

### Path Forward Communiqué III September 2016

This is the third in a series of updates on activities with IR-4's Path Forward Working Group that was established to comprehensively consider how IR-4 can best operate after years of flat/decreasing funding; a changing budgetary environment in the Land-grant institutions; challenging regulatory requirements; and evolving industry needs. To help with this process, IR-4 appointed an outside panel of experts to conduct an Organizational Assessment. The Organizational Assessment Panel (OAP) was tasked with critically evaluating IR-4's infrastructure including the number and locations of the state and ARS coordination offices, field research centers/field research cooperators and analytical laboratories. They were also asked to explore operational efficiencies and/or possible savings that could be achieved through reorganization of IR-4's units.

The OAP submitted their report with recommendations to the IR-4 Project Management Committee. Briefly the OAP was extremely impressed with the dedication, passion, intelligence, and proactive approaches of the personnel involved/engaged in IR-4 research. The panel felt IR-4 brings a great value to its stakeholders and as such, it does not recommend an organizational restructuring. However, the panel does recommend IR-4 Headquarters and regional programs engage in process improvements,

Specifically, the OAP determined that the current structure meets the existing and future needs of specialty crop producers, processors and consumers. While there is always room for improvement, the OAP found that the major limiting factor in serving the future needs of its constituents is not the structure of the organization, but a projected shortfall in financial resources. The OAP complimented the Project on its innovative and entrepreneurial approach to problem solving and collaborative culture. The OAP evaluated a range of options for changing the organizational structure and determined that it was unlikely that these changes would yield a significant enough level of cost savings to justify the associated disruption and anticipated reduction in organizational morale and cohesion. The OAP encourages IR-4 support of and investment in entrepreneurial efforts such as extramural grants and collaborative relationships that can grow relevant programs and resources to support them. The OAP recommends that the Project continue to identify cost savings or incremental increases in revenue while working with the Commodity Liaison Committee, Minor Crop Farmer Alliance, and other specialty crop organizations to seek additional financial resources in the annual appropriations process and Farm Bill.

The OAP provided some further considerations:

- USDA-Agriculture Research Service (ARS) is an integral component of the Project and functions as a full and collaborative partner to accomplish the scientific mission of IR-4. There is however, an opportunity to refine the administrative relationship between IR-4 and ARS. The OAP suggests that the IR-4 Executive Director maintain an open dialogue with ARS leadership with respect to organizational structure and common goals.
- In the documentation, the following statement is made relative to the mission: 'The IR-4 Project operates as a unique partnership between USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Land Grant Universities / State Agricultural Experiment Stations (SAES), the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the agrochemical industry, commodity groups, and specialty crop growers. It is understood, that the success of the program depends on cooperation of all major partners in this effort.' The OAP concurred that this statement provided a critical encapsulation of why IR-4 has been able to sustain success. Progressive newer IR-4 research programs have been funded through extramural grant support, such as invasive species, public health pesticides, specialty crop exports, and trade harmonization. These programs are beneficial and should be continued. However, these activities should not impact the original mission and resources committed by long-term partners.
- The OAP supports careful exploration of the concept of changes in indirect cost (IDC) policy to host institutions. Discussions should be coordinated through IR-4 Headquarters to assure uniformity of process.

- Cost sharing is encouraged, but as a 'recommended' rather than a 'mandatory' guideline. Cost sharing could be included on an incentive basis, e.g., providing priority attention to samples/trials where cost share guidelines are met.
- Should the Project Management Committee (PMC) pursue significant organizational changes in the future, the OAP urges adoption of a timeline that provides an ample transition period of multiple years to minimize program and personnel disruption.

The IR-4 Project Management Committee spent the majority of the July 2016 meeting reviewing and analyzing the recommendations of the OAP and other aspects of the Path Forward Process. It was agreed that:

- To encourage the best use of funds, the regions will perform a detailed cost accounting, for their work in the lab, field and QA.
- IR-4 will continue to maintain the three NIFA funded analytical labs (UC-Davis, Michigan State, University of Florida) along with the two ARS laboratories. In an effort to improve best practices, IR-4 will schedule a facilitated meeting with laboratory principals in early 2017 to review and assess processes in the labs, including project selection, analysis priorities, lab efficiency and achieving timelines.
- IR-4 will maintain the existing four regional coordination offices. The number of regional coordination offices will be revisited in 2018.
- There will be an eight-member task force established to explore "field data flow" process improvement. Specifically looking at ways to develop greater efficiencies with the field data books flowing from the researcher to the regional office to QC/QA to the Study Director. This task forces will meet in early 2017
- IR-4 is committed to closely exploring opportunities to redirect resources into different areas when employee attrition occurs.

It was also agreed that IR-4 would step up its efforts to gain new sources of funds. Some ideas include engaging the food processing industry and other members of the food supply chain and informing them of the importance of IR-4 activities. It is believed that once they understand the importance of IR-4, they will be willing to help provide some new funding. Other ideas include being more proactive in gaining funds from the States through Specialty Crop Block grant programs or other State sources. Another opportunity is encouraging more cost sharing of expenses from commodity associations and the crop protection industry with the opportunities for incentives as these groups can co-fund research. The IR-4 Commodity Liaison Committee has established a workgroup that is specifically dedicated to educating Congress for the dire need for increased funding for IR-4.

Jerry