

**NSF Committee of Visitors Report
UCAR and Lower Atmospheric Facilities Oversight
Section
Division of Atmospheric Sciences
Directorate for Geosciences
August 2-3, 2006**

RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC COMMENTS IN THE COV REPORT

The report of the Committee of Visitors (COV) that met on August 2-3, 2006 to review the UCAR and Lower Atmospheric Facilities Oversight Section (ULAFOS) provides a valuable and positive assessment of ULAFOS, and guidance for improving the overall effectiveness of the Section. The Committee did a remarkable job of assimilating a significant amount of information and providing insightful recommendations that addressed issues of importance. We appreciate the strong positive endorsement of the ULAFOS contributions to the oversight of important national facilities and the positive and productive relationship we maintain with our awardees and the broader atmospheric sciences community.

The COV report contains several recommendations that are intended to assist ULAFOS with facing the challenges of future oversight and to allow ULAFOS to sustain its contribution to the atmospheric sciences. These recommendations are addressed in the order they appear in the report.

Challenges/issues/concerns

Recommendation 1

The COV recommends that NSF develop a formal mechanism to monitor the funding levels of non-NSF research and development initiatives at NCAR and consider whether corrective action needs to be taken.

Response

ULAFOS finds this a valuable recommendation and has begun discussions with NCAR management to establish a formal reporting mechanism that will summarize, for example, the funding amount and duration, source, distribution within NCAR, and relationship to the NSF core program. The details of this report should be known within the next several months. Once implemented, it will form the basis of a dialog between NSF and NCAR about the level and value (to NCAR and the community) of non-NSF funding at NCAR.

Recommendation 2

The COV recommends that ULAFOS continue to guide NCAR management to pursue more creative means in addressing the diversity gap.

Response

ATM is committed to improving the diversity gap at NCAR. We will continue our strong support for the SOARS program and work with NCAR and UCAR to strengthen and extend the effectiveness of this activity. In addition, ULAFOS will work with NCAR management to assist in developing plans and mechanisms addresses this recommendation which was also recommended by the 2006 NCAR management review panel. ULAFOS will attend an NCAR retreat at the end of Sept. 2006 that will be devoted in part to addressing this recommendation. At that retreat and in the future, ULAFOS will continue to guide NCAR towards creative means of addressing the diversity gap within the institution.

Recommendation 3

The COV recommends that ULAFOS encourage (and/or support) NCAR management to pursue workshops or other focused efforts on the development and use of metrics.

Response

ULAFOS is strongly committed to assisting NCAR to develop more meaningful metrics for goals and accomplishments in order to monitor their performance. We have provided them with guidance on the need to incorporate metrics into a dynamic reporting system. ULAFOS participated in an NCAR retreat at the end of August 2006, in which NCAR management addressed several recommendations from the NSF NCAR management review, including that NCAR develop meaningful metrics to assess activities. Also, ULAFOS will participate in a national conference hosted by UCAR entitled "Measuring Up" (to be held in Boulder, CO in November 2006). This conference is devoted to sharing best practices among Federal Laboratories on the topic of measures for assessment. We anticipate that this will be an annual event, and ULAFOS plans continued participation.

Recommendation 4

The COV strongly recommends that ATM make its best effort to provide a stable staffing situation within ULAFOS and assist in providing resources within ATM and/or elsewhere to enable continued successful oversight activities. This is particularly important in view of the upcoming competition for the management and operation of NCAR and for the continued oversight functions of ULAFOS.

Response

ATM, working with GEO directorate office and DAACS, is committed to assuring that adequate staffing continue to be provided to ULAFOS to allow the Section to meet its responsibilities. NSF and ATM recognize the challenges facing the Section due to the upcoming competition and will make available the necessary resources to allow a successful competition while sustaining the ongoing oversight activities.

Recommendation 5

The COV recommends that ATM ensure that the funds for deploying facilities in observational programs (deployment pool) are appropriately matched to the capacity of the facility providers to provide services, and to the need for those services to fulfill the science objectives of funded peer-reviewed research. In addition, ULAFOS should ensure that deployment pool funds and facility-provided capacity allow for both large and smaller field studies to be supported.

Response

ULAFOS concurs with the COV recommendation and will continue to refine its processes to ensure that there is the closest possible a match between the three primary elements needed to implement observational field programs: deployment pool funds, science proposals to be funded, and staff and facility availability.

1) The ULAFOS Facilities Program Officer regularly monitors the facility request submittals to NCAR, University of Wyoming (King Air) and the Colorado State University (CHILL), and then coordinates with the Lower Atmospheric Research Section (LARS) Program Officers during the year to determine which science proposals are likely to be funded. An assessment of the facility funding requirements to support those programs is then made and given to ATM management for consideration in the ATM budget allocation. This process has been improved over the last several years and will remain under review to identify any possible additional improvements.

2) The ULAFOS Facilities Program Officer coordinates with the NCAR EOL director and staff to assess the availability of requested facilities (for example, refurbishment and maintenance schedules affect the availability) and to work to accommodate schedule conflicts. The staff mix is also assessed to ensure that appropriate staff are available to deploy the facilities on NSF supported field projects. NSF/ATM in cooperation with NCAR/EOL established a new process for the large, multiagency and/or multinational large programs (“Experiment Design Overview” and “Science Program Overview” documents) which gives facility managers the time to shift staff and schedules to increase the likelihood of facilities being available to meet the approved science proposals. The new process will be monitored to determine its effectiveness in improving the allocation of resources within EOL to match field campaign requirements. In addition, the ULAFOS Facilities Program Officer monitors the funds available in the deployment pool and provides input to the Division Director and LARS Section Head with respect to the anticipated future number and complexity of field campaigns in coming fiscal years.

All of these actions will continue to be monitored and refined, if necessary, to ensure that resources are appropriately apportioned to achieve the most effective field campaigns, and that access to the facilities is equitable for both small and large programs.

Competing the NCAR Management Agreement

Recommendation 6

The COV recommends that ATM/NSF continue to provide appropriate resources and support to ULAFOS.

Response

ATM agrees that the competition for the management of NCAR is an important and high profile activity for the Division. ULAFOS is taking the lead on this activity within the Division and has formed strong and productive partnerships with other parts of NSF, such as the Division of Acquisitions and Cooperative Support (DACS). As noted above, the Division is committed to providing ULAFOS with the resources necessary for a successful completion of the competition and, when necessary, will work with ULAFOS to engage additional expertise within NSF to assist with the competition efforts.

Recommendation 7

The COV commends ULAFOS for close communications with NCAR staff on issues involving the process of the competition and recommends these discussions continue.

Response

Maintaining the productivity of NSF's national laboratory during the competition period is a high priority for the Section. We have already had presentations and discussion with four out of the five laboratories at NCAR. In addition, we have received feedback from the staff that has assisted ULAFOS in providing a more effective message to the staff of NCAR. Over the next several months, several more formal and informal presentations will take place with various members of the NCAR staff and management. ULAFOS is committed to maintaining a dialog with all levels of the NCAR staff throughout the competition.

Recommendation 8

The COV recommends that ULAFOS modify the time line for procurement and award to address contingencies, keeping in mind that outside resources may be necessary.

Response

ULAFOS is working with DACS to review the timeline created early in the process. The COV recommendation, as well as experience gained to date, provides a good basis to reexamine the timeline and the anticipated resource requirements.

Recommendation 9

The COV commends ULAFOS staff for identifying this as an area of potential risk and recommends that they closely monitor the progress of this activity.

Response

ULAFOS will remain vigilant with respect to identified and emerging risks. We continue to discuss this issue with other Federal laboratories that have recently been through similar competitions. These discussions are proving helpful in further identifying and quantifying the potential risks of a competition.

Recommendation 10

The COV agrees with the recommendation in the prior COV report (2003) to include an option to extend the next agreement for at least one 5-year period.

Response

Subject to satisfactory performance, ULAFOS and DACS intend to recommend a five year award with an option for an extension of a further five years.

Recommendation – from Template Section C

C.5 NSF would appreciate your comments on how to improve the COV review process, format and report template.

The COV reiterates that the report template is completely inappropriate for evaluating a group such as ULAFOS. We strongly recommend that NSF replace this major impediment to conducting intelligible and effective reviews. COV recommends that ULAFOS be tasked to provide an appropriate evaluation form for their type of program.

Response

NSF continuously reviews the COV process and attempts to make improvements. Comments from previous ULAFOS COVs, which had a similar finding, appear to have improved the COV process. This year, ULAFOS was able to modify some of the questions to adjust their appropriateness to the Section's activities. ULAFOS will continue to emphasize the importance of focusing the COV review process to elicit the most meaningful and constructive advice. ULAFOS has begun a discussion with other section heads that primarily provide oversight to large complex facilities about designing an appropriate NSF COV template for such activities within the agency.