

**National Agricultural Research, Extension,  
Education and Economics Advisory Board**

**REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL  
AGRICULTURAL LIBRARY**

**From a Meeting of the Advisory Board's Ad Hoc Task Force for the National  
Agricultural Library Conducted during the Advisory Board Meeting,  
Washington D.C., March 8-9, 2007**

**Executive Summary**

The National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board's Ad Hoc Task Force for the National Agricultural Library (NAL) met in Washington DC during a meeting of the NAREEE Advisory Board. This Task Force was established by the Board and charged to advise NAL and The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) on how they can improve the unique national collection of science-based information on United States (US) food, fiber, natural resources and agricultural related issues in serving the USDA and other stakeholder groups. Also, the committee was to advise the NAL on how it could significantly increase its visibility and dissemination of information to its stakeholders through both traditional and electronic means in carrying out its congressionally mandated roles.

The Task Force members have expressed concern about NAL's ability to deliver essential information services for the Department, the Land-Grant university community, and for the Nation. NAL has been a priceless resource with comprehensive collections and innovative services supporting the diverse and complex information needs of researchers, policy-makers, educators, farmers, businesses, organizations, and others in agriculture and natural resources. The NAL reflects our Nation's heritage of agricultural knowledge and discovery. It provides the essential underpinning for the creation of new scientific knowledge and technological breakthroughs. Without this wellspring of core knowledge and innovation on tap, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for scientists, stakeholders, policy-makers and other officials to make sound decisions, to avoid duplication of work, or to take informed and appropriate actions to move efficiently and effectively in food safety and security, economic progress, energy independence, and improved quality of life. It is inconceivable that the USDA would be able to establish effective policy or present credible research and education programs without NAL having a robust information program and associated services to support its recommendations and conclusions.

In 2002, the Board sent forward recommendations<sup>1</sup> for the revitalization of NAL whereby the critical information needs of the agricultural enterprise would be secured for

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<sup>1</sup> NAREEE Advisory Board transmittal of December 6, 2002 to the Secretary of Agriculture

the nation. In its advisory role, the Task Force is concerned with the future of NAL unless there are changes and would like to raise the following issues with the NAREEE Advisory Board for their further consideration and their discussion with the Secretary of Agriculture and the appropriate committees of Congress. The issues are:

- 1) **NAL's budget is insufficient to meet NAL's national and departmental missions.** In the last two years, NAL was unable to purchase books published outside the United States; in many cases NAL was the only library in the United States purchasing these agricultural titles.
- 2) **USDA's 2007 Farm Bill proposals for reorganization of the REE mission should include NAL.** Current discussion and proposals for the 2007 Farm Bill reauthorization are silent regarding the NAL.
- 3) **There is insufficient information and or support within the Department and Congress for development of the National Digital Library for Agriculture (NDLA).** The small digital collections available today require advanced technologies and robust search engines to provide interoperability and in-depth searching across files and databases within NAL's collections as well as across the digital collections of the Land-Grant colleges /universities and other institutions. A fully searchable digital library is critical for the future of the NAL.

We have significant concerns for NAL's future given its current fiscal state and believe we are fast reaching a tipping point. We recommend immediate action by USDA and Congress to preserve this national treasure before further regression occurs.

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**Introduction**

The National Agricultural Research, Education, Extension, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board established an **Ad Hoc Task Force for the National Agricultural Library (NAL)**, and its first report was submitted in 2002. In lieu of a statutory advisory council, the role of the Ad Hoc Task Force is to advise NAL and The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) on how they can improve the unique national collection of science-based information on United States (US) food, fiber, natural resources and agricultural related issues in serving the USDA and other stakeholder groups.

The recommendations and rationale which follow will address the following critical issues for NAL:

- 1. Adequacy of funding to meet mandated national and departmental missions;**
- 2. Organizational placement to best reflect its role and visibility within USDA;**
- 3. Emergence of the National Digital Library for Agriculture (NDLA).**

**Background**

“There is established in the Department of Agriculture the National Agricultural Library to serve as the primary agricultural information resource of the United States.”<sup>2</sup> NAL is one of four national libraries, which is internationally recognized for its unique and accessible collections of agricultural information. In meeting its national mission, NAL serves as the nexus for a network of state land-grant university and other institutional libraries.

In addition to its prominent national role to acquire, organize, disseminate, and preserve our Nation's heritage of agricultural knowledge and discovery that is the underpinning for new scientific and technological breakthroughs, NAL has demonstrated strengths and expertise through its specialized Information Centers. These Centers provide value-added services and expertise on high priority topics in agriculture, including Web sites with links to full-text and other related resources, and special information products. The Information Centers were established by congressional mandate or according to high national priorities of USDA and/or the Administration. Examples include: Food Safety,

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<sup>2</sup> 7USC3125a

Food and Nutrition, Invasive Species, Water Quality, Rural Development, Alternative Farming Systems, and Animal Welfare Information Centers.

The NAREEE Advisory Board has had a long-standing interest in the NAL following an intensive review of a report from distinguished members of an Interagency Panel, chaired by Dr. Vanderhoef, Chancellor, University of California – Davis, called the *Report on the National Agricultural Library 2001*, along with a review of broad public input to the *Report*. The Advisory Board’s review resulted in its strong endorsement of the recommendations made in the *2001 Report* by Vanderhoef, et al. The Advisory Board stated in their subsequent letter and report to then Secretary Ann Veneman, “NAL is an outstanding national resource with untapped potential to provide information resources to the benefit of all Americans and peoples around the world ...”<sup>3</sup> Since then, the Board believes only limited progress has been made towards implementation of its recommendations, although they continue to serve as NAL’s vision for the future.

Following the *Report on the National Agricultural Library 2001* (Vanderhoef, et al.), additional studies of NAL were conducted to provide insight for NAL on user needs, ways to streamline and integrate core services and Web-based technologies, and some initial strategic planning for the NDLA. Common themes emerged from the studies suggesting NAL modify operations to be more customer-driven, there is an urgent need for increased visibility and public awareness of NAL and its services, users expect convenient electronic access to information, and the NDLA is universally applauded and endorsed, and should be the main focus and long-term organizing principle for NAL and its national network of university and industrial libraries.

### **Adequacy of Funding**

We believe the agricultural information needs of the research community, stakeholders, and the American people demand attention, support, and action. The 2001 Vanderhoef Report in response to a charge by the former Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Rominger stated,

“... the NAL is unable, with its current level of support, to do both well.” [i.e., serve as a USDA Library & serve as a National Agricultural Library]

The Interagency Panel also stated,

“The Panel believes the annual NAL budget should eventually reach approximately \$100 million (2001 dollars) to meet its congressionally mandated mission in the digital age. This will provide sufficient resources to develop superior expert system search tools, to hire and retain the infotech talent it needs, to fill the growing gaps in its coverage of new knowledge in research journals and historical documents, and to ensure its security in view of the new security hazards it will face. It will enable the NAL to provide services and levels of service required of a National Library in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

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<sup>3</sup> NAREEE Advisory Board transmittal of December 6, 2002 to the Secretary of Agriculture

## **Review of NAL Over the Past Decade**

NAL's outlook appears questionable unless positive actions are taken quickly by Congress hopefully during the 2007 Farm Bill reauthorization process and by USDA in its FY 2009 budget request. NAL has operated with an essentially flat budget since FY 1996. As a consequence at least forty-seven positions were abolished, collection development expenditures decreased \$1.8 million which forced the cancellation of some journals for which their sole holding library in the United States was NAL. Since 1996, more than six high-use Information Centers were either closed or down-sized because of insufficient funds in topical areas as important as biotechnology, plant genome, aquaculture, youth development, rural development, and technology transfer. In addition to program funding needs, NAL's facility costs to renovate and repair the Abraham Lincoln building are estimated at \$38.8 million, which includes the replacement of leaking windows that threaten the safety and preservation of the collection.

NAL's FY 2006 appropriation was \$22.2 million. Despite many ongoing efforts by NAL's innovative and dedicated employees to overcome the odds, the negative impacts from insufficient support for NAL over the past decade are just beginning to surface in the public eye and among stakeholders and researchers who need and regularly utilize NAL's resources.

This last decade is characterized by insufficient short- and long-term funding for NAL<sup>4</sup>, NAL's loss of agency status during USDA's reorganization in 1993, no proposed language for NAL and its critical National Digital Library for Agriculture initiative in the 2007 Farm Bill Proposals by USDA and an ongoing concern by the full NAREEE Advisory Board on the lack of support by USDA and its Research, Education, and Economics mission area.

The Board's recommendations in its 2002 report identified NAL issues and recommended specific actions to help it revitalize and increase its visibility as the country's only National Agricultural Library and as the coordinator of the national network of state Land-Grant Libraries and USDA field libraries. NAL has the core infrastructure necessary to acquire, catalog, index, preserve, and disseminate agricultural publications – it only requires nurturing with increased dollars to be able to shift its extraordinary collection into a fast-paced digital collection – or it will most likely lose momentum and potentially regress.

## **Organizational Placement within USDA**

As a Task Force, we are concerned that within the USDA-Research, Education, and Economics reorganization proposal (under Title VII of the 2007 Farm Bill Proposals by USDA) and the Farm Bill reauthorization which is under discussion by the Congress of the United States, there is no mention of this critical infrastructure. The NAL should be included in any list of topics for discussion regarding reorganization of REE, as it is the primary repository for information so critical to the agencies mission area. For a

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<sup>4</sup> In the early 1970's funding for NAL and the National Library of Medicine (NLM) were similar. In 1982 the NLM budget was doubled and has received steady increases thereafter.

successful program of intramural and extramural research and outreach within USDA and beyond, it is imperative to have a National Agricultural Library that is adequately funded, and capable of serving the USDA, its Land Grant University partners, stakeholders and general public.

As an example, it is important for the scientists and stakeholders who are working toward moving this nation more energy independent to have access to a strong informational base. The NAL is vital in these efforts and without both funding and serious consideration to the matter of the NAL's place in any reorganization, an opportunity for long term improvement may be lost.

### **National Digital Library for Agriculture**

Through the NDLA initiative, NAL is transitioning its vast collection of research documents, other trusted high priority materials (grey literature, historic and rare collections, in a variety of formats, etc.) and databases to a system capable of providing quick, easy access to these resources anywhere and anytime to USDA employees, stakeholders and the public.

To serve stakeholders effectively in the future, NAL should be able to provide a wealth of agriculture-related information and knowledge in accessible electronically to an ever-growing and broad range of customers who want quality content (digital abstracts, full-text publications, research papers, data, Web sites, databases, information packages, special collections, 24/7 document delivery, and other digital resources). This dynamic national agricultural information system draws upon innovative technologies and superior search engines to enable customers a "one-stop-shopping" reality. The system is coordinated by NAL and built on a network of partnerships with Land-Grant and other institutional libraries across the nation to provide users with transparent searching of comprehensive digital library collections – libraries without walls!

Establishing a National Digital Library for Agriculture was one of the central recommendations in the 2001 Vanderhoef Report; a recommendation which has been universally embraced. But to date, the level of Departmental and Congressional support has been limited, which has dramatically limited its initiation. NAL has struggled within its current appropriation to make some progress, often at the expense of essential programs and services. To fully implement the concept, modern systems and search engines capable of searching across multiple platforms, formats and networks are needed. At present NAL is not capable of simultaneously searching across all of its own digital collections, much less across the digital collections of its partners.

### **Key Recommendations:**

If we, as a nation and its scientists, are to maintain a competitive advantage in the world's agricultural arena and solve the perplexing issues that we face, it is imperative that:

**1) NAL be revitalized by prompt attention of USDA and appropriate committees of Congress to support and fund the NDLA initiative;**

2) NAL be positioned within USDA to best reflect its role and visibility as a National Agricultural Library serving its many stakeholders;

3) NAL be fully funded to:

- a) enhance collection development needs that are reflective of a national agricultural repository, are responsive to the information needs of USDA and the agricultural community, and are supportive of the digital library environment
- b) expand key activities of existing Information Centers and create new and sustainable Information Centers to support high priority topics of USDA and the Executive Office of the President. **For example, the NAREEE Advisory Board recommends that a Biofuels, Biobased Products, and Bioenergy Information Center be established in support of the President's Advanced Energy Initiative, and the Secretary of Agriculture's Agricultural Bioenergy and Biobased Products Research Initiative.** USDA has a major role in this area and is conducting important research that, when completed, should be made publicly available and preserved indefinitely through the NDLA.
- c) obtain the tools and technological expertise to manage information, enhance access to information, and to fully integrate NAL's building blocks for the NDLA.

The NAL *ad hoc* Task Force urges the NAREEE Advisory Board to endorse, to support, and to forward these key recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture and to the appropriate committees/sub-committee of Congress.

**NAREEE Advisory Board Ad Hoc Task Force for the National Agricultural Library**

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