

NIFA's Response to the Sustainable Farm Enterprises Portfolio Expert Panel Report

February 17, 2010

Overview

The Sustainable Farm Enterprises portfolio was assessed by an external, expert panel in September 2009 and received the panel's report in November. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) appreciates the investment of time and effort of the eight person panel and has carefully considered the nine themes and the assessment contained in the panel's report. In response, NIFA addresses the panel recommendations by providing additional insight in reference to evaluations, ongoing and emerging issues, stakeholder input and utilization and health. NIFA will make every effort to embrace the recommendations presented by the panel, not only through specific program changes but especially through the overall transformational and organizational changes occurring in creating NIFA.

After evaluating the thoughtful recommendations of the panel in its report, the Sustainable Farm Enterprises portfolio team recognized several overarching themes, around which it has developed its response.

Context in Which This Response Was Developed

The Sustainable Farm Enterprises portfolio team found this to be a challenging time in which to formulate a response to the many of the issues contained in the panel's report. The panel met one week before the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) became NIFA and two weeks prior to the arrival of the first NIFA Director, Roger Beachy. The intervening period has been a time of great transition that is far from complete. Dr. Beachy has taken a clean sheet of paper approach to revitalizing and restructuring agricultural research, education, and extension around a paradigm of impact, scale, and focus – that is:

- Redefining programs around bold, specific, goals that will have national impact
- Sizing program resources to be sufficient in scale to *so/ve* problems
- Focusing available resources on outcome-based, high priority goals instead of spreading them thinly across all areas of need.

The USDA Chief Scientist has also articulated five priority areas for all USDA science agencies:

- Global Food Security and Hunger
- Climate Change
- Sustainable Energy
- Childhood Obesity
- Food Safety

At this time, the overall structure of NIFA has been defined to include the following components:

- Institute of Food Production and Sustainability
- Institute of Bioenergy, Climate, and Environment
- Institute of Food Safety and Nutrition
- Institute of Youth, Family, and Communities
- Center for International Programs

The Sustainable Farm Enterprises team decided that this was the best time to write this response because it would facilitate a clean transition to its future in NIFA by:

- Addressing the issues that clearly carried through a transition, and
- Highlighting issues that need to be further clarified as part of the transition.

Response to the Panel's Report

Alignment

The panel recommended the aligning of portfolio's activities and outcomes with the mission, vision, and goals of the agency. In response to this recommendation we provide the following.

The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) allocated resources to programs, and not portfolios. The portfolios are a gathering of programs around a central focus, rather than outlining an issue and proceeding to craft one or more programs to address it. Thus, the process did not facilitate the alignment approach recommended by the panel. As NIFA works towards its vision, we look forward to better aligning programs around issues with an emphasis on impact, scale, and focus.

Outcomes and Communicating Success

NIFA agrees that our ability to document outcomes, particularly the use of metrics that cross programs, needs to improve. This has been a priority for the past few years and remains an important task.

The NIFA vision of planning programs around impact, scale, and focus specifically calls for the development of specific, measurable outcomes. These are not only being developed for specific programs, but the NIFA Office of Planning and Accountability (OPA) initiated a dialog with ECOP and the Extension community, and more recently several Experiment Station Directors, about developing regional and national indicators that are representative of the work we do. This would enable us to move from anecdotes, community, and state stories to being able to describe large-scale impacts resulting from our funding. This effort has not yet produced concrete results but remains a priority and a focus of attention. OPA anticipates sponsoring a workshop to address this issue in the coming year.

NIFA will continue to emphasize with its grantees and partners the need to report outcomes in grant reports. This is a large-scale, multi-faceted communications effort to better inform those completing and reviewing grant reports about what is needed to not only document progress but to demonstrate results. NIFA is continuing through its ongoing One Solution and REEPort initiatives to better structure its reporting instruments and systems so as to more clearly capture this information. For example, the capacity of outcomes achieved through the regionally administered programs, such as SARE, is not fully reflected in the CRIS database. In order to address this issue NIFA is working enable the comprehensive presentation of outcomes from multiple sources through a single interface.

NIFA will look for other opportunities including better use of secondary data such as private sector measures of sustainability and possibly hosting a summit on human dimension metrics.

Evaluations

The use of external evaluations is an important resource for NIFA. The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has begun using external evaluators to

gain new perspective on the efficacy of its programs. External evaluations for the SARE regions have validated many aspects of the program and provided recommendations for improving our ability to capture and document the outcomes that are being achieved. Risk Management Education (RME) program extension specialists and educators regularly distribute surveys to producers who participate in risk management to evaluate the efficacy of their programming and to measure producer progress toward meeting their risk management goals. A system-wide evaluation of risk management education is being designed. NIFA and this portfolio are keenly aware of the great value to be gleaned from external evaluations and are always seeking opportunities to gather such input.

Ongoing and Emerging Issues

The panel identified several gaps in the portfolio regarding ongoing and emerging issues, including the 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.

The Sustainable Farm Enterprises portfolio does address some of these gaps, but agrees that this information was not provided to the panel. The following briefly describes some of NIFA's work targeted at some of these gaps.

The Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program (BFRDP) is required by legislation to address the needs of limited resource beginning farmers and ranchers; socially disadvantaged beginning farmers or ranchers, immigrant farm workers planning to become beginning farmers or ranchers; and/or other farm workers desiring to become beginning farmers or ranchers. In FY 2009, the first year of the program, several awards were made to train farm workers on sustainable farming practices and help the transition of farm workers into farm operators.

The Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) has an Agricultural Prosperity for Small and Medium-sized Farms program that funds grants on enhancing the profitability and sustainability of small and medium sized farms through value-added products and enterprises, including biofuels and biofuels co-products; on linking innovative production, educational, and marketing strategies for immigrant farmers; and on enhancing resilience of small and medium-sized farms through extreme event-based scenario planning.

The AgrAbility program funded work to increase the role of providing health and safety resources to hired and contract agricultural labor through their partnerships, including bilingual educational activities that reached more than 10,000 individuals last year.

While NIFA does not collect injury and fatality data, farm safety program staff encourages applicants to grant programs to utilize data from various sources such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the National Agricultural Statistics Service to best address the areas of high incidences of fatalities. Proposals to the program develop curriculum, educational programming and evaluation consistent with the North American Guidelines for Children's Agricultural Tasks (NAGCAT), developed by the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety (NCCRAHS), a NIOSH funded center.

The Risk Management Education program recognizes that the current economic climate has been particularly difficult for our nation's farming sector. A series of 17 webinars aptly named "Ag in Uncertain Times" have been offered since June 2009. The webinar series featured 40 separate speakers/presentations. Additional presentations are being planned for Spanish-speaking audiences. The presentations addressed operating in the face of

uncertain credit, operating in the face of uncertain markets, families facing uncertainty in agriculture, operating in risky environments, and managing agricultural enterprises in uncertain times.

NIFA, and the Sustainable Farm Enterprises portfolio, has a distinct role in addressing sustainable farm enterprises, in cooperation with other NIFA programs and other Federal agencies. An area that may have created some confusion is that the mission statement for the Sustainable Farm Enterprises portfolio includes the phrase "...health and safety of farm owner, operator, or farm worker..." As intended when written, the word "health" in this context was meant to be as a component of farm safety, that is, ensuring the health of farm owners, operators, or workers is not endangered by unsafe conditions. In hindsight, we understand how this phrase could have been misinterpreted as written to be an emphasis on the overall health of farm owners, operators, and workers. NIFA agrees that the overall health of those working on farms is important and addresses this issue in other portfolios. In particular the Quality of Life in Rural Areas portfolio addresses healthy lifestyles, human development and well-being, and many social services. Zoonotic diseases and parasites affecting humans are addressed in the Animal Systems portfolio. Other federal agencies, such as the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Labor have within their structure a subset of agencies responsible for the various components of human health. These include, but are not limited to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. NIFA will ensure that this is clearer in future mission statements.

Stakeholder Input and Utilization of the Input

While the panel found the portfolio to be strong in soliciting stakeholder input, the panel found only limited evidence that this stakeholder input was utilized in program planning and design. The portfolio team agrees that we did not well explain how we utilized stakeholder input in program planning. Cited below are a few examples describing the use of stakeholder utilization for program planning and design.

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development held a number of stakeholder workshops to collect input prior to the implementation of the program. The collected input was used to develop the entire program including the design grant types, in developing the funding priorities, in determining the panel composition, in developing grantsmanship workshops to assist applicants who are new to the USDA process, and in developing post-award and other activities such as outcome-based reporting.

The Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Agricultural Prosperity for Small and Medium-sized Farms program used stakeholder input to develop the logic model with short, medium and long-term goals. The short-term goals were then used to develop the program funding priorities.

The SARE Program was designed as a regionally administered program specifically so that it would be close to the ground and have strong stakeholder input in every aspect of the program. The four regional Administrative Councils use broad stakeholder input at each step of the process, from the design of the grant programs which are offered in the region, during the technical and merit review of the grant applications, through the final selection of the projects which are to be funded and ultimately in the guidance of outreach efforts to farmers in the region.

The State and Regional AgrAbility Program has utilized stakeholder input in drafting requests for funding applications. Prior language in the Farm Bill was not as explicit and contained language which made it confusing for applicants. Inputs elicited from

stakeholders and applicants have clearly defined the program's priorities and provided examples of each of the four priorities.

Summary

NIFA appreciates the work of the Sustainable Farm Enterprises portfolio panel and their thoughtful report. The core issues raised by the panel, better alignment and stronger outcome focus, are consistent with the strategy for NIFA and the portfolio team looks forward to addressing these issues.