

Geneva Scientists Help Determine National Research Agenda

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by Peter Seem

GENEVA, NY: In 1999, Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Science spent \$75.3 million on research. The bulk of this money was in the form of grants awarded to Cornell researchers and the USDA is the largest single source of these grants. This year, four faculty members at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station served as managers for various USDA grant panels. Through the National Research Initiative (NRI) and various other programs, the USDA turns to panels of experts in the appropriate field to decide which research projects can be funded. "Having four faculty members managing panels is highly unusual and attests to the quality of the Station's scientists," said Tony Shelton, associate director of research. Wendell Roelofs, Jan Nyrop, and Shelton, all from the department of entomology, manage grant panels, as does plant pathology's Dennis Gonsalves.

Photo coming soon.

Suggested caption:

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Roelofs manages the NRI's two entomology and nematology panels this year. The two panels together reviewed 173 proposals of which approximately 20 percent were funded for a total exceeding \$5 million. Nyrop manages another NRI panel, Biologically Based Pest Management, funding about 20 percent of its 68 proposals with \$2.2 million. Dennis Gonsalves manages this year's Biotechnology Risk Assessment Research Grants program, run by the USDA. The panel has \$1.5 million at its disposal for the fiscal year 2001, and received 35 proposals. Shelton manages two biotechnology programs in the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS) and had 13 proposals submitted and approximately \$3 million in available funding. IFAFS is a new USDA program, now in its second year, which is designed for large multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional grants. The program has a lot of congressional support and now receives more money than the NRI.

The panel manager selects panel members and finds experts in the field of each proposal to serve as ad hoc reviewers, adhering to a strict set of guidelines for both. NRI panel members cannot come from the same institution as the manager; they must represent a mix of industry, government and academia, as well as minority groups; there can be no more than one panel member from any state. Most critically, the manager must select panelists to cover

all specialty areas in the field. Panel members rank proposals for funding, and, during that process, it is up to the manager to "be sure that each proposal gets a fair and honest review-and it does," said Nyrop. "This procedure works phenomenally well."

Successful panels, which fairly evaluate research proposals, are a testament to the hard work of the manager and panelists. All four men agreed that managing the panels was a time- and energy-consuming process, and that serving one year was enough. "It was very difficult to rank proposals. You're always afraid, even with experts in the field on the panel and as reviewers, that you're going to miss an exciting idea," said Roelofs.

The grant panels are "the only fair way to channel money to the most worthy proposals. Otherwise politics or other forces determine the direction and quality of research, and that is not in the best interest of the scientific or public communities," said Shelton.

In general a researcher is approached to manage the panel if the panel funded them in the past, or if they have been recommended for working in that particular field. "In the past, I had received a lot of grant money from NRI and I thought it was my turn to help the process," said Roelofs.

Mary Purcell, as the USDA NRI program director of the Entomology/Nematology and Biologically Based Pest Management Programs, is responsible for recommending the panel managers to the deputy administrator of the Competitive Research Grants and Awards Management for final approval. "Panel managers are chosen based on my knowledge of their scientific background and stature in their respective fields. I review their curriculum vitae, and select a person that has a broad knowledge of different subject areas within a particular discipline," she said. Heavy preference is given to candidates who have served on an NRI panel in the past, and each year's panel manager suggests which panelists could be manager for the next year. "We generally are looking for a person who does not show bias and can facilitate a fair review," she said.

The NRI and IFAFS programs are important sources of funding for Cornell and the Experiment Station. Because the grants available from New York's commodity groups are relatively small, the NRI program becomes even more valuable as a source "where you can get multiple year funding at a high enough rate so that you can really tackle a substantial project," said Nyrop. But Cornell researchers are not the only people seeking substantial grants, and, as grants grow more competitive, the role of the panels and their managers becomes ever more important.

By serving on a panel and seeing a range of proposals, researchers see what makes a proposal fundable. It requires a good, if not great, idea that is developed well and presented in convincing manner. Having people who have served as USDA panel managers at the Station and who are available to advise other faculty can prove useful in helping the Station obtain outside funding to develop its worthwhile programs.

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