



January 19, 2012

To: Sea Grant Directors and National Sea Grant Advisory Board Members
From: Leon Cammen 
Subject: 2012 Performance Review Panel

Thank you for taking the time to provide your concerns and advice regarding the 2012 Performance Review Panel (PRP). Your input is always welcome, and we appreciate the feedback and support you have provided in the development of the PIE process. We all recognize the importance of a strong partnership between the SGA, the Advisory Board, and the NSGO as we work toward the most effective and efficient National Sea Grant College Program possible. And we all recognize the need for a rigorous and credible evaluation process, particularly in this difficult budget climate.

The revised PRP guidance and timeline that accompanies this message reflect adjustments made in response to the discussions at this Fall's SGA and Advisory Board meetings, to the concerns and suggestions offered by the Focus Teams during their annual reviews in November, and to the recommendations in the SGA letter of October 18 (attached). Those discussions and the SGA letter highlighted general concerns with the quality of the material to be reviewed, the timing of the review, and the ability of our staff and information management system to support a successful review at this time. In addition, there were questions regarding the rating process and whether it was appropriate to place Programs in competition with each other. We share your concern with these questions and have taken a hard look at the draft process and timing with an eye toward ensuring that this review is credible, efficient, and transparent.

Reports and Summary Material

Many of the concerns with the PRP revolve around the process itself and our ability to support such a comprehensive review. The PIER information management system has improved by leaps and bounds since the October SGA meeting and we are confident that the system will be able to provide the material needed to support the PRP in a timely and professional manner. However, two problems have emerged with the information that has been entered into PIER that will need to be addressed before the review proceeds.

The first problem is that there may be too much information for the Panel to be able to review in a thoughtful and thorough manner. Since 2008 when we began asking you to provide information to NIMS and then later to PIER, you have made available a truly impressive set of impacts and accomplishments; in fact, for some Programs, the draft PRP reports run well over 200 pages without even including anything from 2011. However, reviewing that amount of information for over 30 Programs would provide a significant challenge to the PRP.

The second problem, noted during the Focus Team reviews, concerns the lack of consistent quality across the Network in the impacts that have been entered. Writing concise but revealing impacts is not an easy task and the difficulty has been compounded by having to deal with a new and evolving data management system at the same time. As a result, many of the 2008 and 2009 impacts and accomplishments, and some of those from 2010, are not ready for presentation to an external review team. In addition, some of the information that should have been included for 2010 is missing or incomplete from some of the reports.

To address these problems, the following actions will be taken:

- 1) Impacts and accomplishments entered for 2008 and 2009 prior to the start of the new four-year plan will not be included in the PRP reports. Instead, the supplementary Program Summary Report document will be expanded from 10 pages to 20 pages and that will be the primary mode of communicating your Programs' overall impact for 2008 and 2009. These changes will have the desired effect of significantly reducing the amount of information the PRP will need to review and the ancillary benefit of eliminating the need for the (in many cases) extensive editing of older impacts that would have taken a great deal of time and been solely for the PRP review.
- 2) Impacts and accomplishments entered for 2010 will be available for editing and you will be able to designate any that you do not want forwarded to the PRP. The 2011 impacts that will be entered later this spring should not need editing. Since the 2010/2011 impacts will be available for the PRP, it may not be necessary to discuss them as extensively in the Program Impact Summary as for the 2008/2009 impacts, but that is, of course, up to you.
- 3) To aid in preparing the Program Summary Report, we have included guidance in Appendix C that is intended to ensure a level playing field among the Programs and to help the PRP focus in on the content rather than the presentation.

Draft PIER reports have been available since shortly after last Fall's SGA meeting, and hopefully your concerns about the system have been alleviated. We are continuing to make improvements to the reports, so if there are still issues with PIER or the PRP report, please let us know.

Ratings and Competition

We followed up the PRP discussion at last year's Sea Grant Week by asking for your opinion as to how much weight should be given to evaluating "progress toward your plan" relative to that for "overall impact," and there was a clear sense that for this first PRP, overall impact should receive more emphasis than proposed. The initial suggestion had been 80% progress / 20% impact, but based on your response, the weighting was changed to 50% progress / 50% impact. That weighting still seems reasonable. In addition, there was consensus that at least four years of performance should be included in the "overall impact" assessment so the rating will be based on the 2008 to 2011 reporting period.

Some concern was expressed that the PRP process places Programs in direct competition with one another, violating one of the concepts of the PIE system. While we all understand that we need to have a rigorous evaluation system and that there are sponsors who take that to mean "competitive," the primary goal of this process is to provide formative evaluation that will continually improve individual Programs and the National Sea Grant College Program as a whole. The PRP guidance has been changed to better reflect the concept that all Programs could potentially receive outstanding ratings and that it is not necessary for one Program to do worse in order for another to do better.

PRP Membership

The suggestion was made that for this first PRP, the National Sea Grant Office (NSGO) staff could carry out the review rather than an external panel of experts. While we appreciate the confidence that shows in our staff, we feel it is important that the PRP be conducted through an external panel of experts for several reasons. First, it is worth remembering that an NSGO review was integral to the PAT process, but the National Research Council (2006), in consultation with the SGA, recommended that the NSGO be removed from the Program rating process. Second, at this point, the NSGO does not have the breadth or

depth of expertise to carry out a thorough subject-specific review of the Sea Grant Programs. And as you noted, resources (particularly staff time) are in short supply; it is much more efficient to facilitate the PRP than to carry out the entire review. Third, external reviews are required for all grants, and they carry significantly more credibility than an internal performance review. Therefore, NSGO staff plan to facilitate the PRP and act as neutral providers of information to the Panel. We appreciate your recommendations of PRP members, and encourage you to expand the list beyond former NSGAB or SGA members.

Timing

The question has been raised of whether we need to have a PRP this year. Why not just wait until late in 2015 when we will have completed the initial four-year cycle? The most recent comprehensive review of the Sea Grant Program was the series of Program Assessment Team site visits held from 2003 to 2006. Waiting until 2015 for the first PRP would mean that many Programs would not have had a rigorous, comprehensive evaluation for over a decade! To put that in perspective, over the 12-year period from 2003 to 2015, the Sea Grant Program will have spent over \$700M in appropriated funds with another \$350M or so in matching funds; counting the leveraged funds that you are making use of, the total probably exceeds \$1.5 billion. Given the magnitude of the funds we are being entrusted with, taking a few weeks to evaluate our performance every four years would seem to be a reasonable course of action, especially when we are trying to make a credible argument that we're not a block grant program.

In addition, we are still in the transition phase of the PIE system, and program evaluation with the PRP is a core aspect of the new system. As many of you point out, we need to try it out, take advantage of the strengths that the PRP approach offers, and identify any shortcomings so they can be addressed prior to the next time, in 2015.

Why is the PRP taking place only two years into the new four-year cycle? Ideally, the performance evaluation should occur soon after the completion of your four-year plans. However, given the lag between actually doing the work and seeing the impact, and the frequent no-cost extensions needed to complete projects that fall behind schedule, it made sense to have the PRP two years after the scheduled completion of the award. Currently, though, we are in a transition period, only halfway through the first four-year cycle, and for most issues it is too soon to know what the final impact of your Program's actions will be. But the PRP should be able to determine whether or not your Program is making adequate progress toward achieving the goals laid out in your four-year plan.

Finally, in order to give you time to accommodate the adjustments to the PRP process that have been outlined here (expanded Program Impact Summary, editing of FY2010 impacts and accomplishments, supplying missing or incomplete information), in addition to submitting a strong 2011 Annual Report, the 2012 PRP will be moved from June to October 2012. The additional time will give us time to resolve these issues to facilitate a review process that will reflect favorably on the Sea Grant Program.

Conclusion

The PRP review is a major step for the Sea Grant Program. It will be the first time that all Programs have been evaluated at the same time by the same group of individuals. As recognized and supported by the SGA and NSGAB, the 2012 and subsequent PRP ratings will affect merit funding and that is as it should be, so it is important that we do this right. To help ensure that we are adequately and appropriately evaluating Programs, we will ask the PRP to assess the entire process once the final reports are released.

We appreciate your thoughts and as always invite your comments and suggestions.