

# WSSA NIFA Fellow 2019 Progress Report

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## **NIFA Relocation to Kansas City**

In September, 2019, most of the NIFA staff were relocated to Kansas City. This mandatory relocation led to resignation or retirement of nearly 80% of NIFA staff. NIFA is currently housed in a temporary location awaiting renovation of their permanent site, which will be in downtown Kansas City. The renovation of the new site is expected to be complete by late 2020.

The relocation has had major short-term impacts on NIFA. The greatly reduced staff numbers have delayed many processes including release of RFPs, completion of proposal reviews, grant administration and fund transfer.

NIFA is in the process of hiring several new National Program Leaders, Division Directors, professional staff, etc. The position announcements have been posted on the WSSA web site and sent by email to all WSSA members. This is an opportunity to add more weed scientists to the NIFA staff. I am hopeful the several WSSA members have submitted applications.

The current situation is further complicated by temporary office space that is not conducive to collaboration. In addition, while the aggressive hiring activity is essential, it currently is diverting time from the existing staff to participate in interviews. This combination of factors has led to a very challenging situation which is impacting productivity. It will take time for NIFA to rebuild to a stable staffing level.

## **NIFA Restructuring**

In order to maintain connections with other science funding agencies, elected officials and staffers in the National Capital Region, NIFA has created a new position category called National Science Liaison. NIFA has appointed six National Science Liaisons who will remain in Washington DC. They are currently officed in Patriot Plaza. One of the National Science Liaisons is Mathieu Ngouajio, who is a weed scientist. With Mathieu remaining in Washington DC, I plan to work closely with him as my unofficial NIFA host in DC.

## **2019 Activities**

Travel. I visited NIFA in Washington DC three times in 2019: 1) May 1-4 (connected with President's Congressional Visits), 2) June 9-12 (Pat Tranel hill seminar and strategic planning for a weed genomics conference proposal), and September 25-27 (Herbicide Resistance Education Committee). My official NIFA host, Mike Fitzner, has advised me to not visit Kansas City yet due to the high level of instability related to the relocation. Dr. Fitzner has suggested that I visit later in March at a time when NIFA Director Angle is in Kansas City, so that I can meet with Director

Angle along with other NIFA staff. I have also been invited to give a seminar in Kansas City, but this will likely not occur until after NIFA has moved to the permanent site with more suitable conference facilities. I intend to get to know the many new National Program Leaders in the crop protection area as NIFA rebuilds. I view this as an opportunity for me to establish a rapport with new National Program Leaders as they join NIFA.

Weed Genomics Conference Proposal. I helped facilitate the submission of a proposal for a weed genomics conference, which was submitted to the AFRI Pests and Beneficial Organisms Program. It appears that the relocation resulted in some miscommunication about the proposal, and it was not selected for funding in 2019. Plans are in place to resubmit the proposal soon. We hope to schedule this conference/workshop for late summer or early fall, 2020 in the Kansas City area, so that key NIFA staff can participate.

Weed Science Funding History. Don Shilling had worked with an IT staff person at NIFA to analyze historical data on funding of weed science proposals. He and I have a comprehensive data set over 10 years, and the IT staff person was prepared to assist with the data analysis. Unfortunately, this person left NIFA rather than relocate. I have secured the assistance of a very capable statistician at Michigan State University. I believe it will be possible to conduct a partial analysis of the data, however a comprehensive analysis will likely not be possible without the involvement of the individual that created the database. I am optimistic that we will be able to extract some interesting information from the data, perhaps for a presentation at the 2021 WSSA Annual Meeting.

### **Future Priorities**

Advocacy for WSSA Research Funding Priorities: The WSSA Research and Competitive Grants Committee has identified several research priorities that were communicated to NIFA in 2018 as part of a stakeholder input process. The two highest priorities were 1) new technologies for precision mechanical weed control and 2) molecular biology and genomic tools to understand the biology of weeds. I will continue to encourage NIFA to create competitive funding opportunities in these high priority areas. There is interest in weed genomics within NIFA leadership, however the relocation in 2019 made it very difficult for new initiatives to gain any momentum. Hopefully I will be successful in advocating for this area of research as NIFA rebuilds and gains new momentum.

WSSA has formed a NIFA Fellow Advisory Committee consisting of the Past President, President, President Elect, Vice President, Executive Science Policy Director, Chair of the Science Policy Committee, and Chair of the Research and Competitive Grants Committee. We will meet at the 2020 WSSA Annual Meeting immediately following the Sunday Board of Directors Meeting.

Communication with WSSA Members: I will continue to keep WSSA members informed of new funding opportunities through the NIFA competitive grants programs along with other funding sources.