

COMMENTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

To: The Honorable Gale Buchanan, Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics
From: D.C. Coston, Chair, NASULGC's Farm Bill Implementation Assistance Committee
Date: October 27, 2008
Re: Research, Education, and Extension Office (REEO) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)

Title VII of the 2008 Farm Bill (the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, P.L. 110-246) contains, as you know, many provisions of concern to the land-grant university system. Two items of particular interest to the system are the Research, Education, and Extension Office (REEO) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Therefore, on behalf of the Board on Agriculture Assembly of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the Farm Bill Implementation Assistance Committee submits the following comments and recommendations on these two subjects.

Research, Education, and Extension Office

REEO Division Chiefs. The Statement of Managers from the Committee of Conference requires that the Division Chiefs be selected by the Under Secretary to: (1) promote leadership and professional development; (2) enable personnel to interact with other agencies of the Department; and (3) allow for the rotation of Department personnel into the position of Division Chief. Each Division Chief is required to have conducted exemplary research, extension, or education in the field of agriculture or forestry and is required to have earned an advanced degree at an institution of higher education. Each Division Chief is limited to a four-year term of service. The duties of each Division Chief include addressing the agricultural research, extension, and education needs and priorities within the Department and communicating with stakeholders, as well as the development of the roadmap.

Recommendation: We are pleased that the Division Chief positions have been filled from within the USDA's science and education agencies and we look forward to working with these and other REEO personnel in the years ahead.

Recommendation: Working as a team, the Under Secretary, Division Chiefs, and other REEO personnel must enhance programmatic integration and eliminate administrative duplication among NIFA, ARS, ERS, USFS, and NASS, and maximize allocation of staff resources among these agencies.

Recommendation: The Division Chiefs should utilize the land-grant system's education and extension capability to deliver research results produced by all agencies within USDA to the Department's various stakeholders and customers.

Recommendation: The Division Chiefs should assist the Under Secretary in identifying, prioritizing, and addressing continuing and emerging agricultural research, education, and extension needs, including funding requirements

Personnel. The Statement of Managers states the expectation that the REEO is “to be staffed and funded from appropriations made available to the agencies within the REE mission area. There is concern that the REEO will evolve into a new layer of bureaucracy. To address this, the Managers have included language to limit the number of staff positions for the REEO to 30 full-time current positions.”

Recommendation: Each REEO division should be staffed by personnel with professional experience in the division’s respective mission area(s).

Recommendation: In addition, personnel with families, youth, and community development professional experience should be represented throughout the REEO staff to ensure integration of these functions into the operations of the individual divisions and the Research, Education, and Economics mission area as a whole.

Recommendation: Intergovernmental Personnel Act appointments are strongly encouraged to be represented within the REEO staff.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Title VII requires a new National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to be established by October 1, 2009. The Managers believe that NIFA “will be commensurate in stature with other grant-making agencies across the federal government, such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. The Managers intend for NIFA to be an independent, scientific, policy-setting agency for the food and agricultural sciences, which will reinvigorate our nation’s investment in agricultural research, extension, and education.” To accomplish these objectives, “all authorities under CSREES are transferred to NIFA, and all programs currently under CSREES will continue under NIFA... By restructuring CSREES, the Managers intend for NIFA to raise the profile of agricultural research, extension, and education.”

NIFA Director. According to the Statement of Managers: “NIFA will be headed by a Director, who is required to report to and consult with the Secretary on the research, extension, and education activities of NIFA. The Director will work with the Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics [REE] to ensure proper coordination and integration of all research programs that are within the responsibility of the Department. The Director of NIFA is required to be a distinguished scientist and will be appointed by the President... The Director is required to report to the Secretary or the designee of the Secretary and will serve a six-year term, subject to reappointment for an additional six-year term.”

Recommendation: The NIFA Director should report directly to the Secretary.

Recommendation: The NIFA Director should coordinate with the REE Under Secretary and implement, to the maximum degree possible, the Roadmap.

Recommendation: The NIFA Director should ensure that NIFA coordinates and integrates with other USDA intramural agencies, the REEO, and stakeholders including the land-grant university system.

NIFA Structure. The Statement of Managers provides “the Director with discretion to organize NIFA into offices and functions to administer fundamental and applied research and extension and education programs. The NIFA Director is required to ensure an appropriate balance between fundamental and applied research programs, and is required to promote the use and growth of competitively awarded grants.”

Recommendation: NIFA should be organized into two divisions: (1) a “Division of Research, Extension, and Education” to administer capacity and infrastructure programs (as defined by legislation); and (2) a “Division of Competitive Programs” to administer competitive initiatives for research, education, and extension.

Recommendation: In addition to the two divisions, the Director should create programmatic leadership offices to provide crosscutting programmatic planning and support functions between the two divisions, and ensure integration between capacity and infrastructure and competitive research, education, and extension programs. Examples of programmatic leadership offices that would integrate the functions and initiatives to be administered by each division include:

- ***Families, Youth, and Community Development***
- ***Natural Resources and Environment***
- ***Plant Health and Production***
- ***Food Safety, Nutrition, and Health***
- ***Animal Health and Production***
- ***Agricultural Systems and Technology***
- ***Agricultural Economics***

Recommendation: The Director should designate a specific point of contact within each programmatic leadership office to ensure collaboration and coordination between each REEO office and the respective NIFA office. Research, Extension and Education functions should be represented in the points of contact and within each of the programmatic leadership offices.