

WSSA NIFA Fellow 2020 Progress Report

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2020 Summary

New NIFA Leadership. NIFA has a new Director, Dr. Carrie Castille. She will be located in Washington DC. Parag Chitnis, NIFA Associate Director, will be the lead administrator in Kansas City. I have met with Dr. Chitnis prior to the move to Kansas City. I have not met Dr. Castille. When travel restrictions are lifted and NIFA has moved into their new building, I hope to meet Director Castille during one of her visits to Kansas City.

Weed Genomics Conference. I helped facilitate the submission of a proposal for a weed genomics conference, which was submitted to the AFRI Pests and Beneficial Organisms Program. The proposal was funded by NIFA and the conference is now scheduled for September 21-24, 2021 in Kansas City. This location will allow NIFA staff to easily attend.

Webinars. With the encouragement of the NIFA Fellow Advisory Committee, I organized three webinars for WSSA members. The first webinar, Federal Funding Opportunities for Weed Scientists, was held on October 28, 2020 with 50+ attendees. The second webinar, WSSA Grantsmanship Workshop, was held on December 16, 2020 with 35+ attendees. The final webinar, Federal Career Opportunities for Weed Scientists, was held on January 28, 2021 with 45+ attendees. The webinars were recorded and are posted on the WSSA website.

Weed Science Funding History. Don Shilling and I 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. With the assistance of a very capable statistician at Michigan State University, Sasha Kravchenko, a partial analysis of the 10-year data set on funding history was completed. NIFA has recently hired a Science and Portfolio Analyst, Emma Moran. She has access to the NIFA coding system and is interested in assisting with a more comprehensive analysis of the 10-year funding history data set. I look forward to working with her on this project.

New NIFA National Program Leaders. NIFA has been aggressively hiring staff at all levels of the organization, including scientists and professional staff. One of the recently hired National Program Leaders is Vijay Nandula. Vijay and I meet monthly to discuss current and future issues. He has become a valuable contact for me. Vijay presented at two of the three webinars and also helped identify presenters from other agencies for the third webinar on federal career opportunities. Vijay recently invited me to serve on a competitive grants panel in May, which I

accepted. This will hopefully help me build my network within NIFA and possibly open some new doors for future engagement.

Travel. Most NIFA staff were transferred to Kansas City in late 2019 and were housed in temporary office space while their permanent location was being renovated. During this transition I was advised by my host, Mike Fitzner, to not visit Kansas City due to lack of office and conference rooms capacity. The global pandemic has required all NIFA staff to work remotely since March. Renovation of the new office complex is complete, however NIFA staff have not yet been able to occupy the building due to the pandemic. As a result, I have not yet visited NIFA in person in Kansas City.

Future Priorities

Advocacy for WSSA Research Funding Priorities: The WSSA Research Priorities 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. The committee is currently revisiting these priorities and will likely expand the list. I will continue to encourage NIFA to create competitive funding opportunities in high priority areas for weed science. There is interest in weed genomics within NIFA leadership, however the relocation in 2019 and the pandemic in 2020 made it very difficult for new initiatives to gain any momentum.

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.

NIFA Advisory Committee. I will continue to meet regularly with the NIFA Fellow Advisory Committee and seek input on priorities for my role as NIFA Fellow. I have found the meetings with this committee very valuable. The committee has offered many helpful ideas.

Travel. I am eager to visit the NIFA staff in Kansas City. Many of my contacts prior to the move to Kansas City have retired or resigned, so I have lost much of my network. It is important that I make connections with the recently hired staff, especially new National Program Leaders. With all the new additions, there is a unique opportunity for me to expand my network and effectively advocate for WSSA research priorities.