

To: Sea Grant Directors

From: Leon Cammen

Subject: Program Alignment Review Follow-up

We have now finished the first round of review of the strategic planning alignment documents submitted in May. In reviewing your program plans and alignment documents, it is clear that significant time and effort went into the program planning alignment process. Thank you again for your submissions. This is a critical component of the new planning, implementation and evaluation process, and an important step for the Sea Grant network.

As a reminder of why it is so important we do this together, the recent National Research Council review of Sea Grant stated that “steps should be taken ...to strengthen strategic planning at both the national and individual program level. The strategic plans of the individual programs and the national program should represent a coordinated and collective effort to serve local, regional, and national needs.” The report went on to state that we should “ensure that the performance of each program is measured against the objectives outlined in the separately approved, program specific strategic plan called for in the previous recommendation.”

The purpose of this alignment process, therefore, is threefold: (1) to ensure all Program plans align with the national plan; (2) to ensure that program plans are ambitious with challenging goals and milestones, while meeting benchmarks of effective planning documents; and (3) to establish at the outset of the planning cycle a formal agreement between the program and the NSGO that the Plan is acceptable and meets Sea Grant national planning criteria and standards.

To summarize the outcome of the June alignment review, your programs generally did an excellent job of aligning to the national plan, while also clearly outlining direction over the next four years through strategies, outcomes, measurable objectives, performance measures and targets. This information will assist the network by enabling Sea Grant to articulate the quality and quantity of performance that can be expected. It will also serve as a useful guide in evaluating your progress in meeting your program’s own goals and objectives.

What follows below is some additional detail on the alignment review process and some lessons learned that should help those of you still developing your plans.

Alignment Review Process

As you know, the state program plan alignment review took place over a two-day period on June 11th and 12th. Three National Sea Grant Advisory Board members served on the planning alignment review committee: the Board Chair, Dick West; the Vice-Chair, John Woeste; and, the Board lead for strategic planning, John Byrne. Each member of the alignment review committee led discussion and provided recommendations and comments for approximately one-third of the programs, and each reviewer was

familiar with all of the state program alignment documents. Taking into account the size and resources of each program, the committee addressed the following three questions for each plan in order to recommend either approval or needed modifications to the National Sea Grant College Program (NSGCP) Director:

- (1) Does the program adequately support the national plan?
- (2) Is the program devoting a significant portion of its resources towards supporting one or more of the focus areas of the national plan?
- (3) Relative to other programs, is this plan ambitious—does the plan set challenging goals and ambitious milestones given the amount of resources dedicated to the overall program?

The committee reviewed the alignment documents (Phase I and Phase II alignment packages) in order of small programs to large programs (based on the program's overall self-reported resources). Program officers were available to answer questions from the review committee and to provide any additional input, if necessary.

Through this planning alignment review exercise, there were some common concerns that were identified in many of the plans. These are summarized in the attached appendix. This information is intended to assist those programs who have: (1) not submitted planning materials; (2) submitted only draft versions of their planning materials; or, (3) for those programs that may need to resubmit their planning materials. Please note that you will also be receiving a separate memo specific to the results of your own program's alignment review.

As we move forward, please remember that plans are living documents, and there is a process for modifying plans in the case of unforeseen events. Similarly to what is stated in the national plan, each Sea Grant program may revisit its plan and priorities to ensure that the organization is maintaining focus, staying alert to new trends and opportunities, and accomplishing outcomes. As your programs find new opportunities, please communicate them to your program officer. That said, you should not undertake the planning process with the intent to make frequent changes to the plan during its lifespan. Modifications to plans are not intended to be routine, but, when deemed necessary, will be formally submitted every year through the annual report, and must be approved by the NSGCP Director with input from the program officer.

The next alignment review process will take place on **Tuesday, October 20th, 2009**. All program alignment documents must be submitted to your program officer no later than **Friday, October 2nd, 2009**. Upon approval of all state Sea Grant program plans, which will likely take place this fall, all program planning alignment documents will be posted on the National Sea Grant College Program website. This includes the state plans (the Sea Grant program strategic/implementation plans), and the alignment documents that show how the state plans are aligned to the national plan. We will not post the program-by-program resource allocation funding. But, we will post the program-by program percentages and the national totals and percentages.

Please keep in mind that all program plans must be aligned and approved before the release of 2010 funds.

Thank you again for your hard work. You are each to be congratulated for doing your part to make Sea Grant a success. I look forward to working together as we continue to move this program forward!

APPENDIX

Through the Spring Alignment Review exercise, there were some common concerns identified with many of the plans, which are summarized below:

- **Objectives and performance measures should be measurable** – An overarching concern is that many of the proposed measures or objectives were not really measurable and would not be useful for self-evaluation. The questions that need to be asked for each measure are: “Can we use this measure or objective to tell us if a project or a program is making adequate progress, and when it is completed can we tell whether it has been successful or not?” A few examples of good objectives that lend themselves well to are below:
 - By 2013, three communities have implemented sustainable practices due to information, training, or assistance provided by Sea Grant and its partners.
 - Through 2013, 20 coastal communities will enact legislation, or incorporate into comprehensive plans, actions to encourage the maintenance or expansion of coastal/marine-dependent businesses.
 - By 2012, Sea Grant will develop and transfer the remote sensing aspects of surface circulation data to three regional coastal ocean observing systems which use the model.
 - Between 2009 – 2013, Sea Grant Extension personnel will certify 120 graduates of their seafood Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point program.
 - By 2013, Sea Grant-sponsored research will provide at least one new or improved module for improving existing models for Great Lakes fishery management.

- **Use numbers rather than percentages in measurable objectives and performance measures** – All performance measures and objectives that have a percentage need to have a baseline in order to determine success. Please be sure to include the numerator and the denominator, or their equivalent, in all measures or objectives that contain percentages. This also will allow us to roll measures up to the national level, something we cannot do with percentages.

- **Think globally, act locally** – Some programs reiterated the national plan strategies and outcomes as their state plan strategies and outcomes. Although this is acceptable, it should be understood that programs may develop distinct strategies and outcomes that are relevant to your states and regions, and should not feel compelled to use the national language. Programs should have strategies and outcomes that work locally and align with (not necessarily match) the national program.

- **Program Advisory Boards** – Throughout the two-day review discussion, the value of the contribution from state program advisory boards was mentioned often. Programs should ensure that their planning documents have been vetted and approved by their advisory boards.

- **Importance of the alignment letter and the “program comments” column** – Programs that took the time to write thorough alignment letters that explained their planning and alignment processes and articulated why certain decisions were made, enabled the committee to better understand the rationale behind the structure of the alignment documents. The same is true for programs that took advantage of the “program comments” column.
- **Quantity and level of objectives and performance measures** – A number of programs provided numerous objectives and performance measures that were primarily measuring outputs, not outcomes. Although these may be useful at the program level, this level of detail is not necessary for this exercise. Programs who wish to maintain a high level of detail are certainly welcome to do so; but, please keep in mind that you will need to report back on this information. If your program wishes to scale back the quantity of measures and objectives, and instead focus on those that will provide a strong outcome story, please work with your program officer to reduce your objectives and performance measures.
- **Additional focus areas** – Although the National plan contains marine literacy as a cross-cutting goal, several programs chose to include it as a separate focus area. Although that is allowable, it does present problems in rolling up our focus areas into a national summary since not all programs have separated out their education efforts. If you decide to treat marine literacy as a separate focus area, we will ask you at a later date to provide us with an estimate of how the funds that support those activities could be accounted for in the other four focus areas. In addition, it will also be useful to know the level of the cross-cutting educational activities in the programs that have not treated literacy as a separate focus area. Having this information available both ways will allow us to tell the national story not only from the perspective of our four focus areas (including the appropriate educational activities that support them), but also from the perspective of education on its own merit.
- **Leveraged Funds** – As part of the alignment process, programs were asked to estimate the leveraged funds expected over the course of the four-year implementation period. However, some programs did not include this information. The estimates of leveraged funding will be rolled up to provide an estimate of overall national program resources to make the point that Sea Grant is much more than just what the Federal appropriation would buy. Having only partial information weakens the argument. We understand that some of the expected leveraged funds may not materialize, but a “good-faith” estimate is still useful.