



Healthy Plants • Healthy World

AFRI Stakeholder Meeting Comments February 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to present comments at this 2012 Stakeholder Meeting. I am Angela Records, and I am here to represent The American Phytopathological Society (APS) in my capacity as the APS Public Policy Fellow.

Founded in 1908, APS is the premier educational, professional, and scientific society dedicated to the promotion of plant health and plant disease management for the global good. The Society represents nearly 5,000 scientists whose work advances the understanding of the science of plant diseases and its application to plant health. The APS has served as an unbiased resource on plant health for USDA and other Federal agencies for many years. The progress made in plant health programs in the United States through support of research, teaching, and extension from Federal, state and private sources has facilitated the sustainability and profitability of America's plant production industries.

APS supports many of the broad areas of endeavor funded through the AFRI program.

- APS fully supports placing a priority on improved opportunities for education and training of undergraduate and graduate students and postdoctoral scientists as we continue to be concerned about the lack of adequately trained plant pathologists to fill future job needs of industry, academia, and the government.
 - In fact, a coalition of industry and scientific societies called CSAW (the Coalition for a Sustainable Agricultural Workforce) has formed to press this issue.
- APS applauds the vision of AFRI to support fundamental and practical research in food safety – particularly funding that includes collaborations between food microbiologists and plant pathologists.
 - In February, 2012, a group of 130 plant pathologists and food safety experts met to identify research priorities that will address the association of human pathogens with plants, and find solutions to food contamination problems. This very successful meeting was funded by USDA-NIFA.
- APS supports AFRI investments in strengthening agriculture's role in meeting our nation's future food and energy needs with consideration of our changing global environment.

APS realizes the difficulty of meeting these challenges with a constrained budget. The APS has long been a robust proponent of increased funding for research, extension, and education programs at the USDA, and particularly the competitive programs such as AFRI. We have supported the investments into the science of genomics, microbial communities, microbial-plant associations, plant biosecurity, bioenergy, and food safety as each of these became priorities.

Recognizing the funding constraints...

- We urge that AFRI continue to involve the plant health community in identifying priorities and facilitating recognition of the best science.

- We ask AFRI to further invigorate the important Foundational programs that permit individuals or small teams to focus their creativity on our most pressing agricultural problems. We recognize that funding of the large CAP programs brings diverse communities of scientists together and that this focus has the potential to solve important problems. *However, the novel science funded by the Foundational programs is essential to maintaining our nation's edge in agricultural sciences.*
- We also urge AFRI to increase emphasis on enhancing our understanding of the interactions between human pathogens, plants, and the environment, and that this be included in the Food Safety Request for Applications (RFAs).
- We urge AFRI to also include expanded opportunities for research designed to increase our understanding of microbial communities.
- While we understand that the Section 406 Integrated Program for food safety has been moved into the AFRI program, we hope that fundamental and applied integrated projects will continue to be supported. We ask AFRI to engage the scientific community in discussions about improving the peer review process. APS is aware of the increasing difficulty NIFA faces in identifying qualified reviewers to achieve a thorough and fair peer evaluation of proposals. We welcome the opportunity to discuss possible resolutions with agency representatives.
- LASTLY, we ask AFRI to ensure that the requirement for letters of intent – for all proposals other than conference grants – is not used to prioritize proposals without peer review.
 - APS members appreciate the benefits to potential PIs, reviewers and panel members of triaging at the stage of Letters of Intent. However, if triaging is to occur at this stage, then the PIs should be allowed to include more information (maybe 2 pages), and the letters should be reviewed by a small panel of experts. *This will reduce the possibility of eliminating groundbreaking science.*

We were pleased to see, in the recent RFAs, references to the National Research Council document, “A New Biology for the 21st Century: Ensuring the United States Leads the Coming Biology Revolution.” We support the idea that this “New Biology Initiative” should be an interagency effort, with a timeline of at least 10 years, and that its funding be in addition to current research budgets.

In closing, the APS appreciates the efforts underway by the agency to raise the visibility of – and, hopefully, associated funding for – the plant and plant-associated microbe sciences. We thank NIFA for allowing input into AFRI and we appreciate the actions that NIFA has taken in response to previous comments and suggestions from sessions such as this.

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