 Scope

Indicator – Does the portfolio cover the range of work it should, given the mission of the agency and the portfolio and available resources? Are there significant programmatic gaps?

External panel score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments: (alignment, on-going and emerging issues)

Panel comments:

Review document did not address issues related to occupational health in a classical sense of the word reflecting the absence of diseases and/or physical disabilities (e.g., noise induced hearing loss).

Panelists found issues with respect to aligning its work with the portfolio's mission and goals (e.g., safety, hired labor, input costs/value-added).

1.2 Focus

Indicator – Does the portfolio appropriately emphasize the most critical issues through its program design and resource allocation?

External panel score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments: (alignment, partnership utilization, accountability, on-going and emerging issues)

Panel Comments:

The panelists referenced gaps listed above in 1.1.

The panelists found that in general the portfolio programs were making progress towards aligning goals with programs.

The panelists suggested improvements in overall program design, capturing outcomes, focusing on general outcomes in the competitively funded programs, and working collaboratively with the portfolio's partners with respect to formula funds.

1.3 Contemporary and/or Emerging Issues

Indicator – Does the portfolio address contemporary and/or emerging issues?

External Panel Score – 1

Themes addressed by panel comments (alignment, accountability, on-going and emerging issues, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists noted progress in current programs, although noting a number of gaps (see about in 1.1 and 1.2).

The panelists recommended better coordination across regions in the funded and within portfolio managed programs (SARE, REM), more work with program partners to overcome the fragmentation and decentralized nature of the portfolio's funded and formula programs to better capture evolving issues, particularly with respect to climate change and the economic climate.

1.4 Solicitation and/or receptiveness for Stakeholder Input

Indicator – Does portfolio staff actively solicit stakeholder input and is staff receptive to those who wish to give it?

External Panel Score – 3

Themes addressed by panel comments (partnership utilization, accountability, on-going and emerging issues, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists suspect that this area is relatively strong with respect to intent.

The panelists suggest a ‘grass roots’ approach be strengthened. In particular, define people by program to be impacted and take measures to reach them, leverage state partner relationships, improve outcome development, continue follow up with project proposers to improve process, and supplement high tech methods with high touch approaches.

1.5 Utilization of Stakeholder Input

Indicator – Is stakeholder input given appropriate attention in allocating resources, designing programs, and general decision-making?

External Panel Score – 1

Themes addressed by panel comments (partnership utilization, on-going and emerging issues, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

Issues:

The panelists could only find limited evidence of utilization in the report and did not have evidence of feedback to stakeholders.

Section 2 – Quality

2.1 Significance of Results

Indicator – Overall, does the portfolio produce results of significance and value to the mission of the agency?

External Panel Score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments (alignment, partnership utilization, accountability, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists noted that the issue lies in the definition of significance and value. If it is to advance knowledge, then it is on target. If it is to address tangible outcomes, then improvements are needed.

The panelists were concerned about the alignment of portfolio activities with its mission, particularly with respect to the health component.

2.2 Usefulness and Utilization of Results

Indicator – Are portfolio results useful and are utilized by intended recipients and ultimate beneficiaries?

External Panel Score – 1

Themes addressed by panel comments (alignment, partnership utilization, accountability, linkages, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists struggled with this component and noted the systemic issues of not having measurable outcomes in the logic model, not being able to document outcomes, having many outcome collection methods out of their control, having to rely on a reporting system not well aligned with outcome reporting, and not effectively using available data (EPA, NIOSH, etc.).

2.3 Integration

Indicator – Where appropriate, does the portfolio integrate research, education, and extension in its funded activities?

External Panel Score – 3

Themes addressed by panel comments (partnership utilization, integration, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelist's knowledge was quite helpful in developing this score. However, the report – while containing individual success examples within programs - was lacking in terms of generally speaking to the issues and specifically void of reference to resident instruction.

2.4 Interdisciplinary Balance

Indicator – Where appropriate, does the portfolio utilize an interdisciplinary approach in solving problems?

External Panel Score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments (partnership utilization, integration, linkages, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists reflected positively on this component and noted that several competitively funded RFAs require interdisciplinary teams. The presentations by and conversations with the NPLs suggest collaborative relationships across programs in the portfolio. However, evidence is weak in the report.

2.5 Alignment with Current State of Knowledge and Science and Use of Appropriate and/or Cutting Edge Methodology

Indicator – Does the portfolio use/build on the best and latest knowledge and science to carry its work? Do funded projects and programs utilize appropriate, creative, and/or cutting edge methodology?

External panel score - 2

The panelists noted limited evidence in report. The panelists did not find evidence of this component in the health area and little in the other programs. The presentations did provide evidence of the use of webinars and internet-based input collection and program review. The competitive programs would be aligned by the nature of the process, although again there is only limited evidence in the report. It is easy to assume that this is also the case in the formula funds, although without evidence the panelists had to mark down this score. The use of practical, context- based knowledge is relatively strong in this portfolio.

Section 3 – Performance

3.1 Productivity

Indicator – Does the portfolio produce a substantial number of outputs and outcomes given available funding?

External Panel Score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments (accountability, utilizing information and communicating value, portfolio resources)

Panel Comments:

The panelists were very satisfied with the outputs, yet much less so with respect to outcomes. Much of the reasoning is discussed in the themes and other scorecard component panel comments.

3.2 Comprehensiveness of Work Produced

Indicator – Did the portfolio produce significant results across its entire scope?

External Panel Score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments (alignment, accountability, partnership utilization, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

See 2.1 and 3.1

3.3 Accountability

Indicator – Were recipients of portfolio funding accountable for the funds they received, documenting use of funds and resulting accomplishments as directed?

External Panel Score – 3

Themes addressed by panel comments (alignment, accountability, partnership utilization, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists found enough evidence in the report and presentations to provide a '3' score for this component in that the funding recipients were accountable to the directions as provided. The issue is more along the lines of continuing the evolution from output to outcome based programming and expecting the funded recipients to be accountable to a higher standard of outcomes.

3.4 Program Leadership, Partnership and Guidance

Indicator – Does the agency provide strong program leadership, seek strong collaborations, and provide sound guidance to its partners for this portfolio?

External Panel Score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments (alignment, accountability, partnership utilization, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists believe that the agency does provide strong leadership, collaborations and guidance to its partners, yet sees a need to both increase and focus these characteristics on a stronger emphasis on outcome-based programming. The panelists appreciate the commitment of the NPLs and project leaders.

The panelists noted inconsistencies across the portfolio with respect to agency connections where it was positive in terms of NPL conversations across portfolios, less positive with respect to partners, less positive with respect to the input/support on the document that the panelists used in the review.

3.5 Program Management

Indicator – Does the agency manage the programs in this portfolio well, including appropriate use of resources, management of grant and formula processes, and documentation of results?

External Panel Score – 2

Themes addressed by panel comments (accountability, partnership utilization, utilizing information and communicating value)

Panel Comments:

The panelists noted that the NPLs do well in managing grant portfolio and need to continue their work on documenting outcomes and building stronger relationships around outcomes and reporting with the recipients of formula funds.

Appendix A – Review Panelists:

Richard Klemme (Chair) – Dean and Director, University of Wisconsin-Extension Cooperative Extension.

Ambrose Anoruo – Professor and Associate Dean for Research, College of Agriculture and Related Sciences, Delaware State University.

David Baker – Assistant Dean and Program Director, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension, University of Missouri Extension..

James Hafer – Director of Agricultural Programs, Chief Dull Knife College.

Joe Reilly – Associate Administrator of USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service

Lorann Stallones – Professor of Epidemiology, Department of Psychology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado

Tom Trantham – Dairy Producer and Co-Owner of Twelve Aprils’ Dairying in Pelzer, South Carolina.

Don Villarejo – Founder and Executive Director Emeritus, California Institute for Rural Studies and presently Agricultural Labor Consultant in Davis, California.

Score Table

R&D Criteria and Dimensions	Score
Relevance	
1.1 Scope	2
1.2 Focus	2
1.3 Contemporary and/or Emerging Issues	1
1.4 Solicitation and/or receptiveness for Stakeholder Input	3
1.5 Utilization of Stakeholder Input	1
Quality	
2.1 Significance of Results	2
2.2 Usefulness and Utilization of Results	1
2.3 Integration	3
2.4 Interdisciplinary Balance	2
2.5 Alignment with Current State of Knowledge and Science and Use of Appropriate and/or Cutting Edge Methodology	2
Performance	
3.1 Productivity	2
3.2 Comprehensiveness of Work Produced	2
3.3 Accountability	3
3.4 Program Leadership	2
3.5 Program Management	2
Overall Score	65