

## SEA GRANT ASSOCIATION

### COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING NATIONAL STRATEGIC INITIATIVES (NSIs)

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At the Sea Grant Association (SGA) meeting held in Silver Spring, Maryland on April 24 and 25, 2001, SGA president Rick DeVoe asked me to poll the members for comments on the National Strategic Initiative (NSI) process with which Sea Grant has been involved for the past few years. I issued an e-mail call for comments on April 30, 2001 and received input from eight programs.

During the comment period, the deadline for submission of the Gulf Oyster Industry and Oyster Disease NSIs was rapidly approaching. Concerns over that particular activity led to a flurry of additional e-mails from a number of programs. The opinions on those NSIs were summarized by Bill Rickards (Virginia Sea Grant) and sent to me; a compilation of the responses developed from Rickards' submission is included as an appendix to this report. A few e-mails were received subsequent to the preparation of Bill's summary and pertinent comments were incorporated.

The material that appears below is my summary of all the input received to date on this topic, including additional input provided by the SGA Board. I have attempted to synthesize comments that were similar in nature into general statements. Explanations are also provided so as to give an indication of the rationale for the synthesis statements. Further, I have attempted to capture the overall feelings of those who responded into one overarching summary statement. Finally, suggestions for improving the NSI process are provided.

**SUMMARY STATEMENT:** *The SGA and the National Sea Grant Office (NSGO) need to work together toward the resolution of the issues that have arisen with respect to the development, solicitation, and management of NSIs.*

There was broad agreement that the generation of topics for and issuance of NSIs is intended to be a joint decision-making function of the SGA and the NSGO, yet there is a clear feeling among respondents that SGA has not been fully involved. This partnership is actually mandated by the Sea Grant reauthorization legislation of 1998. A few examples of concern include the view that the number of NSIs should be limited, the funding levels should be increased, the peer review process should be handled in a different manner, and that the proliferation of NSIs has reduced the ability of the NSGO and university Sea Grant Program staff to perform other necessary functions. Several of the statements below expand upon these concerns and include others.

### **1. NSIs undermine the basic tenet under which Sea Grant operates.**

**Situation:** Sea Grant was established as a university-based program of research, education, and outreach. NSIs are open to agency and industry researchers, thereby changing the character of the program and detracting from the Sea Grant mission. Placing funding in NSIs rather than distributing the money to core results in erosion of the local Sea Grant programs where core funding increases have not kept up with inflation and the basic increases in the costs of doing modern science.

**Recommendation:** Expanded funding should be used, to the extent possible, to reduce the erosion that is taking place in the core budgets of the 30 Sea Grant programs. New NSIs should be developed using the rationale outlined under item 2 (below).

### **2. NSIs should be developed collaboratively.**

**Situation:** While the NSGO is actively developing NSIs, SGA (in partnership with NSGO and the National Review Panel) has formed nine theme teams that are developing research initiatives (one of which, marine aquaculture, is also an NSI). Several of the NSIs were developed by necessity in response to congressional mandates, and others to political expediency. Thus, NSIs seem to be created for a number of different reasons or in response to different mandates. Further, there are no standardized procedures on how NSIs are selected or conducted. As a result, the process seems to be somewhat chaotic. The specific roles of the National Review Panel, the SGA, and the NSGO in the NSI process are unclear.

**Recommendation:** SGA recommends that non-mandated NSIs only be initiated with full collaboration between the NSGO and the SGA (as required in the Sea Grant reauthorization legislation of 1998). New NSIs should, in most instances, arise from the Theme Teams that continue to work collaboratively with NSGO in assembling research and outreach strategies that, in turn, reflect the strength of the Sea Grant community. NSGO and SGA should develop policies that ensure collaboration and the development of a process that has the support of all involved.

### **3. There are too many NSIs and they are not sufficiently funded.**

**Situation:** The number of NSIs has led to a proliferation of Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for relatively small amounts of money. As a corollary, the RFPs come out at different times throughout the year, and the guidelines and rules governing NSI solicitations are not consistent. Thus, researchers must be mobilized to write proposals on several occasions, and the local Sea Grant Programs are constantly attempting to keep up with their normal workloads while being asked to respond to the many, varying deadlines imposed by the NSGO. NSIs add significantly to the workload of those Sea Grant programs that become involved in the process.

**Recommendation:** Congressional mandates require the NSGO to issue RFPs for certain national competitions. The SGA recommends that these be announced in one comprehensive *Federal Register* and RFP announcement, incorporating a standardized proposal process and timeline. For

“discretionary” NSIs, the SGA recommends that the NSGO, after deliberations with the SGA and the National Review Panel, select one or two *well-funded* NSIs for competition in any one year, and provide for multiyear funding.

#### **4. NSGO time spent on NSIs takes away from other important NSGO activities.**

**Situation:** Writing *Federal Register* notices, along with conducting panel meetings and administering the NSIs, has increased the administrative burden on the NSGO, and perhaps reduced the effectiveness of the national office in its interactions with the local Sea Grant programs and NOAA.

**Recommendation:** Some amelioration of the problem might be achieved if the NSIs were all incorporated into one national call for proposals each year. This would potentially reduce the total number of proposals received, however, it would allow researchers to concentrate their activities on one NSI call rather than responding to several issued at different times throughout the year.

#### **5. The selection of Proposal Review Panel members should be determined as a joint effort between NSGO and the local Sea Grant programs.**

**Situation:** Currently, the makeup of the preproposal and proposal Review Panels is at the discretion of the NSGO staff person who is responsible for each NSI. The composition of each panel can have a major impact on the decision-making philosophy behind which proposals are ultimately funded.

**Recommendation:** To ensure a fair and open process, members of the local Sea Grant programs with expertise in each NSI should be involved in the process of identifying suitable candidates to serve on Review Panels. Every effort should be made to avoid conflicts of interest.<sup>1</sup>

#### **6. Feedback from the NSGO on NSI decisions and proposal selection is inadequate.**

**Situation:** This statement reflects at least two issues. First, substantive comments received by Sea Grant Directors from Review Panels that review preproposals and full proposals are often cryptic and either offensive or useless to the program or the prospective PI. Second, the NSGO should be forthcoming in providing information requested by individual Sea Grant programs with regard to the titles of projects selected for funding and the progress that is being made with respect toward finalization of the contracts associated with those projects. There has apparently been some lack

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<sup>1</sup> It is virtually impossible to convene a Review Panel in which one or more individuals do not have a relationship that could be construed as representing a conflict of interest (having published with or served on a graduate committee of a PI, being part of a program that funds or has funded a PI are examples). In those cases, the involved Panel member is excused from any part in the discussion. Panel members are not allowed to be listed as PIs on any preproposals or proposal that is submitted.

of response to queries of that nature.

**Recommendation:** Feedback, both for approved and unapproved preproposals and proposals, should be substantive and provide the reader with a clear explanation of the decision.

**7. The time frame provided for funded NSI projects/programs is insufficient to address the issues comprehensively and to involve an outreach component.**

**Situation:** While an outreach component is often encouraged in NSI solicitations, funding may be terminated before sufficient information has been generated to make the incorporation of an outreach component necessary or even possible.

**Recommendation:** The duration of NSIs, and their funding levels, should be sufficient to accommodate a strong extension/outreach component prior to the termination of the funding. Participation in each NSI by extension personnel should be encouraged from the onset of funding and should be a major component during the last one or two years of the NSI. Planning for these components can be facilitated if each NSI has a scheduled termination date (contingent, as always, on continuation of funding for the planned period of the NSI).

**8. The management of NSIs should not be a function of the theme teams.**

**Situation:** Theme teams were developed for the purpose of fleshing out research and outreach agendas on particular topics. The original charge to theme teams has been to develop white papers, generate a one or two page summary sheet for distribution, and develop a booklet that provides more detail on how increased funding into the theme area would be utilized to address the research and outreach needs that exist.

**Recommendation:** Additional responsibilities of the theme teams should only be mandated after full discussion, and agreement, among all involved components within Sea Grant.

**9. PIs have two options on proposal submission.**

**Situation:** Allowing prospective PIs to approach NSGO directly in response to RFPs undermines the effectiveness of the local Sea Grant programs by complicating their role as having the ultimate responsibility for project/program and fiscal management.

**Recommendation:** All preproposals and full proposals should be submitted through a state Sea Grant program.

## Appendix

### Summary of ODRP/GOIP NSI Options

The discussion of how best to proceed with obtaining reviews of the Gulf Oyster Industry Program and the Oyster Disease research Program NSI gave rise to the following options that might be considered by the SGA in conjunction with future calls of this nature.

- Local Sea Grant programs would not be expected to conduct reviews. NSGO would collect the proposals and conduct the entire review process (mail and panel) without input from the state programs.
- Directors receiving proposals should forward them to the NSGO along with the names of potential reviewers. NSGO would conduct the entire review process (mail and panel).
- SGA should enter into deliberations with NSGO to resolve problems with the NSI review process before any further NSI solicitations are issued.
- Directors could use reviewers who are knowledgeable about the subject area in general, but who may not be specifically involved with the particular area of research being reviewed. (This would expand the pool of potential reviewers, which is very small given the broad response to the RFP and limited number of experts in the fields covered by the NSIs)
- Reduce the number of reviews sought for each proposal.
- Alert NSGO that the directors will attempt to obtain the requisite number of reviews, but because of the limited pool of potential reviewers, a shortfall may occur.
- Conduct a centrally coordinated review process through one of the state programs. (There seems to be little or no support for this option.)