

December 5, 2000

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Dear Henry:

I am writing in response to Scott Collin's letter of September 25 commenting on the recommendations of the Site Review Committee (SRC) that visited the LTER Network Office on May 8-9, 2000. Although the report of the SRC was very clear, his additional comments helped to focus our attention on specific points in the report. I thank both of you for this opportunity to respond to the site visit report.

The SRC made three general recommendations and a series of specific comments in the areas of publications, information management, new technology, interactions, and office operations. In this letter, I will address each of the general recommendations at some length and the specific recommendations only where I disagree with or am uncertain about the purpose of the recommendation.

## **General recommendations**

The SRC recognized the challenge that faces the Network Office (NET) in reconciling the need to be responsive to the Executive and Coordinating Committees while providing leadership in promoting network-level activities. The SRC suggested that this situation often placed NET in a reactive mode. The actual situation is more complicated, as NET must also be responsive to various divisions at NSF, occasionally at short notice. I agree that this situation sometimes puts NET in a reactive mode, but the need to react to unexpected opportunities or challenges provides one of the strongest arguments for having a centralized office. The need for coordinated and occasional rapid reaction from the LTER Network does exist, as demonstrated, for example, by the recent exercise to provide funds for enhanced connectivity to LTER field sites. The SRC suggested that a more proactive stance could be achieved by establishing a clear set of mid-term

goals in coordination with the LTER Executive Committee (EC). Therefore, **I have begun to identify a set of general goals that will be finalized by the date of submission of the NET renewal proposal.** These goals are based on duties identified in the proposal establishing NET, made current in discussions with NET staff and the EC. Specific target activities needed to achieve the overall goals will be developed with the assistance of the pertinent LTER standing committees. In addition, I will prepare a list of short-term goals, to be achieved by the data of the renewal proposal. I presented this plan to the EC at its August meeting, and I continue to interact with them to finalize this latter exercise, which I expect to occur by the February 2001 meeting of the EC in Washington.

The SRC acknowledged the need for NET to take on special projects that fulfill particular needs of the LTER Network. However, the SRC recommended that NET establish a clear set of guidelines to be used in evaluating new projects as they arise. Such guidelines must take into account the priorities of the LTER sites and the network as a whole as well as the goals of the Network Office. In preparations for the twenty-year review of the LTER program, NET staff, the EC, and the Committee on Scientific Initiatives recently met to review and revise the aims of the LTER program and to identify activities to achieve these aims. I am in the process of surveying LTER sites regarding their priorities for the activities identified in this meeting. I expect to have a prioritized list of activities by mid-January, 2001. These priorities will allow us to gauge the importance of different activities to LTER stakeholders. **Based on this knowledge, NET staff will develop a simple, concise set of guidelines that will direct the process of deciding which new projects to take on.** These guidelines will be finalized with the assistance of the EC before the February meeting in Washington.

To date, there has been no formal mechanism for sites to provide feedback on NET activities. The SRC identified the absence of an evaluation procedure as a problem in reviewing NET progress. **In consultation with the EC, I have established a mechanism to obtain feedback from the Coordinating Committee (CC) through quarterly updates of NET activities and an annual review of progress at the spring CC meeting.** The first such review will take place in 2001.

## **Information Management**

NET has the responsibility to provide leadership in achieving the goals of environmental data management as identified by the SRC. I believe, and the SRC recognized, that the NET Information Management Office has provided strong leadership in this area. However, several of the recommendations of the SRC can only be achieved through coordinated efforts of the LTER governing bodies, including both the Coordinating Committee and the Committee on Information Management. Specifically, the development of standards for data collection, the creation of a

long-term, system-wide data collection plan, and the development of QA/QC procedures at both site and network levels are major, labor-intensive, long-term activities which cannot be accomplished without the commitment of human resources beyond the means of the Network Office. Our logical partners in this exercise, the LTER Information Managers, are already substantially overburdened with responsibilities at their sites. The training and experience of Information Managers and support for their activities varies widely from site to site, with the result that only a small subset of the Information Managers can address these goals in a meaningful way. Moreover, rapid turnover of personnel and a limited pool of replacements reduce the available human resources even further.

Given these obstacles, achievement of the goals established by the SRC will be slow without substantial increases in the human resources available for information management. Increasing human resources can be accomplished in three ways. Increased emphasis can be placed on information management at the sites, and augmented resources can be provided to upgrade information management capabilities throughout the network. Funds can be provided to buy release time for site Information Managers to allow them to focus on specific tasks leading to the accomplishment of the goals mentioned above. Finally, increased resources can be provided to the Network Office to increase staff in the Information Management group. The optimal solution probably involves all three of these approaches. In the meantime, NET will continue to promote the need for standardization, joint data collection, and QA/QC within the present information management structure.

Regarding the maintenance of the LTER web sites, NET is presently responsible for LTER, ILTER, Schoolyard LTER, and OBFS web sites as well as a new intranet site that we are developing. The NET proposal did not recognize the need for a person to focus on the establishment and maintenance of web sites, and we have had to divert resources from our publications budget to hire a part-time web master. The press of work has recently forced us to increase this person to full time, and we may have to hire additional help. This position needs to be formalized and funds allocated in the renewal proposal in 2002.

## **New Technology**

The goals and composition of the Technology Committee are being reviewed to bring them in line with the recommendations of the SRC. John Vande Castle has created a Technology Working Group comprised of LTER scientists with expertise in a broad range of new technologies. This group will meet in January to begin to address the recommendations of the SRC.

## **Interactions**

NET staff have been central in the development of the ILTER program, which has now grown to a size and complexity that few would have expected seven years ago. The presence of Chris French in the Network Office allowed a high level of ILTER activities, and we have not been able to compensate adequately for her departure. The formation of groups of LTER scientists to act as liaisons with regional ILTER groups is one effective mechanism to reduce the burden on NET. However, the maintenance of ILTER databases, web page, and communications will inevitably decline unless there is a dedicated person in the Network Office for these activities. In addition, without a person focused on developing new international contacts and maintaining old ones, the rapid growth of the ILTER Network will slow and the development of international research goals and projects may falter. Although we have discussed the possibility of another IPA arrangement with International Programs, no decision has been made. If NSF is interested in maintaining and increasing the ILTER activities, resources for a program coordinator will have to be provided.

I appreciate the time and effort that the SRC put into the development of their report, and I have taken each of their recommendations seriously. The principal message of limited resources and prioritization of activities has made an impression on all of the NET staff. It is clear that in many areas we have reached saturation and must either decline to take on new activities or, if warranted, seek additional resources for these activities. At the same time we recognize that some of these new activities may be beneficial or even critical for the LTER Network. We will continue to work with the Executive and Coordinating Committees, our National Advisory Board, and the National Science Foundation to develop mechanisms to identify and address the critical needs of the LTER Network.

Sincerely,

Robert B. Waide

Executive Director

cc: S. Collins