

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION
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Dr. Robert B. Waide, PI
The LTER Network Office
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Re: Mid-Term site review of the LTER Network Office (Cooperative Agreement DEB-0236154)

Dear Dr. Waide:

Attached please find the report from the LTER Network Office (LNO) mid-term review committee, received by this office on October 24, 2005. The report is comprehensive and generally self-explanatory. It is highly supportive of the contributions made by the LNO in all areas of the review, including adjustments made since the last review and renewal. Their Summary statement on page 1 makes the clear recommendation that NSF should solicit a renewal proposal covering the next Cooperative Agreement funding cycle, and the next three pages highlight specific LNO accomplishments, strengths and progress since the last review.

Starting on page 4, the report also contains a number of constructive suggestions and recommendations focused on enhancing the role of the LNO in LTER. I urge you to fully consider all of these as you focus resources and activities over the next year or so. As you do so, recall that the committee's investigative time was limited and that some things inevitably get overlooked or misinterpreted during such a process. Please note that the report as attached and this letter will be included in your award jacket as part of the review history of this project, and will be made available to the renewal panel that will meet in two years. Once you have had time to consider the report, we should plan to meet over the phone, using the Polycom, or in person, to discuss your proposed responses in light of the current CA, but also while looking ahead toward a renewal proposal.

My comments below are made to highlight some of the team's findings and perhaps expand on them from an NSF perspective. If I don't mention some aspects of the LNO's activities below, it is only because I do not have anything to add. Because the sections of the report are not numbered, I'll refer to places in the text by page and paragraph.

1. Page, 4 second paragraph: The first recommendation in the report is actually addressed to NSF, pushing it to look beyond lists-of-tasks-completed in LNO reports and more toward assessing the impacts that the LNO has had in advancing the functioning of the LTER network and the larger ecological community. The challenge will be to develop appropriate metrics and be able to relate impacts with the tasks as laid out in the CA. I could not agree more with this recommendation and look forward to discussing with you how it might be implemented. In fact, a similar recommendation was recently made to NCEAS, a partner of the LNO in ecoinformatics

that shares the dual, and somewhat conflicting, missions of serving a community while also providing leadership at the same time.

2. Page 4, last two full paragraphs: Although no recommendations are presented here, these sections encourage the LNO to be more proactive in formulating a changing role for itself as LTER continues to evolve (such as with the Trends project). In addition, LNO is encouraged to be more involved in both developing and implementing a shared vision for LTER, including the LNO. NSF is well aware of the dynamic tensions between serving and leading communities (as mentioned above, this also applies to an extent with NCEAS). The LNO is more than a technical assistance shop, although it also must be a TA shop too. The challenge is for the LNO to itself figure out how to more optimally configure itself to provide all of the functions it is supposed to. That might mean, as suggested on page 5, providing more training opportunities for key subsets of LTER participants (particularly PIs?) utilizing the new training facility.

3. Page 5, two recommendations: These recommendations follow the earlier discussion but focus specifically on LNO's role in facilitating synthesis, including the development of options and metrics or other mechanisms for judging the success of its various investments in this area.

4. Page 6, recommendation: This section and the recommendation focus on matching LNO activities and staffing to specific needs of the LTER network, clearly relating to LNO's technical assistance role. A couple of specifics are included, such as shortening lag times between development and release, a reconsideration of staffing in light of defined network needs, and greater direct involvement of senior LNO members with the sites (in person at the LNO, on-site, via Polycom, etc.). The recommendation is not a simple one to address, going to the core of LNO activities as it does.

There is an ancillary observation two paragraphs farther down on page 6 that the team could not figure out exactly what the "LTER NIS" is or might be. I confess to a similar confusion, which may well be more widespread in LTER than you might otherwise guess.

5. Communications, pages 6-7: There are a lot of good suggestions in this section that are not all captured in the actual recommendation on page 7. Even if only a few were adopted in practice, they collectively could have a big impact on the relationship between LNO, the LTER sites and NSF. One suggestion that I am open to, would involve more of the LNO staff as observers in mid-term site visits.

6. The ITTL, page 7, bottom: The team clearly was duly impressed by the new ITTL, while also perceiving the imminent problem of scheduling it for LTER and partner training uses, versus using it in a more dedicated sense for UNM classes. NSF views the ITTL as a valuable resource that could be used to a high degree to facilitate a number of the recommendations in the LNO report. Given that most of the use of the facility is hypothetical at the moment, I hope that an arrangement can be derived that preserves the options.

I look forward to your response to the report and my comments and to working with you as the LNO continues to develop over time.

Thank you and the entire LNO staff for facilitating this review.

Sincerely,

Henry L. Gholz
Program Director, DEB/LTER

cc: Review Team, James Collins (AD/BIO), Joann Roskoski (EO/BIO), Michael Willig (DD/DEB), Penny Firth (DDD/DEB), Phillip Taylor (GEO/Bio-Oce), Roberta Marinelli (OPP), Machi Dilworth (DD/DBI)

Attachment: Site Review Report