



American Society of Plant Biologists

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April 27, 2010

Dr. Roger Beachy
Director
National Institute of Food and Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Federal Building; Room 305-A
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Dr. Beachy:

I am writing on behalf of the American Society of Plant Biologists (ASPB) and its membership, which – as you well know – includes a preponderance of scientists whose research interests tend toward fundamental discovery but also many researchers whose work collectively spans the continuum from fundamental plant science to its applications in the field. Due to the interest of our membership, ASPB has been an ardent and long-term supporter of competitive research funding by the United States Department of Agriculture, as well as by other agencies. We recognize and support the notion that, to conform to the Department's overall mission, USDA-funded research must span the bench-to-field continuum.

Furthermore, ASPB endorses the recent restructuring of the USDA's research portfolio and the progressive and ambitious stances that are emerging as a result. Our membership is very supportive of the recent increases in funding for AFRI competitive research programs, and we are especially encouraged by the efforts of this Administration to significantly increase future funding. We understand the practical and political needs to see clear outputs deriving from the Department's research funding portfolio, as well as the establishment of more programs that are jointly conceived and run by the USDA and other federal science agencies. We also support efforts to provide rigorous peer-review to both the extramural and intramural programs at USDA to ensure their relevance and continued future success.

However, since the release of the highly anticipated RFA under the new AFRI research structure, I and others in the ASPB leadership have been fielding many messages of concern from ASPB members in the university and ARS communities, although there is also much to be excited about.

Among these very positive elements, we fully endorse the focus on the goals outlined in the NRC "New Biology" report that are strongly highlighted in the RFA. Indeed, we have conveyed our strong support for this report during our meetings in Washington, in part due to the fact that this report envisions many

areas in which plant biology research will enable progress toward solving the Grand Challenges it lays out.

The (pending) seventh component of the RFA also promises increased fellowship support for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, which is so important to ensure the future health of the plant and agricultural research endeavor by selecting and encouraging the brightest students to pursue agriculturally-relevant studies.

We note that the RFA strongly endorses the coordinated agricultural project (CAP) model that had been used successfully in the past for crop-centric projects. The idea of a fully integrated effort to tackle problems of critical national importance is compelling. However, in our view, not all of the past CAP projects were highly successful, and some suffered from issues of effective management and a lack of sufficient funds to provide critical mass once divided across so many participants. It is clear that the success of these CAP grants will require active participation of current AFRI program staff to gauge progress, to address problems that might arise, and to ensure that goals are being met. One of our major concerns is that the already over-worked AFRI program staff will be unable to provide sufficient oversight given the large increase in the number and scope of CAP awards reflected in the current RFA. We note that this issue does not seem to have been addressed in the RFA or any of the recent public statements made by NIFA personnel.

As I indicated, our membership has conveyed a number of other issues, as well as questions, that we would like to bring to your attention. Our intent is to share these with you in the spirit of cooperation and with a view toward influencing your thinking as planning for the next RFA begins in due course.

First, there is significant unease about the small amount of funding available for foundational research programs. We understand that NIFA's intent is to grow this program in future years and we expect that to happen. However, there is some concern regarding the prospects for significant increases in future funding given the current fiscal climate. Yet basic research is the intellectual engine that drives the more applied outcomes that are so important to the USDA mission. As such, ASPB feels that at the same time USDA expands programs for large scale integrated bench-to-field projects, it is vital for AFRI to maintain a broad, stable research enterprise. Although we often hear calls for greater support of 'innovative' and 'impactful' research, clearly paradigm shifting discoveries cannot be predicted or engineered. Hence, the only way to ensure that such discoveries occur is to continue to provide robust and growing support for foundational research by individual investigators.

The AFRI RFA released on March 21 offers very specific guidance organized around the six priority areas identified by Secretary Vilsack. No doubt the purpose of this specific language was to provide guidance to avoid confusion over the goals of these new programs and to ensure that submitted proposals were relevant and complete. However, an unintended outcome is that the guidance is focused so narrowly that it seems to preclude a large number of fundamental scientists from submitting proposals. This narrow focus also tends to limit the kind of creative and innovative research described above that frequently leads to novel findings and unanticipated connections and advances. This is of particular concern regarding more junior investigators. Indeed, the cynical view is that the RFAs are written so

narrowly that only a few institutions are targeted for support. Although we fully understand that this is not the intent, leaving this false impression in the community undermines support for the larger, progressive goals of NIFA.

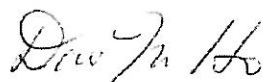
Although we appreciate the effort made by you and the department to explain the bigger picture in which the 2010 AFRI RFA should be placed during your webcast on March 22, we would appreciate seeing similar outreach efforts throughout this process. Indeed, ASPB stands ready to help in that endeavor and, at a minimum, we'd be delighted to publish both this letter and your response to it – in addition (of course) to the support work we have been doing for the NIFA/AFRI Stakeholders' Workshop that was held in Washington, DC on April 13.

To conclude, we believe that NIFA funding should accomplish at least two goals. To be sure, it should seek solutions to the pressing issues outlined in the six priority areas, a goal that is well addressed in the current RFA. However, a second and larger goal should be to maintain a robust and sustainable US agricultural research enterprise, one that is both poised and adequately resourced to address future challenges. In our view, the narrow focus of the current RFA and its emphasis on large, multi-institution projects does not provide the basis for addressing this second goal.

We hope that AFRI will structure its review panels for proposals that are submitted this year in a manner that can address these concerns. We hope, too, that Congress will see fit to grant President Obama's request for AFRI in the FY 2011 budget, and we will continue to work diligently in support of that objective – and also to offer whatever assistance you may wish in the event that FY 2011 budgetary exigencies oblige you to revise your plans for AFRI's next major RFA.

Finally, we recognize that AFRI and NIFA face a lot of challenges in getting up and running. Meeting these challenges illustrates how much more money is needed for research, and we hope the Administration continues to view AFRI as a worthy endeavor and requests significant funding increases bringing the program to the authorized level of \$700 million in due course.

Sincerely,



Tuan-hua David Ho

President, ASPB

Washington University in St. Louis