

Comments that Dick West received on his Preliminary Study of the Panel and Sea Grant  
(Distributed to the NSGRP on Thursday, August 16, 2007 by email from Nat Robinson)

Dick West is gathering information from Administration, Congressional, OMB, Panel, SGA and other sources for the purpose of identifying options and developing recommendations on the Panel role and for improving Sea Grant. Below is a summary of comments received that will be discussed during the Panel's fall semiannual meeting in San Diego. Note that these comments are not prioritized and are in no particular order.

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1. A major challenge defined for us that I think we need to address. Yes, put it on the agenda and allow ample time. The short statement lays open relevant sensitive issues that have not been discussed. Hopefully, the prompt will enable us to openly and critically tackle the issues identified.
2. Aside from individual state pride issues, currently there is no formal competition between State programs. It has been strongly argued – mainly by the SGA, but also by the Panel and NSGO – that a state to state competition is inappropriate and would be counterproductive. The Sea Grant Colleges, although subject to decertification policy when needed, are setup as permanent organizations, even though their research funding has been highly competitive.
3. The objective in the past decade has been to “raise the bar” of productivity and excellence of the Sea Grant Colleges. From what I have seen, this level has been improved significantly in most cases as a direct result of the PAT review process.....noting, however, that in some instances, certain Sea Grant Colleges were already "world-class" in 1994.
4. The funding issue you raise is impressive. Yes, some of the increase has been due to NOAA itself, especially some of the past five years. What I observe is that the funding increases were due in large part to Ron Baird's fighting for every dollar. In this he utilized the Panel and the SGA up on the Hill, as well as his own testifying before Congress, OMB and NOAA. As a former corporate executive, I cannot help but notice that - [the national needs of the Iraq war aside] - since Ron's retirement, the funding has gone down. For whatever reason, as you observe, there has been little major effort to increase Sea Grant's budget in the past two years.
5. Your point, the Panel turn over matter, is important. Panel recruitment and turnover occurred, but was apparently not a high priority in Ron Baird's singly focused efforts to improve the individual Sea Grant programs, and increase funding. I got the sense that Ron faced so many serious crises and dilemmas during his tenure, that when he had an effective Panel in place, he was often tempted to extend their time to assist him. I note that Leon said at the meeting we had at CORE that he did not intend to use the Panel the way Ron did.
6. Your point that NOAA's budget has doubled over the last ten years while Sea Grant has remained flat is very accurate. I thought about this a lot and I think there are two principal reasons for this. First, in the past the SGA has given a very mixed message to Congress. They talked to the Congressional members about increasing the budget but they also

complain about the National Office overhead rates, the Panel, etc. As you state, this mixed message or “Congressional confusion” gives Congress an opportunity to put things aside. Secondly, I think there is a significant internal problem in NOAA for support of Sea Grant. The status and reward structure for managers in NOAA is to value dollars and personnel totally under their control. Passing money to Sea Grant does not represent dollars and personal under this contract.

7. Competition. You again are right on target with this comment. Our Executive Committee has made visits to OMB and been told point blank they want to see competition within Sea Grant. We followed up with a detailed letter (a document that was prepared, and forwarded under Peter Bell’s signature as our Panel Chair at the time), demonstrating the competition for research grants that take place. This helped, but OMB came back and was strongly critical that the programs themselves are not competed nor is it administration and outreach.

This is the reason that the Panel’s Program Evaluation Committee recommended that a recertification process take place every second or third review cycle. As you state, OMB and the administration is pushing for competition and does not look favorably on Sea Grant when a significant portion is not recompeted. The Panel’s Program Evaluation Committee had suggested a recompetition process that would not be over burdensome to programs and strong programs with a long history would compete very well. This is one of the three remaining Cycle 1 recommendations from the Panel that former Director Ron Baird asked to be held till after the NRC Report was completed. Recompetition continues to be on the table. I think we need to continue to discuss this.

8. Better competing for public funds. Again, I think you are right on target with this topic. As part of the Science Advisory Board I’ve been continuing to raise the question with Connie regarding overall impact in a State by NOAA. Our Sea Grant Programs get funds from other parts of NOAA. The universities get funds from other parts of NOAA. No one collectively looks at the impact of NOAA on a particular state and how those programs can be combined and levered to be more effective. If they did this I think there would be a great opportunity for greater local support for both NOAA and Sea Grant.
9. The subject of friction between the program office, the SGA and the NSGRP is an important issue. The principal client of the Sea Grant Program is the American public and the SGA members are the grant recipients and the NSGRP is the independent Federal Advisory Board. I think these are important distinctions and the current close relationship between the National Sea Grant Office and the SGA and separation from the Panel is troubling.
10. I think systematic turnover of Panel membership should routinely occur. However, I think this is a “red herring” raised by the SGA and another item that is causing Congressional confusion. Carping on this issue before Congress shows the disconnect between the National Office, the Panel and the Programs and is not supportive of a well coordinated program that deserves more money. Our message to Congress should be: 1) up the numbers to a \$100 million. There is no number 2.
11. You are absolutely right about a timely response to the NRC Report. I’ve been raising this issue since day 1. Congress required NOAA to perform the NRC study, Sea Grant spent

\$570,000 through February on the study and it is now about approximately 13 months since the report was issued.

12. A critical issue associated with the NRC Report is the level of administrative funding. Leon has asked in his reauthorization draft for administrative cap to be increased to 7% or \$4 million. This would be an increase from \$2.6 million currently to \$4 million or almost 54%. Based on the reauthorization conference calls with the SGA, I don't think there is any way the SGA is going to support this and at best Leon will get an increase from 5% to 6%. If this is all he gets, and based on the marks for next years budget, the response to the NRC report should be structured on realistic resource and staffing expectations (i.e., 6% administrative cap).
13. In terms of working relationship between the Review Panel and the NSGO and the SGA, these things normally were hammered out or attempted to be hammered out during a retreat. I strongly recommend a Leadership Retreat to try and improve and resolve these relationships.
14. I finally had a chance to read this—interesting—these problems have been dogging Sea Grant for a long time—I would add that since Sea Grant's inception, its importance within any university hierarchy has gone way down. When Sea Grant was first established, the SG directors were many times Provosts of universities—now these appointments are rather low level—and thus SG has a low profile in the university compared to Land Grant for example.

The Sea Grant directors are extremely parochial in their view of the world—and this is allowed/encouraged by the panel and the NSGO through the evaluation process. There is little recognition of the matching dollars and the amount of leverage because the national office sees this as a dilution of their influence—rather than a leveraging of their investment. Also—there is little to no connectivity between SG and the rest of NOAA—how is SG involved in the Research Council—for example.

15. Your points regarding the major challenges facing SG (three parties pulling in different directions and the perception of a non-competitive program) have been recognized for many years. Your report might be strengthened if, in addition to highlighting these areas of concern, you were able to recommend a process to systematically address both of these areas toward the goal of a “fix.”
16. A very interesting read that makes some very good points. I'll be curious how it is received by NSGRP and NSGO. May I share this with the SGA board? I look forward to working to bring SGA to the table for these types of discussions. In some ways, our current work on reauthorization has brought SGA and NSGRP together in a collaborative way. Even though there may be some disagreements on details, we are all engaged in that discussion and it's a good example of how we should all be working together for the greater good of Sea Grant.
17. I would add to Dick's list of concerns regarding the lack of increase in Sea Grant funding the matter of integration with other NOAA programs closely related to the coastal zone, e.g. OCRM.

