

**TASK FORCE REPORT
ANALYSIS OF AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR ENHANCED OPERATION OF THE REGIONAL AND NATIONAL
ASSOCIATIONS OF AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATIONS**

**Presented to the
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Introduction

It is critically important to the health and future of any organization (and especially to a service organization) that it periodically engages in self-assessment. Asking the “hard appropriate questions” is fundamental in any such assessment. Does the organization still fulfill an important need? That is, is it relevant? If so, can it do better at meeting the needs and expectations of the recipients of its services? If not, are there alternatives which better meet the needs of those receiving the services? To those ends, the regional associations of Agricultural Experiment Station Directors/Agricultural Research Directors via an *ad-hoc* Task Force created by ESCOP have asked the following questions:

1. Are regional associations the best model for the 21st Century? (As addressed herein, “regional associations” refer to the associations of 1862 State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors and 1890 Agricultural Research Directors.)
2. What are the limitations to the current model of regional associations’ accountability?
3. Are the costs of participating in a regional association justified, given the benefits?
4. Are there better ways to manage the regional associations and their portfolios?
5. Are there additional functions that regional associations should be providing?
6. Should “form follow function” for the regional associations?
7. What might the regional associations do better?
8. Are the national and regional associations (research and extension) achieving adequate levels of integration?

As the Task Force focused on the questions, it became clear that satisfactory and complete consideration was not possible without addressing the interrelationships of the regional associations with the national structure. Because the regional and national structures are so

interdependent, at least in our view, a set of parallel questions was directed to the national structure, organization and processes. [(As addressed herein, “national associations” refer to the Experiment Station Section (ESS) and its Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOP) and other sections and COPs of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC).]

General Process

The responses to the questions were framed against a background document– a white paper developed by the Executive Directors of the regional associations (attached as a separate document and available on the ESCOP home page in the “ESCOP Workroom” at: <http://www.escop.msstate.edu>). A panel of experiment station directors, one from each of the five regions, was formed to review and comment on the content of the paper.

That review panel was ultimately formed into an *ad-hoc* Task Force by the chair of ESCOP not only to review the white paper but to develop the first iteration of the responses to the self-assessment questions. The review panel met during the summer 2000 ESCOP meeting in Denver and sorted itself into three subgroups to address the critical questions with the motive of creating this straw document designed as a point of departure to help assure a fruitful outcome of the workshop planned for this topic during the ESS meeting in New Orleans, September 26-28, 2000.

Intriguingly parallel with but not catalyzing this activity, the Administrative Heads Section initiated discussions relating to the structure and function of the NASULGC Board on Agriculture (BoA). Certainly the *ad hoc* Task Force considers this fortuitous in that the outcome of the ESS deliberations should help clearly illuminate the importance of a more effective, transparent, balanced, representative and user-friendly BoA.

The Task Force engaged this activity with the expectation that there will be follow up actions leading to clearly-stated positions adopted by the ESS. Understandably, there will likely be a series of interim actions needed to create the organizational resolve required of the general adoption of any section-wide position(s). The Task Force also believes that taking such positions are inevitable and that discussion and debate in open forum is the most effective and disciplined course to that end. Again, the following straw responses to the eight questions are intended to catalyze that process.

Response

Regional Associations

1. Are the regional associations the best model for the 21st Century?

The regional associations have evolved over decades and are individual, and respective, parts of a larger system that has been effective in coordinating and facilitating multistate research

programs and related, supportive activities. The office of each of the regional executive directors provides the continuity, a point of reference for the rapid rotation of elected leadership, and an enhanced potential for sharing information, ideas and initiatives across regions.

While there are differences among regions and their modes of operation, the opportunities for scientist participation in any regional research portfolio is transparent. Almost two-thirds of the multistate participation involves scientists from other than the lead region. This is but one example of the flexibility practiced by the regional associations.

Regionalization places programs and activities into a manageable-sized framework. There is some optimal or near ideal-sized management structure wherein programs are catalyzed. The current regional structure appears to provide that optimal size. Multistate research creation, implementation and management at the national level is incomprehensible given the size of the portfolio.

The regional offices, originally established for regional research project management, now manage many additional activities which help synergize the national system. Task forces, formal development committees, conferences and information exchange groups go well beyond the traditional research project in promoting collaboration.

Regional offices provide a focus and forum for working with the federal partner. The regions also provide a broad base for negotiation and a collective thought process and consultation leading to consensus for addressing common management and relational issues. Presently, the inter- and intra-regional association relationships appear to be in good order and interactions within and between regions are nearly seamless. The multistate research programs employ good science and solve key regional and national problems. In conclusion, the Task Force believes that the regional association is the best model for conducting the regional business of the ESS.

Recommendation: Retain the current regional structure with the understanding that it is, and will continue to, undergo continuous evolution.

2. What are the limitations to the current model of regional associations?

Much of the work of the associations relies on volunteers who are already more than fully employed. Thus, the timeliness of commitments and fulfillment of needs may compromise an association's ability to fully capitalize on a one-time opportunity. The regional portfolio of research is basically a scientist-driven, bottom-up program. To function most effectively, each research project/program needs a champion. For some needed research, a champion is not always forth coming and thus an opportunity may be missed.

Recommendation: We must be very diligent in our use of all modern means of communication available to inform scientists and research administrators about research opportunities, new projects, new programs and funding opportunities.

Work of the ESCOP Partnership Committee over the past 18 months has resulted in recognition, by both the CSREES and state system administrative leadership, that direct attention needs to be given to identifying issues now preventing the state-federal partnership from being as effective and efficient as it could and should be. The issues cover a broad spectrum, thus CSREES, ESCOP and ECOP have formed a joint Partnership Task Force to begin looking at ways to improve the partnership. As a first step, the Task Force has recommended, and has received approval from CSREES, ESCOP and ECOP, to conduct a workshop in February, 2001. Invitees to the workshop will include all research (1862 and 1890) and extension directors and administrators and program leaders from CSREES. We strongly endorse this effort and recommend that the workshop include an agenda item for discussion relative to the role and responsibilities of regional associations in strengthening the state-federal partnership.

Recommendation: Redouble the efforts of the ESCOP Partnerships Committee to emphasize strengthening and harmonizing the fundamental partnership with CSREES.

3. Are the costs of participation in regional associations justified, given the benefits?

The interest on the part of scientists to participate in multistate programs is a strong indication of the project value. There are numerous costs associated with regional participation beyond those involved with actual conduct of an activity (e.g., research). These include costs of operating the regional office and sending scientists to regional or multistate meetings. States in a regional association should view the office of the executive director as that of staff. Shared financial burden and volunteer scientists from member states greatly reduces and levels the workload across participating states and provides for the opportunity to engage a broad, diverse base of scientific expertise. The resultant synergy capitalizes on the talents and strengths of individual scientists and results in solutions of complex problems that are unlikely to be addressed completely, if at all, by single states. These solutions and the resultant benefits far outweigh the costs. The alternative, to distribute the work across the member institutions, would most likely be much less effective, much more costly and duplicative.

Recommendation: Continue to monitor assessments to assure regional associations remain cost effective and accountable to the membership.

4. Are there better ways to manage the regional associations and their portfolios?

Regional offices have changed a great deal since they were established as offices of the Director at Large (DALs) over fifty years ago. They have exhibited flexibility in terms of progressive evolution and to numerous short-term changing scenarios. Adaptation to change is a constant when dealing with the federal partner and congressional mandates.

While state boundaries are artificial ecologically in relation to "agriculture," they represent a means to provide a structure and form of governance and management that has served well as a base for doing business. Regionalization is practiced by other government entities (EPA, ARS) as well. Although they may have different regional/state configurations, any

configuration has a set of pros and cons. The strength of the "region" probably rests within the willingness of its member states to develop a set of stakeholder driven research priorities and the selection of a cadre of scientists with the talent and support to conduct the research.

Recommendation: Continue to manage the short-term dynamics to assure the continued healthy evolution and accountability of the regional associations through periodic (ca. 5 year intervals?) self assessments.

5. Are there additional functions that the regional associations should be providing?

The passage of AREERA led to codification of numerous "multi's" including multistate, multi-discipline, multi-institution and multifunction. While the potential exists for forging new operational relationships, the member institutions must exercise the will and provide the financial support to make it happen. The current associations could play a significantly enhanced role in multi-mission/multi-agency research. There is considerable potential for collaboration and partnering with other regionally based programs and offices. For example, pest management through a competitive RFP process is initiating virtual regional IPM centers. The mission and goals of these centers is likely to be closely aligned with the missions and goals of EPA. This and other similar programmatic options could be investigated.

Recommendation: Strengthen regional association capabilities and encourage the Executive Directors to be more pro-active in identifying and developing initiatives of broad mutual benefit and to serve as advocates under the guidance and concurrence of (and with accountability to) the association membership.

National Associations

1. Are the national associations (sections) the best model for the 21st Century?

The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) provides a national framework for many of the functional units of "Colleges of Agriculture." The functional units (i.e., experiment stations, extension services, academic programs and international programs) are treated as sections. The 1862 State Experiment Station Directors and 1890 Agricultural Research Directors are members of the Experiment Station Section (ESS). The Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOP) is composed of elected members from the four regional associations and the agricultural research directors from the 1890 institutions, designated as the fifth region. The chair of ESCOP and the three other Committees on Organization and Policy representing extension, academic programs and international agriculture along with several other representatives constitute the Board on Agriculture (BoA) of NASULGC.

Because all Land-Grant Universities receive a significant direct appropriation for research and extension programs through the Hatch, Smith-Lever, and 1890 Research and Extension Acts, there is a need for a national organization to represent the functional components of Land-Grant

Universities. The strength of our institutions is enhanced by the synergy between the functional elements. Articulating the positive impacts and outcomes of federal appropriations is one goal of such a national organization. One of the strengths of the experiment station system is the ability of the partnership institutions to use the federal appropriation to leverage state match and for researchers to secure additional competitive funds and industrial contracts to address short and long-term concerns. A national organization can articulate the return on the investment in agricultural research more effectively than individual universities or researchers.

The ESS and ESCOP leadership (the chair of ESS is also the chair of ESCOP) represent the experiment station system with the USDA CSREES administration on issues related to the federal appropriations and research priorities. The ESCOP chair represents the experiment station through congressional testimony and other venues.

It is important to have national representation for the agricultural experiment station system. Indeed, the national organization is more important than ever before.

Recommendation: The national organization of 1862 State Agricultural Experiment Stations and 1890 Agricultural Research Directors should be strengthened, especially given the growing need for highly orchestrated accountable research that brings the sum of national capacity to bear on priority national issues.

2. What are the limitations to the current model of national associations?

The current national associations have a history of unfulfilled opportunities. On numerous occasions consensus by research and extension administrators could have more effectively demonstrated the synergy of the LGU's agricultural programs. There are many examples of how the current national associations have not been able to build bridges between functions.

The current national association (NASULGC) has paid staff representing Extension and Academic Programs, while the Experiment Stations and 1890 Agricultural Research Directors rely on loose connections between the regional Executive Directors and the NASULGC staff. As a result the Experiment Station input to NASULGC policies related to agricultural research is inadequate.

While a totally new comprehensive association with no historical prejudices might solve some problems, it is not recommended. We need to recognize the limitations and develop a plan to enhance coordination and cooperation.

Recommendation: NASULGC and ESS/ESCOP should work jointly to insure that agricultural research is represented at the "NASULGC table" to facilitate full integration of research with extension, academic and international program when dealing with joint issues. One solution might be to create a more formal relationship between the Executive Directors and the NASULGC Staff.

3. Are the costs of participating in a national association justified, given the benefits?

The Experiment Station Directors pay their assessment to the Regional Associations. There is no direct assessment to NASULGC for ESCOP or ESS. This is different than the direct assessment paid by Extension Directors and Academic Program Deans to NASULGC and used to fund staff positions within the NASULGC office. The cost to Experiment Station Directors is primarily the costs of participating in and attending the annual meeting of NASULGC and for the members of ESCOP to attend the various meetings of ESCOP and ESS. Each ESS/ESCOP member has a personal choice in how much she/he spends on the “National Association.”

The benefit of participating in the annual meeting of NASULGC is directly related to the quality and content of the program. In other words, participation in NASULGC meetings by Experiment Station Directors requires that the program include topics that are important to the agricultural research enterprise at Land-Grant Universities. The development and selection of the program should be the responsibility of the Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy. There is a great opportunity to use these national meetings to support integrated activities and demonstrate the synergy of research, extension and academic programs.

Participation in ESCOP activities becomes the duty and responsibility of those elected to ESCOP or chairing committees reporting to ESCOP. These are important activities and the reorganization of ESCOP and the committees makes the responsibilities of these groups more clearly defined. Unfortunately, the costs of participating in ESCOP activities are covered by the institutions who’s Directors are elected or appointed to ESCOP and the associated committees. This can discourage some qualified individuals from assuming these national duties.

Recommendation: Create a program committee of ESCOP to insure that the quality and content of the programs at the annual NASULGC meeting are relevant and important to ESS/ESCOP members.

4. Are there better ways to manage the national associations (sections) and their portfolios?

The national portfolio is the aggregate of the regional portfolios. One of the major activities of the association is to provide an interface to the CSREES Partnership Office on the research portfolio of the State Agricultural Experiment Station System. The new guidelines and the development of the paperless management system will greatly improve the management of the research portfolio.

A national system to improve the management of the integrated research and extension portfolio would be of great help to the system. The Western Region’s approach to involve extension and academic programs in the management team of the Western Region Executive Director’s office is one approach to solving this dilemma. Another approach is that taken by the Southern Region during the early 1990's to establish a series of joint research and extension information exchange groups and task forces. Today the Southern Region has 30 such activities in place. In addition, the Association of Southern Regional Extension Directors recently decided

to employ an executive director to facilitate their regional programs and other activities. This progressive approach will provide a rich opportunity to enhance the integrated components of the research and extension portfolios.

Recommendation: Explore alternative approaches for facilitation and management of multistate integrated activities.

5. Are there additional functions that the national associations (sections) should be providing?

The national association (ESS) should be enhancing collaboration among the functional partners. If the attitude was shifted to “how can we make things work” instead of “why they won’t work” significant improvements and benefits would accrue from the current associations.

Recommendation: Create a committee of ESCOP, ECOP and ACOP to make recommendations on additional collaborative functions to be addressed at the ESCOP-ECOP-CSREES Partnership Workshop in February 2001.

(Note: Whereas the first five questions were answered separately for regional and national issues, single answers are used to address both levels in questions 6 through 8).

6. Should “form follow function” for the national and regional associations?

The expectations of the members of the regional and national associations are evolving to an ever-expanding list of functions. Previously, NASULGC was primarily expected to be an advocate for the LGU system. The regional associations were primarily expected to service the management needs of the regional research portfolio. Today’s SAES/ARD directors seem to expect much more than just advocacy for the system, or multistate research portfolio management (see ED responsibilities and duties, pages 10-11).

The functions for both the regional and the national organizations are being altered by the changes brought on with GPRA and AREERA. Major issues at the regional level are the integration of AES with CES and the partnering with CSREES. Both concerns result from the above mentioned legislation. The national issues result from structural arrangements within NASULGC and on our campuses. A great deal of frustration occurs within regions because of differing views about the proper structure for individual components (SAES, AHS, CES, etc.)

Recommendation: A comprehensive review of the possible functions by the regional and national associations is needed. These suggested functions should then be prioritized by the associations’ membership, and the priority needs worked into plans for implementation.

7. What might the national and regional associations do better?

The regional and national associations need to give greater emphasis to fostering:

functional integration; partnerships; initiatives; advocacy; stakeholder listening; and accountability. Some of this could be done at the regional level, but much of it needs to be completed at the national level. However, this presents a dilemma in that the primary resources (fiscal and human) for getting things done rests within the regional AES directors associations, not nationally. As a consequence, activities to create new functions are initiated separately. The good will that exists among the regional associations (and especially among the EDs) makes this otherwise divided system work. But when it comes to initiating functions with Cooperative Extension things usually do not work as well.

There are a number of activities underway which could enhance the effectiveness of the system and in which the regional and national associations will be key players. These activities should lead to a better understanding of the role and responsibilities for the different entities involved:

1. The proposed joint ESCOP/ECOP/CSREES Partnership Workshop in February 2001 should result in the identification of a number of issues that are now limiting our system, and hopefully result in plans to address these issues.
2. The development of a “Science Roadmap” for the agricultural research system should enhance our ability to articulate a common vision for the system with regard to research.
3. The increased dialogue and collaborative efforts with extension and academic programs both at the regional and national level to enhance the integration of research , extension and academic programs addresses new opportunities for the system.
4. Implementation of the “ Guidelines for Multistate Research” which will help open opportunities for greater inter-regional activities, and provide better mechanisms for tracking activities from development through accomplishments and impacts.
5. Continuing the “Impact Assessment Activity” which is joint with ECOP and CSREES needs continued support and emphasis from the states and the regional associations.
6. Emergence of the CFAR effort, which has great potential for increasing federal support for agricultural, food, environmental and life sciences research, needs our support.
7. The reorganization of ESCOP in 1998 into core committees has resulted in getting more people involved in activities related to national needs and has resulted in more or broader ownership.

Recommendation: Develop a new mechanism to link the regional associations at the national level and promote partnering with extension and federal agencies.

Question 8. Are the national and regional associations (research and extension) achieving adequate levels of integration?

Regionally-organized research activities have always provided for both multi-regional participation by researchers as well as opportunities for involvement of extension and academic (teaching) faculty. In fact, many participants in research projects have a multi-functional appointment at their university, thus there has been multi-functional representation. Also, the current multistate research portfolio is more multi-regional than it is uni-regional which attests to the capability and strength of this model for building collaborative research efforts that are

“seamless” with regard to geographic boundaries. Extension, until recently was not required to perform and document multistate activities though they were engaged in interstate collaboration. As a result of the AREERA legislation, the extension directors’ regional associations are pursuing several options to assist them in the integration of extension and research in multistate activities. This is an excellent time for the research regional associations to continue to work closely with the extension regional associations in developing and documenting strong and effective multistate integrated activities. The regional associations need to collectively work together to build on the strengths of current research and extension multistate organizational structures as one way to enhance the programs of both research and extension for better serving our clientele.

Recommendation: Critically assess alternative approaches for improving the relationship with ECOP.

Responsibilities and Duties of the Regional Executive Director

The following responsibilities and duties were assembled and agreed upon by the executive directors and the task force:

- **Anticipate and respond to the association needs-** examples include development of efficient portfolio management systems; strategic planning; and taking inventories of institutional capacities.
- **Innovate wherever and whenever possible-** examples include the paperless management systems; electronic balloting; and web-based distribution of documents.
- **Foster intra- and inter regional communication-** examples include web page development; conference calls; and the organization of regional and national meetings.
- **Facilitate multistate research activities-** examples include serving as AAs to projects; monitoring research activity overlaps and gaps; liaison with the CSREES Partnership Office.
- **Document research activities-** examples include support for Image Enhancement document development; analysis of our research investments; support for CRIS.
- **Maintain records of activities-** examples include the keeping of meeting minutes; support for documenting projects with CSREES; and electronically archiving records and reports.
- **Proposing options for consideration-** examples include the recent development of multistate research activity guidelines; development of policy options for research management and accountability; and methods for reporting integrated, multistate research activities.
- **Backstopping Directors-** examples include standing in at regional and national meetings; representation to federal partners; and providing public testimony.
- **Promoting the integration of institutional functions-** examples include support for ESCOP on the development of the past Farm Bills; campus-based workshops on the AREERA requirements; and joint ECOP/ESCOP strategic planning.

- **Help to identify and support initiatives-** examples include hosting SUNEI; support for the NE SAFER initiative (on food safety); assistance on the CFAR initiative; and participation in the Genome Initiative.
- **Remove barriers to collaboration-** examples include facilitation of the CoFARM Strategic Planning activity; liaison with ARS and other research partners; attendance at meetings of regional extension directors; and providing links to commodity groups and private sector research interests.
- **Provide national representation-** examples include membership on **ALL** ESCOP committees; direct representation to CSREES; and organizing the annual EES workshop.
- **Providing "corporate memory"-** examples include support for new directors on processes; development of efficient procedures for project development and management; and serving as a resource for historical documents, records, and decisions.
- **Supporting image enhancement efforts-** examples include gathering data for professional writing teams; encouraging awards for superior regional performance; and publicizing regional achievements.
- **Analyses of trends-** examples include reports on CRIS-derived research expenditure patterns; monitoring project activities; and providing overviews of national and regional changes in stakeholder needs.
- **Liaison to the federal government-** examples include membership on the ESCOP/USDA Partnership Committee; support for congressional contacts, mostly through AESOP Enterprises, Ltd.; and multiple contacts with federal agencies sharing an agenda on agricultural and natural resource management research.
- **Facilitating functional integration regionally-** helping to develop procedures for forming joint research and extension projects; supporting joint research and extension committees and task forces; documenting joint research and extension activities.
- **Support for lobbying efforts-** preparation of 'one page' documents on budget needs of targeted federal agencies; direct support for the NASULGC budget advocacy process; and indirect support for CARET.
- **Enhancing access to resources-** examples include sharing of RFPs through multiple channels, including list servers; analysis of SAES funding patterns to reveal opportunities for additional resources; and grantsmanship workshops.