NPA Policy and Processes
Regarding Preparation and Review of Project Plans for OSQR

The NPA Director's office devotes significant time and effort in the OSQR process to facilitate preparation of the highest quality project plans. Although Area Office (NPA) staff are not necessarily experts in any particular field of science, we review all project plans and OSQR panel results and comments. While a Lead Scientist may get involved with this process only once every five years, NPA staff are constantly involved in one phase or another of the cycle and can be of significant assistance. The ARS OSQR website at: http://www.ars.usda.gov/Research/docs.htm?docid=1286 is also a valuable resource. In addition scientists will be notified of a teleconference/webcast by the OSQR staff that is useful. Keep in mind the project plans will be scrutinized by some of the most recognized experts in your field, so it is important for ARS to have excellent quality plans that hold up to scientific scrutiny from our colleagues in the research community and, thereby, showcase the scientific stature of ARS scientists. The purpose of the present document is to share what we have learned so that your project renewal can be accomplished in a timely manner. Remember that the Area staff are here to assist in the process.

Area involvement starts with participation in NPS-led workshops, discussion with NPLs concerning action plans, concurrence of projects to be reviewed, and collaborative review with NPLs, CDs, RLs, and SYs concerning proposed objectives for the new projects. The end point of these discussions is a PDRAM that is issued by NPS. NPA staff anticipate there will be no surprises in objectives due to the interactions before the issuance of a PDRAM. If there are conflicts between the NPL and Lead Scientist, the Area should be engaged in the discussion.

The Project Plan Outline: Once a PDRAM is received, the Lead Scientist or unit secretary consolidates the conflict of interest lists (COI) for each scientist (Categories 1 and 4) on the team into a single file and forwards it through line management to the NPA Program Analyst (PA). These lists are important because panel chairs and panelists will be chosen with COI lists in mind. Lead Scientists will also develop the Project Plan Outline (PPO) with input from the project's SYs. Again, the document goes through appropriate line managers (RL/CD) to the NPA. The NPA PA, Statistician and Assistant Area Director (AAD) each review the PPO. First, the objectives must match the objectives in the PDRAM. If changes are made at this stage, they must have the concurrence of the NPL. Please keep the NPA PA aware of any correspondence (phone calls or emails) discussing changes in objectives. Changes in objectives will necessitate re-issuance of the PDRAM so it is important to have conversations with the NPL before

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the original PDRAM is issued. Secondly, NPA staff will review the PPO's format to ensure that it includes each element shown in the example on the OSQR website.   Third, NPA staff will review hypotheses to ensure they are testable. And finally, NPA staff will examine the experimental design sections to determine if there is enough detail to convince panelists that the scientists can accomplish the objectives. The more detail that is included at this stage the better; all documentation done for the PPO can be directly placed into the project plan! The PA will send the PPO to the NPL for approval. Remember, this is the last formal opportunity for the NPL to see what will be done and it provides an opportunity to educate the NPL about the program. In discussions with the NPL, it would be good to ask if they would agree to informally review the project plan before it goes to peer review. Early reviews of the project plan can help detect and resolve problems before the panel ever sees it.

The Project Plan: Once the PPO is approved by NPS, the Lead Scientist drafts the project plan and sends it through line managers to the NPA for review. At this stage, the plan should have been through internal review, carefully checked for grammar, spelling and format and ready to go to the panel. Again, the PA, the Statistician and the AAD review the plan.   The intent of this review is to facilitate a project plan that will perform well in the OSQR process. A review sheet with NPA staff comments, similar to what a journal editor would send, will be returned to the Lead Scientist. In addition, edits and comments, using the track changes feature, may be embedded on the project plan directly. *Each comment on the review sheet must be addressed; either accepted and changes made, or refuted with reasonable responses.*

Panel Recommendations and Action Class Rating: Once the panel has reviewed the project plan, the panel recommendations and action class rating will be returned through line management to the Lead Scientist. If the project receives an action class score of a Moderate or better (Minor or No Revision), the Lead Scientist should revise the plan to address panel comments, fill in the ARS response boxes, and return both documents through line management to the NPA. NPA staff will review the documents to ensure the requested changes were addressed and the responses to reviewers are reasonable. The PA will send the project plan to the OSQR staff who will review the changes and, if acceptable, certify the project and inform the Lead Scientist through line management.

On the other hand, if a Major Revision or Not Feasible score is received, the NPA will notify the Lead Scientist and then follow up with the Lead Scientist, RL, CD and NPL to determine the next course of action. Options include re-writing the project, terminating the project or combining it with others. At times, objectives may need to be changed; if this is necessary, a new PDRAM will be issued by the NPL. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, the policy of the NPA is for the Lead Scientist to re-write the project. Once a course of action is determined, a revised plan will be re-reviewed by the same panel, who will provide a second action class rating and additional recommendations. If the project receives a second score of Major Revision or Not Feasible, administrative action will be required. Panels do not review projects a third time. On the other hand, if the project receives a passing score on the second review, the Lead Scientist can simply revise the plan to address panel comments, complete the ARS response boxes and send

both documents to the NPA. NPA staff will review, then forward both documents to OSQR, who will certify the project if they agree that the revisions were appropriate.

Certification: Once the project is certified, the Scientific Quality Review Officer will send a letter through line management to notify the Lead Scientist and request that the new project be entered into ARIS. The unit should prepare a new 416/417 that reflects the Objectives, Approach and SY distribution from the certified project plan. The 416/417 should also make a permanent fund transfer of all current year funding from the expiring project to the new project, unless the PDRAM provides different instructions. When the 416/417 reaches NPS, they will ensure that adequate funds remain in the old project to cover expenses already incurred and then transfer the remaining funds to the new project. Project certification is also a good time to align the project's milestones with the appropriate fiscal year because this is how progress will be reported in the Annual Reports (AD-421).

Though the NPA understands that preparing for peer review can be time consuming and, at times, frustrating, this can be an excellent mechanism to bring the research team together and chart the future of a project. The NPA expects scientists to continue to take the process seriously, meet the timelines specified, and put forth their best efforts to ensure excellent science is proposed and then accomplished. We look forward to working with you!