



## **External Advisory Committee for the Northeastern States Research Cooperative 2021 Summary Report**

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### **Overview of the Committee Charge and Process**

The charge of the External Advisory Committee (EAC) for the Northeastern States Research Cooperative (NSRC) is to inform the NSRC Executive Committee about the priority issues facing forest stakeholders in the Northern Forest region and to provide guidance to the NSRC Executive Committee for crafting the 2021 request for proposals (RFP) in response to broader stakeholder interests and needs. This report is a summary of responses from the EAC following individual feedback via an anonymous questionnaire, a two-hour facilitated EAC group meeting via Zoom held on August 5, 2021, and EAC member feedback on a draft of this report during a ten-day comment period, August 12–22, 2021.

### **2021 External Advisory Committee Members**

*Susan Arnold*, Vice President for Conservation, Appalachian Mountain Club

*John Bartow*, Executive Director, Empire State Forest Products Association

*Tyler Everett\**, Passamaquoddy Forestry, United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc.

*Rich Grogan\**, Executive Director, Northern Border Regional Commission

*Patrick Hackley*, State Forester and Director, NH Division of Forests and Lands, State of New Hampshire

*Derek Ibarguen*, Forest Supervisor, White Mountain National Forest

*Kathy Fallon Lambert*, Senior Advisor, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment; Co-Founder, Science Policy Exchange

*Donald Mansius*, Director, Forest Policy and Management Division, Maine Forest Service

*Craig McLaughlin*, Wildlife Research and Assessment Supervisor, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

*Neil Patterson, Jr.*, Assistant Director, Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, SUNY ESF

*Tyler Ray*, Founder and Principal, Backyard Concept

*Sean Ross*, Managing Director, Lyme Timber Company

*April M. Salas*, Executive Director, Revers Center for Energy at Tuck School of Business, Dartmouth College; Chief Sustainability Officer, Town of Hanover, NH

*Joe Short\**, Vice President, Northern Forest Center

*Michael Snyder*, Vermont State Forester and Commissioner of Vermont Forests, Parks, and Recreation, State of Vermont

*Casey Thornbrugh*, Northeast and Southeast Tribal Climate Science Liaison, United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc., and Northeast and Southeast Climate Adaptation Science Centers

\*Did not participate in the EAC meeting but provided input via email and the pre-meeting questionnaire.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

An early comment during the EAC videoconference set the tone for the discussion:

“Looking at the RFP, our input [from last year] seems to have been heard, and that’s really fun to see. [...] And then looking at the funded projects, they’re interesting and informative, but what I wonder about is what was the range of applications and proposals and what didn’t get funded, because I’m kind of curious about that. I guess I’ll say that I’m a little bit underwhelmed by the list of funded projects, relative to the RFP, and the focus areas, and the principles embedded in it.”

Following this comment, the EAC discussed a general feeling that there was a gap between the list of funded projects and the principles in the RFP about informing practitioners and policymakers. As one EAC member stated, “[This is] a good list of topics, but the nature of the work is pretty far removed, I would say, from application.”

The discussion then explored several ideas about why that might be the case and what recommendations might be made to close this gap. EAC members asked for a list of all of the proposed projects to try to ascertain if a group of applied projects did come through the call for proposals, but that they were not chosen because of merit, in which case the problem to address would be how to encourage better projects. This conversation led to a number of recommendations including:

#### **I. General Recommendations:**

1. Strengthen the language within the RFP, the application form itself, and the selection criteria to promote problem-driven, engaged research with solid communications work. The language should ask more from the applicants about the applied question that they are asking, their rationale, and their strategy for making their results actionable for management and policy. This could be distilled to instructions for applicants so that there is no ambiguity in their responses; for example, in a matrix that steers responses from concept to action.
2. Consider requiring the applicant to assert the “readiness” level of their proposed research for application like “technology readiness levels” used in other scientific fields. A commonly accepted spectrum of “commercial readiness” levels ranges from basic to applied research, and/or commercializing to scaling projects. Consider including a “readiness level” as an explicit check box which would also help NSRC in future reporting about where its funding goes.
3. Reconsider the 50% match requirement as this could be a structural barrier for applied projects and projects led by groups outside of universities. This is also an equity issue. Could there be a mechanism for asking if projects either have a match or if they need a match, and if a match is needed for a promising project, could there be a process for working with that team to find a solution? (Note from the NBRC: the NBRC has not found this to be an issue, but if equity is a concern, the NBRC has used a waiver system in the past (e.g., for COVID-related hardship)).

4. Encourage projects that demonstrate alignment with the timeframe of policy decisions. This may mean shorter projects on one-year timelines or multi-stage projects that have longer horizons but also account for interim annual milestones.
5. Spread the word about the RFP “beyond the usual suspects” in basic research.
6. Build in funding for relationship-building and engagement. This could look like a smaller award such as a planning grant. This could also include flexibility built into full awards such that research teams can modify their projects midstream based on engagement with partners and stakeholders. Smaller planning grants also help to address the equity issue because smaller or less-well-resourced organizations could possibly be competitive for smaller awards that build support or provide proof-of-concept for future applications.
7. Funding for relationship-building and engagement should be tied to a clearly articulated and strong approach (i.e., as one participant put it, “money alone is not the answer.”). One strong approach to ensuring engagement is to require a partner/organization on the project team who has the track record and demonstrated networks in place to partner with academia on that outreach and engagement.
8. Review the timing of the general NSRC award and the Indigenous Forest Knowledge Fund (IFKF). There needs to be enough time between the general RFP process and notice of awards and the IFKF application due date such that Tribal-led projects could participate in the general call and then restructure for the IFKF if needed.

## **II. Specific Topics:**

### A. Environmental Justice (EJ) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

The group discussed the topics of environmental justice (EJ) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Several members of the EAC advocated for these topics to retain the current emphasis in the RFP to ensure that the NSRC is meeting its mission to be “relevant and beneficial to people and environment.” The group discussed the “mixed messages” in the pre-meeting questionnaire responses (see Appendix A) regarding this topic. Two participants made the point that “these are important issues, but could be de-emphasized as relative to other topics.” One participant countered that it was important to know if “our services are benefitting those we serve. Looking at the NSRC geography and NSRC mission, we should not assume the work and research in their current design benefits all communities in the NSRC region.” Another participant illustrated the value of looking “through a lens of DEI” to reach new conclusions and recognize blind spots. The final comment of this discussion suggested that research that helps to define EJ as it relates to ecology and natural resource management would be helpful and that the RFP could clarify this focus.

### B. Rural Community and Economic Development

In the RFP, the topic of rural community and economic development is quite broad and needs more alignment with the rest of the document. In the RFP, the EAC recommends moving this point higher in the document to be the fourth cross-cutting focus area.

### C. Areas of Emphasis or De-emphasis

In general, the EAC felt like the issues emphasized in the RFP were still relevant. There were suggestions for more emphasis on the timber industry, forest products, and economic connections to forest management, recreation, and workforce development. Several participants emphasized the importance of regional approaches — research that facilitates cross-border, regional thinking, for example in invasive species research and response.

There was a discussion about whether COVID-related topics should be de-emphasized (see responses in the pre-meeting questionnaire). One participant advocated that COVID-related changes in visitors and residents in the Northern Forest are still quite relevant with long-term implications, for example, increasing wealth and income inequality by an influx of new remote workers. Another participant noted that COVID-related topics may be less relevant with regard to *why* changes have occurred, and instead should move quickly toward an emphasis on better understanding these changes through data, and then engaging with them as they are.

### D. Review Criteria

The EAC recommends that the principles in the RFP become more clearly reflected in the proposal review criteria and review process, including both the technical reviews and the external panel reviews. One group suggested the concept of bonus points for clearly applied research. “We’re going to hear a lot of basic research proposals and that’s good — I don’t think that’s going to change. But if we want to drive more toward applied, [consider] a bonus points program for [rewarding proposals with] active partnerships between basic researchers and managers.”

The EAC recommends adjusting the percentages of the research criteria and moving the “additional considerations” higher in the list with their own percentages. For example, the applicability question is 20%. Could this be increased directly or could the concept of “bonus points” described above add weight to this criterion? The group did not suggest an exact figure, but expressed that this is a clear priority of the EAC and should be weighted as such.

As one participant put it, the key is to make what were termed “additional considerations” in the 2020 RFP a formal and substantial part (at least 20 points) of the scoring rubric, not just “additional” or “bonus” items. “The 2020 approach suggests that these are nice to have but not must-have items, when I think the strong consensus of the committee in 2020 (and in 2021 as well) was to not just encourage but require projects that are “problem-driven, engaged research with solid communications work.” Looking at last year’s points values, none of the points in the scoring rubric actually spoke to this, so it is not surprising that funded projects didn’t reflect it.”

One participant suggested having a single person who is fully immersed in the subject matter of the RFP screen all proposals for alignment with the priorities before they are sent to the reviewers/evaluators.

Regional efforts need to be ranked more highly than local efforts.

**III. Attached:** Compiled individual responses to the pre-meeting questionnaire.