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Open Letter from the NCPN Governing Board
Guidance on Program Funding Use for 2016/2017

To: See Distribution Below

Discussion:

In this open letter the National Clean Plant Network (NCPN) Governing Board provides guidance to potential applicants under the program's Request for Application and to other stakeholders on several topics: 1) what applicants should specifically consider as they complete the application in Grants.gov and present their work plan, 2) how applications will be evaluated, and 3) future considerations for the upcoming NCPN strategic planning activity.

Since the inception of the National Clean Plant Network (NCPN), USDA has provided about \$30 million through FY 2015, supporting 35 initiatives at 28 cooperators in 19 States. In FY 2015 the Network added sweetpotato and roses to the other supported specialty crops (i.e. fruit trees, grapes, hops, berries, and citrus). Last November, the NCPN Governing Board (NCPN-GB) issued an open letter to stakeholders, providing general guidance on program priorities, funding, and future direction. In January 2015, the Governing Board met to evaluate FY 2015 program funding requests and allocate resources based on the guidance provided and funding availability.

The Governing Board greatly appreciates the fine work being done by all Network members. The Board is especially grateful to everyone who contributed to the annual RFA process, especially those who reviewed pre-proposals submitted through the Tier 2 governing bodies for evaluation. The pre-proposal reviews provided to the NCPN-GB were invaluable and positively influenced final deliberations and subsequent recommendations. Specifically, the pre-proposal reviews gave valuable insights often from the perspective of industry as to how best to direct limited resources towards items of highest need. The Board encourages all the Tier 2 pre-proposal review teams to continue participation in this program discussion and funding prioritization process.

With this letter, the Governing Board again offers guidance for the upcoming FY 2016/2017 funding cycle. The observations made below do not replace guidance from last year but instead augment those earlier observations and is based on subsequent discussions among Board Members after reviewing the FY 2015 applications.

The observations that follow generally build on past themes. Last year, the Governing Board emphasized the development of long-term program plans, supported greater center self-sufficiency, and recommended program funding parameters with a clear focus on needs prioritization.

In this second open letter, the Governing Board provides opinion and recommendations on additional items deemed critical to program sustainability and advancement, as follows:

1) Strategic Planning and Program Long-Term Sustainability – the Big Picture:

Over the next 12-18 months, the Network will review and renew its original 2007 Strategic Plan. NCPN was well served by this plan because it helped to establish a solid foundation for mission and vision while circumscribing the program parameters and providing for guidance in the intervening years.

Last year the Board requested that Tier 2 governing bodies and centers “...*establish basic 5-Year Plans under which program and fiscal needs are projected and communicated initially among each other for prioritization and harmonization; and finally with the Governing Board in support of funding consideration and long-term planning.*” The Board made this request for several reasons:

- 1) Encourage the development of short and long-term planning that identifies, harmonizes, and prioritizes the needs of the ‘specialty crop’ from the perspective of the entire Tier 2 governing body as well as individual centers and programs.
 - 2) Encourage long-term program planning and sustainability by identifying and securing multiple streams of funding so that diverse sources could be available to support critical Network activities.
- **Recommendation:** In anticipation of NCPN national strategic planning, the NCPN-GB again encourages each Tier 2 governing body and associated clean plant centers and programs to engage in planning that encompasses the needs for clean plant activities of that crop and how participating clean plant centers and programs could best satisfy those needs in a harmonized system. The Board anticipates all applicants seeking Network funding to work towards developing such plans and to submit them as an appendix to future applications. The Board notes the following reasons for this request:
 - Planning helps the NCPN-GB, Tier 2 governing bodies, centers and programs to identify boundaries for support and the sources from which such support might come, including both NCPN and other sources.
 - Planning helps align available sources of support with recognized program needs; ensuring against unnecessary redundancies, that appropriate sources of funding are applied to appropriate needs, and that gaps in need are identified and addressed.
 - Eventually, the Board anticipates that such plans could be shared across all Network specialty crops to facilitate true program harmonization and optimization; maximizing returns on the limited funding available.
 - **Recommendation:** In addition to seeking broad center and program support from multiple funding sources, the Board encourages applicants for NCPN resources to identify cyclical needs (including times when funding requests from NCPN are anticipated to be reduced), and to further prioritize and partition funding requests in a manner that is well aligned with the needs of other centers and programs, and ultimately other crops.
 - This approach will eventually complement long-term planning for the use on NCPN funds across the entire network.
 - The Board anticipates future development of a streamlined and predictable funding paradigm best applied to centers and programs seeking moderate, coordinated, prioritized, and cyclical resourcing requests.

The Governing Board observes that recently submitted plans occasionally only identify Network provided Federal support and do not adequately include, secure, or pursue other sources of support.

- **Recommendation:** Work plans should be comprehensive so that decision-makers have adequate information to make informed funding decisions. Applicants should strive to clearly identify varied streams of support or, if such added support is lacking, then provide a plan for seeking such support; which could include internal center funds, other granting sources, program generated income, and ‘in-kind’ contributions. The Board notes the following reason for this request:
 - The Board believes that Federal resources provided to centers can create a ‘multiplier effect’ and be used by applicants for leveraging other sources of funding.

2) Program Consideration of Other Crops:

In joining NCPN, the current specialty crop groups brought in specific strengths and opportunities as well as needs and challenges. Each year, NCPN receives inquiries about supporting new crops.

Consideration of additional crops in NCPN will be an important topic as the Network discusses a renewed strategic plan and how better to network. Network leaders will have to balance the need of additional crops for clean plant services and resulting impacts on industry against factors such as continuing needs of crops already in the Network, growing self-sufficiency of those crops, the availability of resources to support additional crops, and administrative matters such as right-sized program governance.

Along with resourcing needs, factors to consider new entrants might include:

- Crop farm-gate value
- Crops with unique phytosanitary challenges
- Crops for which there are existing clean plant centers
- Crops that can be included under supported programs with minimal added resourcing
- Crops providing acceptable NCPN resourcing entry/exit schedules

The Governing Board feels that accommodating new crops in the Network is important for American agriculture and further addresses the intent of the Congress to establish a program accessible to a broad base of stakeholders. The program will continue to honor existing commitments to crops currently in the network in anticipation that their needs will generally moderate in time, perhaps becoming cyclical, and thus allow for an expanded use of NCPN funds that can accommodate new entrants.

- Recommendation: The Board anticipates, as part of the renewed strategic planning process, to seek stakeholder input regarding the process and criteria by which new crops seeking NCPN inclusion might be accorded entry into the network.

3) Succession Planning and Management:

Personnel like the center directors, diagnosticians, and production managers are important to the success of clean plant centers and programs. In many cases, the loss of key staff has the potential for significant program disruptions with consequential impacts on that entity, the crops that rely on it for services, and throughout the entire network.

The Governing Board feels that succession planning is a critical component of long-term program planning and sustainability and is prepared to fund specific staffing matters when appropriate.

- Recommendation: Succession planning should be included in each clean plant centers long-range management plans.
 - The Board will consider funding requests for succession planning activities in anticipation of staffing changes and the reasonable pre-emption of any resulting impacts on program delivery. Consideration could also include reasonable, temporary support of overlapping staff hired with the intent of supporting a transition and mitigating program impacts during that time.

4) Clean Plant Certification Programs – The Continuum that Connects to NCPN:

Nursery certification programs, though outside of the immediate mission of NCPN, are inherently important to Network stakeholders, including industry. We need to ensure that plant material exiting Network centers and programs remain clean as it travels through the nursery system. The Governing

Board sees the activities of NCPN and allied programs such as nursery certification initiatives as part of an immediate and important program continuum.

- Recommendation: The Governing Board encourages the Tier 2 governing bodies to serve as a forum for discussing the needs of NCPN stakeholders for continued activities with plants exiting the Network and entering nurseries, including nursery certification programs, to ensure that those plants remain clean within systems beyond NCPN.
- Recommendation: The Governing Board encourages stakeholders to seek ongoing support for safeguarding nurseries and plant certification programs from appropriate sources in the Farm Bill, such as the Plant Pest and Disease Management and Disaster Prevention Program, or other sources as may be appropriate.

5) Information/Data Systems:

Each year applicants seek NCPN support for information systems; including the following:

- NCPN website system support;
- Plant Pest Data/Information Gathering and Management;
- Clean Plant Center and Program Process Management; and
- Bioinformatics in Support of Next Generation Sequencing Technologies

The Board sees value in the development and use of tools like those mentioned above, but has been reluctant to support such requests (with the exception of websites). The reluctance stems from a sense that such tools, as proposed, serve local needs with unclear application in support of the network collectively.

- Recommendation: The Board believes that the Network should explore its needs; both those of individual centers and programs, and NCPN collectively.
 - In support, NCPN is entering into an agreement with a National Plant Diagnostic Network (NPDN) cooperator with Information/Data interests similar to NCPN and with expertise to organize and coordinate necessary discussions.
 - The Board is not proposing that NCPN information/data needs be provided from sources outside of NCPN. The Governing Board is simply seeking to better understand the individual needs of centers, the collective needs of NCPN, and harmonization opportunities should they exist.
 - For FY 2016, the Board does not anticipate funding information/data system needs except in rare cases or for ongoing website development and management; but rather anticipates engaging later as counseled by the outcomes of anticipated discussions.

6) NCPN Support of Travel Expenses:

The Board will fund travel when it supports the networking mission of NCPN such as program governance and education/outreach initiatives. Request for travel has steadily increased and challenges the Board with ascertaining which events merit support.

- Recommendation: Travel requests should generally be limited to facilitate persons attending scheduled NCPN Tier 2 governing body events for purposes of governance and for approved education/outreach initiatives. In support of this recommendation, the Board observes the following:
 - Tier 2 governing body travel should be coordinated by a single agreed to entity representing that crop and cover the needs of the entire body.
 - The Board allows for a limited use of travel funds provided directly to individual applicants in support of program service work clearly ascribed as mission critical; including education/outreach initiatives.

- The Board does not support the use of NCPN funds for travel to professional and society meetings unless primarily invited to present information about NCPN for purposes of education/outreach.
- The Board does not allow the use of NCPN funds for foreign travel.

7) Focusing More on Outcomes with Limited References to Inputs and Methods:

Over the next several years, the NCPN-GB will be revising its proposal work plan template; requesting less ‘annually redundant’ information and focusing on outcomes keyed back to specific funding requests. Applicants will be requested to primarily focus proposals on explanations of funding requests and the anticipated outcomes resulting from supported actions. Funding decisions are best advanced with information regarding: 1) what will happen with resources provided, 2) why it is important, 3) the resulting deliverable, and 4) the anticipated outcome.

- Recommendation: The Board seeks stakeholder input regarding improvement of its proposal work plan template as suggested above.

Conclusion:

The Governing Board feels that the observations and guidance provided above, in combination with those notes provided last year and through other venues, will be useful to the intended audience. The overall goal is to advance program excellence in strategic, program, and fiscal planning and to clarify certain parameters for applicants seeking NCPN funding in FY 2016/2017.

Please submit questions or comments about the observations provided in this open letter to the NCPN Management Team at NCPN@aphis.usda.gov.

Thanks to all for your continued support and participation in NCPN. NCPN is your program and your Network. Together we have succeeded to make and keep the Network responsive, relevant, productive, and sustainable.

On behalf of the Governing Board

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Distribution:

- NCPN Governing Board
- NCPN Operations Leadership Team (Tier 2 ‘core’)
- NCPN Cross-Commodity Industry Leadership Team
- NCPN ‘Chairs’ and Members of the FY 2015 *ad hoc* pre-proposal review committees
- NCPN FY 2015 Funding Recipients