APPENDIX A

FAQs

For Administrative Advisors and SAES Directors

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In everyday life it always seems that there is an easy way to get things done. This may be especially true in research management and the following points may provide helpful hints to some frequently asked questions (FAQs) on how an Administrative Advisor and SAES Directors can get things done:

1. How do I manage Multistate Research funds?
As noted elsewhere, 25 percent of the Hatch funds are allocated to the Multistate Research Fund by NIFA and distributed to each eligible Station as a specific allocation. The distribution of this allocation, and the required matching with non-Federal funds is done by the Directors in each of the Stations, and therefore it is necessary for the Administrative Advisor to encourage members of his or her technical committee to communicate with their respective Directors at the outset of the project, and annually thereafter, on the resources that will be necessary for participating in a Multistate Research Project. There is also the additional need for the Administrative Advisor to encourage Multistate Research Project scientists to obtain funding from other sources, beyond the Multistate Research funding. Seeking outside funding for a multistate activity is often the difference between success and failure for a project.

As mentioned elsewhere, it is the responsibility of the Administrative Advisor to diffuse complaints on the amount of funding allocated to project participants inasmuch as this is really an issue for the employing Station Director to address. In all cases the Administrative Advisor must follow this procedure as all funding decisions are done at the Station level, with the exception of any off-the-top funding.

2. How can I get money for a publication?
Interestingly, some Administrative Advisors get caught up in the apparent complexity of having publications paid for by the Multistate Research Fund. The process is, in reality, not at all complicated, if you do certain things in sequence. The preferred sequence is:

A. Before making any financial commitment, get an estimate of the cost of the publication and request the Association's approval for the publication (through the Multistate Activities Committee).

B. Once approval is obtained from the Association, the Station sponsoring the publication moves ahead with publication and makes payment for the publication from any discretionary source, to be repaid later.

C. The copy of the paid invoice is then submitted to the Chair of the MAC two weeks prior to the summer meeting (the preferred timing).

D. An "off-the-top" allocation from the Multistate Research Fund is then approved to be paid at the beginning of the next Federal Fiscal Year (October 1).

A high-risk approach to seeking reimbursement is to skip the approval step, and publish the document as a Multistate Research publication, hoping that once it is published approval can be obtained from the Association. Don't bet on it! And it is highly unlikely that some other source (like NIFA) will provide any reimbursement.

3. When and where should project meetings occur?
Committee meetings are called at the discretion of the Administrative Advisor. Care should be exercised to avoid appearances for a high cost of travel, or for using poor judgment on luxury locations. But this caveat should not be taken to preclude choosing a location that might be overseas, or very remote. Some meetings are very successful because of the distant location and some locations are suitable because they are convenient and/or less expensive.

4. How do I call a project meeting?
All Multistate Research Project meetings must be authorized by the Administrative Advisor who sends out notices to all Directors other agencies, institutions, and invited guests; all Executive Directors; as well as, the NIFA Partnership Office. This procedure is automated for you through the NIMSS.

A project meeting should be called when necessary to coordinate, review, plan or discuss activities. Meetings are usually held annually, and they should help to critically review and evaluate progress, plan future activities, report on publications, and analyze data and results. On occasions, special meetings may be called when necessary and justified. However, individual Station policies may limit participation by scientists to one meeting per year. This may also be true for non-SAES scientists as well. This point should be considered when contemplating the calling of special meetings.

Some meetings may be designated as inter-regional or even held jointly with other projects, both within and external to the region. The primary purpose of holding such meetings must be for research coordination.

It is advisable to plan one and a half days for a project meeting, allocated as one day for presenting results and reviewing information by research objectives, and a second half day for planning-by-objectives for future activities.

Experienced Administrative Advisors have recommended that Multistate Research Project meetings be held independent of other activities. Sometimes it is suggested that it would be good to schedule a meeting with some other activity, such as an annual meeting of a professional society. This is generally said to be a bad idea as individuals become distracted by the other events and, as a consequence, interest and attention levels become low, attendance is usually poorer, and participants are said to be too tired to fully participate. This problem is especially bad, it is said, for projects meeting in conjunction with a national professional society meeting, as regional and disciplinary attendances can become skewed, and the cost of attending the meeting may be greater as a consequence of the larger meeting facilities, which often command a premium.

There are instances when meeting jointly with another organization maybe worthwhile. If the purpose is to identify a speaker who would not otherwise attend, or perhaps gain some other clear advantage by the linking, then joint meetings maybe justified. It is however a general rule that joint meetings are a bad idea, especially if it is just for the convenience of venue.

5. How do I invoice Stations for shared activities?
The NERA policy on sharing costs for services or support is that they should not be billed to the NERA directors or to the Directors of participating scientists. The only process that is approved for sharing costs is to bill the participants of the activity directly. Examples are: Centrally prepared potato seed, support staff for maintaining an activity's web page; and sharing the costs for a centrally administered survey.

6. How can I get a small sum of funds for paying legitimate expenses associated with a project or committee?
For small sums of money some activities charge a registration fee slightly greater than the cost of having a meeting. They then use the balance to pay for activities that are directly related to the project or committee's needs. Although justified, such practice does leave open questions of impropriety. Administrative Advisors should oversee such "registration fee" strategies very carefully. In any event, invoicing participating SAES directors, or the regional association of SAES directors, will not provide any funding to a project or committee. That is the policy.

7. What guidance should I give to a committee meeting?
The Administrative Advisor must take direct responsibility for at least helping to set the agenda (done with the technical committee's chair and the USDA/NIFA representative, if the Administrative Advisor is not doing it directly). This self-initiative is needed primarily for timeliness, as well as the need to insist that the agenda's organization addresses the

objectives of the Multistate Research Project. This is not to say that the Chair or the Executive Committee of the project (no matter how it is organized) should be excluded from the decision making process. It is just that the Administrative Advisor must not let so much time pass that a poorly organized or poorly attended meeting will result.

Care must be taken to schedule time for planning new activities (by the project's objective) and to carefully review and evaluate the progress that is being made. The Administrative Advisor can draft an agenda for response from others, incorporate their ideas, and revise the agenda. Simply waiting for others to initiate the process of agenda setting does not work, in most cases. The Administrative Advisor must take responsibility for this activity.

Sometimes it is worthwhile for the Administrative Advisor to give consideration to inviting a special guest speaker. This individual might be someone from a complimentary scientific discipline; an expert on an important and relevant topic; or some other source of information that may be inspiring or informative to the technical committee's member-scientists. When this is done it is often paid for by charging participants a registration fee sufficient to cover the expense of the special speaker (see previous Q & A). General agreement should be sought on the invitation by the Administrative Advisor, but not to the point of jeopardizing the acceptance by delays.

8. What do I need to know about taking meeting minutes?
It is no longer required under the provisions of the National Multistate Research Guidelines that minutes of all Multistate Research Project meetings be prepared. However, it is a good idea to keep minutes, even if just the attendance and decisions made. This record keeping can be done through NIMSS, as content in the SAES-422. It is expected that the Administrative Advisor will oversee this requirement and additionally distribute them to the OED.

Additional Note: The minutes of an activity's meeting are an important record of all decisions that have been made. They can also be used to record the consensus that is developed by the project's participants. The Administrative Advisor can use the minutes to study patterns of poor attendance, which should be followed up with a phone call from the Administrative Advisor to ask why the "no shows" did not attend. Encouragement should be given to them to attend future meetings, or at least identify the conflicts contributing to their poor attendance.

9. What do I need to do about annual reporting?
Filing a completed SAES-422 fulfills the NIFA requirements for the annual report. Previously the annual report was submitted separately from the meeting minutes. SAES-422 has combined these two reporting requirements into one report.

10. Do I need to report project expenditures?
Multistate Research funds expended by each Station must be reported annually on Form AD-419, which is due at CRIS by February 1. Check the CRIS website for the updated schedule (http://cris.NIFA.usda.gov/reports/schedule.html). This is done by the participating Station Directors. Follow-up by the project's Administrative Advisor is admittedly difficult inasmuch as he or she is almost always out of the reporting "loop."

11. How do I judge a project's health?
As in any human endeavor, some projects are healthier than are others. Identifying a weak Multistate Research Project or Coordinating Committee is the responsibility of the Administrative Advisor, inasmuch as he or she is in the best position to decide whether an activity is too sick to continue. There are some vital signs that can be taken by the Administrative Advisor to check a project's health status.

Attendance patterns by participating scientists, the Administrative Advisor, and the NIFA Representative are strong indicators of the project's health. When attendance begins to decline a clear warning sign should be recognized by the Administrative Advisor and the causes quickly identified.

The Administrative Advisor should be in a position to judge the practical worth of Multistate Research Project or Multistate Coordinating Committee. If it is not worthwhile, consideration should be given to either redirection or termination.

Another indicator of a Multistate Research Project or Multistate Coordinating Committee's health is the willingness and success of individual participating scientists in seeking additional financial support for the activities of the activity. As noted earlier, supplemental funding is often key to a project's success. Publications are another indication of an activity's success, and the patterns of authorship of these publications will indicate the degree of collaboration that is taking place within the activity. Independent activities are often reflected in single-authored publications, and this should be taken as a warning sign.

When a Director is assigned a Multistate Research Project as the new Administrative Advisor it is strongly recommended that she or he review the project's history, especially with the former Administrative Advisor and with the NIFA Representative. The new Administrative Advisor should evaluate previous decisions that have been made, and check to see if the objectives match the priorities and the plans of the Multistate Research Project or Coordinating Committee. Unhealthy projects often are not on target with respect to their objectives.

Sound judgment by the Administrative Advisor is often necessary to either regain the activity's health, or to perform the actions necessary to end its life.

12. Are there any fixes available for a sick activity?
If you, an Administrative Advisor, are confronting some difficult choices regarding the health of an activity, it is sometimes advisable to call in additional expertise for their advice. This could be done through an external review commissioned by NIFA or by NERA.
The review team's terms of reference could be: to assess the quality of science; to evaluate the accomplishments of the project; or to look at the project's management, to see what the problems are, and to recommend solutions.

It is the responsibility of the Administrative Advisor to be the "eyes and ears" of the Region's Directors, as the Administrative Advisor is the person in the best position to decide if a project is in trouble and if troubled, the Administrative Advisor should initiate some corrective action. Ignoring obvious difficulties in a Multistate Research Project or Coordinating Committee serves no purpose.

13. What do I do when a project comes up for termination?
A Multistate Research Project normally has a life of five years with the scheduled termination on September 30 (i.e., the end of the Federal Fiscal Year). This scheduled termination is automatic unless some intervention is exercised. Interventions, as noted earlier, may be a request to revise, or to terminate an activity early.

When a project is terminating, it is the Administrative Advisor's responsibility to see that a final SAES-422 report is prepared that summarize the accomplishments of an activity. The Administrative Advisor may oversee the arrangements for this SAES-422 termination report, or he or she may become directly involved in its preparation.

The SAES-422 termination report should, in effect, communicate a project's research achievements measured as results, outcomes, impacts, and benefits to a project's sponsors and stakeholders. These measures should reflect the resource investments that have been expended on the Multistate Research Project. Careful attention to this requirement is the responsibility of the Administrative Advisor.

NIMSS will greatly facilitate the reporting of the activity's accomplishments, but gathering the information and getting it entered is still a major task. The Administrative Advisor is in the best position to have the motivation and the authority to initiate such an activity.

14.How long does it take to renew an activity?
A successful activity (either a formal project or coordinating committee) may want to renew itself, with a new set of objectives (this presumes you were successful in completing the last set of objectives). To renew a formal Multistate Research Project a new project proposal must be developed and approved. This takes about 18 to 20 months (See Appendix D), and thus early starts are necessary to avoid last minute crushes. Before beginning to draft a renewal a "request to write" must be approved by NERA the membership. Renewals of a Multistate Research Project must include a "Critical Review", which summarizes the accomplishments of the current activities.

Multistate Coordinating Committees usually take less time to renew, but starting a year in advance of an activity's termination is recommended. To initiate the process the Administrative Advisor should obtain agreement from the committee that they wish to renew. Then a request to write needs to be approved by the association. From there the process goes from proposal development to peer review, and finally NERA membership approval.

Many of these processes are facilitated by NIMSS, and electronic reviews and approvals are acceptable. However, in the most usual cases the NERA members want to review and approve projects and committees at their winter meeting, for initiation the next October 1. Working backward a Multistate Research Project's renewal should thus begin in the middle of its third year, and a Multistate Coordinating Committee should begin the process before the end of its fourth year. Leaving the renewal process to the ending months of an activity will usually result in its termination. Being late and then requesting an extension to allow for drafting a renewal proposal will be denied by NERA. Extensions of projects are allowed only for completing an activity’s objectives.