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## Open Letter from the National Clean Plant Network (NCPN) Governing Board

*Observations on the Use of NCPN Funds in Support of a Sustainable Network for FY 2017-2018*

**To:** See Distribution Below

### **Discussion:**

Since its inception in the Farm Bill of 2008, the Network has provided \$35 million to 30 cooperators in 20 States. This funding supports core NCPN activities such as strengthening a network dedicated to the diagnostics of pathogens in select specialty crop nuclear stock, therapeutics on those plants if pathogen infected, the establishment of clean foundations, and program governance.

In this third Open Letter to stakeholders, the NCPN Governing Board reinforces its guidance from prior Open Letters and provides additional comments on the use of funds to support a sustainable Network and deliver services to industry. This year, the Governing Board specifically focuses on two areas of opportunity (sustainability and the funding application process) as well as several administrative topics, as follows:

### **Long-Term Network Sustainability and Self-Sufficiency:**

Sustainability/Self Sufficiency: Clean plant centers continue to be important to the economy of the Network's seven target specialty crops. In addition to a strong public interest in supporting centers, the Governing Board continues to encourage each applicant for Network support to:

- Base its clean plant program on support derived from multiple streams of funding in addition to support received from NCPN; securing in-house support, pursuing other public and private grants, developing or accessing commodity fees, and generating revenue.
- Rely as little as possible on any one source of support; including that from the Network.
- Limit requests for Network funding to no more than 25% of a center's total operating budget ascribed to clean plant activities.

Allowable Support: In alignment with center sustainability and self-sufficiency, the Governing Board anticipates that NCPN resourcing should focus on:

- Supporting a ramp-up of center capacity and capabilities to meet increasing requests from industry for clean plant products;
- Covering only occasional or short-term needs for permanent staff pending the identification and transition to other long-term funding sources. If such staffing support is requested, the Governing Board recommends an explanation for the need and plan to transition to other funding sources;
- Covering temporary staffing needs mainly as a ramp-up or 'surge' activity;
- Procuring or upgrading equipment, supplies, and allowable improvements to facilities;
- Accommodating and facilitating planning and exploratory starter or proof of concept grants. The Board sees value in this endeavor if the intent is ultimately to use the knowledge gained to advance Network program needs or to initially investigate complex questions and seek augmentative sources of funding to advance the concepts. Support for economic studies or program planning grants is an example of an activity that might fit into this category. The Board anticipates such requests not to exceed about \$50,000 and to be of limited duration.
- Embracing Next Generation Sequencing (NGS) technologies. The widespread use of NGS is an evolving matter, but generally the Board supports the use of established NGS technologies for detecting known pathogens, including in foundations. This use extends to studies that

compare the efficacy of NGS to other diagnostic technologies, but only when such studies are conducted for diagnostics on known pathogens of concern to industry. Network resources may not be used to pursue novel or unknown pathogens and for general survey purposes.

- Covering costs of Network governance, including associated permanent staff dedicated to administrative activities.

Discouraged Support: The Board discourages requests for:

- Replacing funding already being provided from other sources for clean plant activities unless those other resources are redirected to appropriate aspects of clean plant center support focusing on diagnostics, therapeutics, or foundations;
- Long-term support of permanent staff. The Governing Board intends that long-term permanent staffing costs, as a major component of long-term center sustainability, are best ascribed to the users of center products with NCPN support limited to augment those costs or provide occasional support for temporary staffing needs.

### **Observations on the Agreement Application Process and Work Plan Improvements:**

The Pre-Proposal Review Process: The Board is very pleased with the way that the Governing Bodies review and harmonize draft proposals for NCPN funding through the use of pre-proposal review committees. These review groups add relevance to proposals by addressing the needs of industry, program prioritization, and collaboration between centers. The Board encourages continuation of this vital review process, and makes the following observations:

- Industry Participation: The Board requests that the pre-proposal review committees remain robust in composition and be composed of about 50% of its members representing industry.
- IMPORTANT – Ranking of Proposal Components: Every year, funding requests presented to the Board greatly exceeds the resources available. As such, the Board is compelled to make critical funding allocations based on the information it receives. The Board recommends that the pre-proposal review committees, as part of their written evaluation of pre-proposals submitted to them, provide the Governing Board with a relative ranking of individual components of each proposal as being either 1) High Priority, 2) Medium Priority, 3) Low Priority, or 4) Not Recommended for funding at this time. Such feedback should include a brief explanation for the prioritization ranking.
- Requests Not Exceeding Available Funding: In past communications to potential applicants the Governing Board proposed limits, both for funding select crops in the Network and for funding individual centers. These limits were developed to facilitate a true network environment where each collaborating commodity group and participating center recognizes, respects, and supports the needs of each other to ultimately produce diverse taxa of clonally propagated clean plants.

The Governing Board anticipates that no one crop or individual center should exceed the recommended limits by more than 10% **unless specifically accompanied by an explanation** indicating:

- 1) A strong rationale for the need to vary (one time) or adjust ascribed crop limits (long-term);
- 2) The anticipated impact to the program if the variation is granted or denied; and
- 3) Action proposed to adhere to recommended limits in future years.

Joint Proposal Planning: Certain crops groups seeking Network support have cooperated to develop and propose needs under a single draft plan and budget to clearly indicate how each of the participating clean plant centers or programs fits into the larger matrix. This approach further acknowledges the needs for each center to be supported as part of the greater-whole. This jointly developed document then serves as a basis from which individual center/program proposals are derived and submitted in final to NCPN.

The Governing Board finds this cooperative approach to be valuable for future Network growth because the process of jointly planning and budgeting facilitates geographically dispersed groups effectively working together. The Board realizes that this process is a challenging and time consuming activity. Still, the Board suggests that all Governing Bodies consider this approach for FY 2017 or as soon as feasible. Therefore, the Governing Board recommends the following:

- Crop groups already engaged in a collaborative planning process are encouraged to continue, and other crop groups are encouraged to adopt this approach.
- The Board requests that clean plant center/program Directors and Governing Body leaders further consider the benefits of joint proposal planning and provide the Board with input about the value of this approach.

Individual Proposals/Work Plans: For FY 2017, the Governing Board is further streamlining requirements for proposal submissions; suggesting that work plans not exceed the ascribed page limits, and focused on: 1) what work is being requested for support, 2) why such work is needed, 3) how that work will impact Network improvements, and most importantly, 4) anticipated deliverables resulting from a granting of the request. The Governing Board makes the following suggestions to improve proposals (work plans):

- Applicants may apply for NCPN funding for multiple crops either under a single work plan or, as convenient, under multiple work plans. Note that the Board may ultimately fund individual applicants under a single agreement regardless of the number of crops for which support is being sought.
- For proposals covering multiple crops the Board recommends that applicants separate costs (including prorating) down to the crop level to account for relative NCPN contributions for specific crops across the entire network.
- In all cases, the Board recommends sufficient detail for each requested funding element to understand the magnitude of what is being requested (e.g. for staffing requests, please specify the number of people or percentages covered by the request, the type of person(s) being covered, their specific costs, and where they fit into the work plan).
- The Board recommends that the actual budget request also be submitted in a spreadsheet to help facilitate its decision-making process; and anticipates developing a spreadsheet template for use by NCPN applicants in the future.

#### **Miscellaneous Observations:**

Centers/Programs Not Receiving Network Funding: The Governing Board members understand that receiving financial support is not required for membership in NCPN. We encourage Network Governing Bodies to consider and accept members into NCPN as collaborating centers and programs regardless of their funded status. This inclusion assumes that their participation and membership is mutually agreed upon and beneficial to advancing the mission of NCPN. At times, such status as an ‘unfunded collaborator’ could lead to future funding support.

How Many Centers/Programs Make for a Healthy Network? The Network is composed of a collection of clean plant centers and programs variously engaged in 1) program governance, 2) the introduction and housing of material proposed for clean-up, 3) diagnostics, 4) therapeutics, and 5) foundations and associated distribution of materials. The Board understands that some centers are full-service centers engaged in all aspects of NCPN work while others are engaged in one or more of the mentioned activities.

As the Network matures, Governing Bodies are asked to analyze how scarce NCPN funding can best be used to support needs. In particular, the Board is encouraging robust discussions to ascertain the following:

- How many centers/programs constitute a healthy network for a specific specialty crop?
- How many of these locations should be supported by NCPN and to what extent?

- Should foundation holdings (e.g., G1 material) be replicated beyond a single or a few locations? If so, how many locations are enough?

Opportunities Outside of the Scope of NCPN: The Board encourages clean plant centers to continue collaborating with programs with similar missions to NCPN where the sharing of knowledge and facilities is mutually beneficial. This approach might include the laboratories of the National Plant Diagnostic Network (NPDN) and similar groups.

The Governing Board also recognizes that certain activities on the continuum of obtaining, assessing, developing, and providing clean plants to industry fall outside of the current scope of the Network. Although the Network might not be able to fund some activities, the Board encourages their discussion, including at Network supported meetings, and recommends that members seek augmentative support for these corollary topics. Such activities might include:

- Interfacing with regulatory programs, research into the development of diagnostic or therapeutic technologies, surveying for pathogens in plant collections not intended for immediate use by industry, data management outside of the immediate core NCPN mission, plant increase and trueness-to-type initiatives, and nursery certification programs.

Since the Network boundaries are fluid and may even occasionally vary between crops, the Board appreciates feedback on its scope.

Support for Information/Data Systems: In late FY 2015, the Board provided a small amount of support to a National Plant Diagnostic Laboratory (NPDN) cooperator to survey select NCPN centers, get baseline data on the kinds of information tools and needs applicable to NCPN members, and to organize and conduct a workshop to advance this question. We anticipate this study to continue into FY 2017 and to provide the Network with greater clarity late in the fiscal year. At that time, the Board will make a decision on supporting information/data system requests going forward.

Travel Funds: The Board recognizes the value of providing funding to NCPN Governing Bodies or associated members for travel in support of NCPN core activities. The Board limits such support to the following:

- Travel to NCPN Governing Body meetings. Such support is generally provided to the Governing Body Chair for use by the entire crop group membership as determined by the group. However, funds can also be provided by NCPN directly to a Body member or other NCPN stakeholder invited to such meetings when such persons are also supported by an independent NCPN agreement.
- Travel associated and integral to a funded NCPN project, including Education/Outreach initiatives, is an allowable cost.
- International travel is generally not supported unless so authorized in exceptional cases.

### **Conclusion:**

The NCPN Governing Board hopes that the above guidance, in combination with the prior ‘Open Letters’ from FY 2015 and FY 2016 show the future direction of NCPN, especially in the area of long-term program sustainability; provide a streamlined process by which cooperators can seek NCPN support; and clarify the needs of the Board for information to make good decisions on the use of limited NCPN resources.

Please submit questions or comments about the observations in this open letter to the NCPN Management Team at [NCPN@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:NCPN@aphis.usda.gov)

Thanks to all for your continued engagement in this bold endeavor that we call the National Clean Plant Network (NCPN). We have come a long way since the program’s inception nearly a decade ago and so much of the program’s success is a direct reflection on you; your willingness to engage, to

collaborate, to share, and to approach so many matters with optimism and strength. NCPN is your Network and you can be proud of its accomplishments.

*On behalf of the NCPN Governing Board*

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Distribution:

- NCPN Coordinators Unite Committee
- NCPN Governing Board
- NCPN Operations Leadership Team (Tier 2 core members)
- NCPN Cross-Commodity Industry Leadership Team
- NCPN Chairs and Members of the FY 2016 *ad hoc* pre-proposal review committees
- NCPN FY 2016 Funding Recipients