

WSSA NIFA Fellow 2020 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. One weed scientist, Vijay Nandula, has been hired as a National Programs Leader. Vijay has rapidly become a valuable contact for me.

2020 Activities

Travel. Due to COVID19, I have not traveled to either Kansas City or Washington DC in 2020. However, I have maintained monthly meetings with my primary host, Mike Fitzner. Recently I have been corresponding frequently with Vijay Nandula. I look forward to visiting NIFA in Kansas City after they move into their new location and travel restrictions are relaxed.

Weed Genomics Conference Proposal. I am very pleased to inform you that the weed genomics conference proposal submitted to NIFA has been recommended for funding. The PIs are Todd Gaines, Mithila Jugulam, Pat Tranel and Eric Patterson. The conference is scheduled for April 7-9, 2021 in Kansas City.

Webinars. The first of three webinars for members of WSSA has been scheduled for October 28, 2020. The topic is Federal Funding Opportunities for Weed Scientists. Speakers are Vijay Nandula (NIFA National Program Leader), Mathieu Ngouajio (NIFA National Science Liaison), and Susan Koehler (APHIS – retired). Two additional webinars are planned: 1) Grantsmanship Workshop, and 2) Federal Career Opportunities for Weed Scientists.

Overall. I am not satisfied with my progress over the last two years. My role as NIFA Fellow began in August, 2018. I made two productive trips to Washington DC in the fall of 2018 with Donn Shilling. Since those two initial visits, three events have limited my effectiveness:

- 1) A 34-day federal government shutdown began on December 22, 2018.
- 2) In late 2018, plans to relocate NIFA (and ERS) to a not-yet-named new location outside the National Capital Region were announced. This created a high level of uncertainty and anxiety within NIFA. In addition, most of the NIFA staff that I had been meeting with eventually left NIFA prior to the move to Kansas City.
- 3) The global pandemic has prevented any travel and limited my interaction with NIFA staff to phone or Zoom, which is difficult with new people. Fortunately, Vijay Nandula is an exception.

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 followed by COVID19 has made it very difficult for new initiatives to gain any momentum. I will continue to advocate for this area of research as NIFA rebuilds and gains new momentum. One of the expected outcomes of the weed genomics conference is a white paper on research needs, that will hopefully be used by NIFA as a roadmap for weed genomics research as new initiatives are considered.

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.

Topics for Discussion with Advisory Committee

- 1) I would appreciate advice on speakers and panel members for the two planned webinars.
- 2) Any advice and insight on priorities for the next year for my role as WSSA NIFA Fellow would be appreciated.

Future

Please note that my three-year appointment as WSSA NIFA Fellow ends in August 2021.