

ACTIVITY SURVEY RESULTS

**Executive Directors
And the
Regional Association's Support Offices**

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Introduction

The Experiment Station Section (ESS) of NASULGC, through their Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOP) commissioned a review of the regional and national SAES associations in mid-2000 (see Analysis of and Recommendations for Enhanced Operation of the Regional and National Associations of Agricultural Experiment Stations at <http://www.escop.msstate.edu/draftdoc.htm>). One of the points made by the review panel dealt with the need to assess the list of Executive Director (ED) responsibilities provided in the report, and offer recommendations to the ESCOP Chair for better allocation of assignments. This report up-dates the progress of the EDs in completing that assignment, and sets out the next steps.

Background

As part of the process for comprehensively reviewing the national and regional SAES associations the EDs prepared a list of responsibilities currently assigned (see the report referenced above). This list of responsibilities was not offered as exhaustive, but was presented more as a conceptual framework for discussing methods for sharing tasks and assigning activities among the otherwise independent regional associations of SAES directors. In response, the Chair of ESCOP requested a study of the responsibilities and the decision processes used for making assignments, for more discussion.

To respond to this request from the ESCOP Chair the EDs elected to survey their respective association members on several points. A common survey instrument was developed and administered within each region by the corresponding ED (copy attached). Respondents were specifically instructed not to bother responding if they were satisfied with the *status quo*.

Results

Twenty-three directors responded to the survey. This low response rate was taken as indicating general satisfaction with the *status quo*. There were no strong expressions of any need for change. More importantly, those few that did respond were overwhelming favorable in their support for the services and support they were receiving from their respective association's ED and his staff. And, many respondents offered strong

encouragements to “stay the course”. Several gave some very positive suggestions for improvements, which are shared below.

Next Steps: The EDs will be meeting in mid-April to discuss the points and suggestions raised in this survey, and to develop a proposal for agreeing on, and coordinating, activities that are national or regional. That proposal will be reported back to the ESCOP Executive Committee at its meeting in early May.

Summary: A summary of the points and suggestions gleaned from the responses follows.

- **Stay Responsive to Needs:** The EDs need to stay responsive to the changing needs of the system. Some flexibility in their assignments is necessary.
- **Cost Reductions:** Most comments on the expenses of running the regional association offices noted the necessary costs and the reasonableness of current budgets. It was noted that travel costs seemed to be the only true area for cost containment, but this point was usually followed by the need for the EDs to travel. Thus, most concluded, no real opportunity exists for significant cost savings by budget cuts (over the current regional association budgets). Other respondents suggested the possibility to substituting video-conferences for travel to meetings, in some instances. Others made mention of using technology to reduce costs (paperless management; modern telecommunications). Some noted the possibility of having one ED represent the rest, as a means for travel cost reductions.
- **Balancing National and Regional Attentions:** Several respondents noted the need to maintain a balance of national and regional activities. Some mentioned that the balance today seems to be more in favor on national activities, perhaps as a consequence of the 1998 AREERA, Plans of Work planning, etc. that keeps the attention shifted to a national agenda. Although several respondents mentioned the importance of giving attention to the national agenda, they noted that this attention was serving as a distraction from the business of the regional agenda. A few noted the desirability of having less bureaucratic processes in the federal-state partnership. Another mentioned the need to reconcile our differences with ‘Washington’, so we could move on with the regional agenda. There were concerns expressed for the reporting layers that directors face (i.e., seen as “inefficient”), while stating a desire for obtaining full credit for integrated, multistate activities. One respondent noted that the SAES system should not duplicate that which CSREES does; or as another put it, if CSREES could do it well, there would be no need for the regional associations to do it. The solution was seen by several respondents as having the EDs in more direct contact with CSREES (perhaps as quarterly meetings). Another noted the need to work on educating the agency.
- **Regional Activities:** Comments were received indicating that the regional associations should give more focus to multistate research activities, and

integration with extension. Some respondents referred to the Western Region's successful integration of activities as a desirable model to follow. Several respondents noted their desire for fewer meetings at the regional level. Other proposed activities for the EDs were:

1. Coordination of large multi-institutional grant proposals (but not the grant writing itself).
 2. Assistance with building more collaboration within and among the regions.
 3. More communication of regional activities.
 4. Service by the EDs on think tank-type activities.
 5. More identification of state needs within a region.
 6. More inter-regional sharing of good ideas.
- **Functional Relations:** Several respondents asked for more facilitation of integration with extension and academic programs. Others stated it as ...we want to be "more like the Western Region" in terms of operationalizing the management of our integrated activities.
 - **Executive Directors:** Respondents gave several suggestions for the EDs to consider. Primary among these suggestions was the theme to remain flexible enough to respond to issues, as they emerge. There was also the admonition to specialize, as a way to reduce the potential for competition among the EDs. Regarding the issue of EDs serving as Administrative Advisor (AA) to multistate research projects there was a mixture of responses. Some respondents said EDs should eschew all appointments as AAs, while others thought it would be a good way to keep the EDs attuned to the perspectives of multistate research project advising. On another point, some respondents saw a need for the EDs to broker deals and tradeoffs for the regions. Others noted the desirability for more contact for the EDs with CSREES, working to educate them on the SAES system's capacity to conduct research.

END OF TEXT

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