

18 September, 2012

TO: Alan Townsend, Division Director, and Penny Firth, Deputy Division Director, NSF Division of Environmental Biology

CC: John Wingfield, Assistant Director, and Joann Roskoski, Deputy Assistant Director, Directorate for Biological Sciences

Dear Alan and Penny,

We were very pleased to be able to talk with John and Joann at the LTER ASM – we felt that the discussions were productive. We are happy to follow up with you on those discussions, as John suggested, to provide you with some input on the proposal submission process. As a first step, we would like to share the results of an informal electronic survey that we conducted since our discussion with John and Joann, in hopes that it proves useful to you in your discussions of the proposal submission process in DEB. The survey was constructed in surveymonkey.com and distributed to personal contacts, scientific society section leaders, and to the ECOLOG-L listerv, and was forwarded by recipients to additional recipients (see Fig. 1 for the survey). Because John indicated during our discussion that the limits on the numbers of proposals per investigator were to be rescinded, we did not survey the community about that issue. We conducted the survey with two purposes in mind.

First, we aimed to gauge the community's preferences between (1) the current proposal submission process of a single preproposal deadline followed by an invited full proposal submission each year or (2) a process that includes two deadlines per year (Fig. 1). However, recognizing that NSF is under extreme workload pressures, we included several "compromises" with option (2) (the two proposal deadlines/year scenario) – namely that there would be no preproposals, there would be fewer *ad hoc* reviews, and proposals would be shorter. We intentionally limited the survey choices to these two alternatives, because our conversations with NSF staff at the LTER ASM indicated that these were the most plausible alternatives. In other words, it seemed highly unlikely that DEB would reinstate two proposals/year without instituting changes to reduce NSF staff workloads. As of 9 pm CST on Sept 18, 2012 (one week from when it was distributed), 1622 people responded to the survey. Of those, 13.3% favored option (1) and 86.7% favored option (2) (Fig. 2).

Second, we asked a question aimed at raising awareness in the community of the crisis NSF is facing with regard to obtaining *ad hoc* reviews and qualified panelists. Therefore, we asked whether respondents would be willing to step up and help reduce the NSF workload by agreeing to provide *ad hoc* reviews and serve on panels. This question was not meant to quantify the pool of reviewers and panelists in the community, but rather to serve as something analogous to an "Honor Code" similar to what might be required of incoming freshman in college, by challenging the community to reflect on its role in the proposal submission and review process. As of 9 pm CST on Sept 18, 2012, 1571 people responded to the question, with 95.3% selecting "yes" and 4.7% selecting "no" (Fig. 2).

The largest group of survey respondents was full professors or equivalent (27.4%), followed closely by assistant professors or equivalent (25.6%), then by associate professors or

equivalent (19.4%), and with similar proportions of graduate students (11.2%) and postdocs (10.9%) (Fig. 2).

We also received a number of email responses and had a number of informal discussions with scientists at the LTER ASM regarding the survey, and we summarize that additional input from the community qualitatively here.

1) A small number of people communicated that they did not like the two options that we provided in the survey – they would like two deadlines each year but did not like the “compromises” that we included. For example, they would like to have preproposals followed by full proposals at each deadline; they do not want to see the number of ad hoc reviews reduced; or they do not see the value of shorter of proposals. In essence, those that wanted additional options all wanted a return to something that more resembled the “old” process, and some wanted that process modified to include preproposals. As these contacts were anecdotal it is impossible to know how widely these views were held.

2) Many people would like more opportunities to have their voices heard at NSF. The community feels that it has a lot of creative, good ideas that could help solve these problems, but that there were few opportunities to contribute or participate in problem solving. Some of the ideas and concerns that we heard included:

- a) hold virtual panels, particularly at the preproposal stage
- b) put in place mechanisms that would prevent scientists from resubmitting entirely unmodified proposals (which also raises the issue of getting reviews back from NSF more quickly)
- c) ensure that at least one deadline per year coincides with that of the other program(s) that most often co-review proposals with DEB.
- d) if the preproposal process remains, have rejections be “tiered” by quality, so that not all investigators have to go back to square 1 (writing a preproposal) upon rejection
- e) establish a separate category of smaller awards (e.g., <\$100,000)
- f) convene an *ad hoc* committee or hold a workshop to discuss ways that the quality of reviews and panels can be improved
- g) create more “sticks” around reviewing, e.g., by requiring a certain number of *ad hoc* reviews or panel memberships depending on the level of NSF funding
- h) limit the number of awards that any investigator can have simultaneously from a single program within NSF
- i) recognize that the reasons that scientists don’t always provide *ad hoc* reviews and agree to serve on panels are complex – people are not just shirking responsibilities
- j) reallocate funding dollars towards core programs away from other initiatives
- k) find ways to prevent the overburdening of women and minorities in panel duties
- l) find ways to broaden the database of potential ad hoc reviewers

We hope you find this information useful in your deliberations about the proposal submission process in DEB and look forward to future opportunities for all members of the community to participate in further conversations about these and related issues.

Best regards,

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Survey: NSF Proposal Submission Process

We ask you to consider what you think is best to advance ecological and environmental science given the constraints (time, funds, personnel, community collaboration) that NSF operates under today and in the near future.

*** 1. Please select one of the following options. We recognize that these are not the only options, but these have emerged as the most plausible alternatives in our conversations.**

- The current system in NSF DEB (that uses a single preproposal followed by one full proposal panel each year) is the best approach, given concerns about work loads for both NSF staff and the community of reviewers and panelists.
- NSF DEB should have two full proposal submission deadlines per year, but to remedy workload issues that faced NSF and the community prior to 2012, the preproposal process would be eliminated, the proposals would be shorter (e.g., 8-10 pages), and the process would involve fewer ad hoc reviews.

2. Among the chief concerns of NSF is the difficulty in soliciting sufficient and prompt ad hoc reviewers and panelists. If you selected the two full proposals/year option above, are you willing to step up and help reduce the NSF workload by agreeing to provide ad hoc reviews and serve on panels? (If you are a graduate student or post-doc, project forward to when you will be eligible to serve.)

- Yes
- No

*** 3. What best describes your current position?**

- graduate student
- post-doc
- assistant professor or equivalent
- associate professor or equivalent
- full professor or equivalent
- adjunct professor
- research associate
- other

Done

Figure 1. The survey.

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1. Please select one of the following options. We recognize that these are not the only options, but these have emerged as the most plausible alternatives in our conversations. [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

	Response Percent	Response Count
The current system in NSF DEB (that uses a single preproposal followed by one full proposal panel each year) is the best approach, given concerns about work loads for both NSF staff and the community of reviewers and panelists.	13.3%	215
NSF DEB should have two full proposal submission deadlines per year, but to remedy workload issues that faced NSF and the community prior to 2012, the preproposal process would be eliminated, the proposals would be shorter (e.g., 8-10 pages), and the process would involve fewer ad hoc reviews.	86.7%	1,407
answered question		1,622
skipped question		0

2. Among the chief concerns of NSF is the difficulty in soliciting sufficient and prompt ad hoc reviewers and panelists. If you selected the two full proposals/year option above, are you willing to step up and help reduce the NSF workload by agreeing to provide ad hoc reviews and serve on panels? (If you are a graduate student or post-doc, project forward to when you will be eligible to serve.) [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	95.3%	1,497
No	4.7%	74
answered question		1,571
skipped question		51

3. What best describes your current position?

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	Response Percent	Response Count
graduate student	11.2%	181
post-doc	10.9%	177
assistant professor or equivalent	25.6%	415
associate professor or equivalent	19.4%	314
full professor or equivalent	27.4%	445
adjunct professor	1.4%	22
research associate	2.1%	34
other	2.1%	34
answered question		1,622
skipped question		0

Figure 2. The results of the survey by question.