



SCHOOL OF PHYSICAL SCIENCES  
DEPARTMENT OF EARTH SYSTEM SCIENCE

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### MEMORANDUM

To: Karl Erb, Director of the Office of Polar Programs  
From: Eric Saltzman for the OPP Office Advisory Committee  
Date: 21 May, 2010  
Re: 2009 Committee of Visitor Reports

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Eric Saltzman'.

The OPP Advisory Committee is pleased to have forwarded the 2009 Committee of Visitor reports, one each for the Arctic Science, Antarctic Science, and Antarctic Infrastructure and Logistics Divisions of the Office of Polar Programs. These reports were developed from COV meetings conducted in September and October 2009, discussed in draft form during the November 2009 OAC meeting, and finalized by the COVs prior to the May 2010 OAC meeting.

We are pleased to report that the three COVs were overwhelmingly positive in their review of OPP processes in terms of both the integrity and efficiency of the program's processes and management, and also in terms of results of NSF investments. Each COV report highlights the fact that the excellent work in meeting the mission of the organization for polar science is achieved by high workloads carried by OPP staff members.

In the context of their overwhelmingly positive reviews, each COV also proposed a limited set of recommendations, which we have pulled together in the following few pages. We note that while these recommendations were developed by the COVs in the context of their reviews of each Division, many if not most of these points are applicable across the Program. While we feel that the COV reports themselves contain important documentation that should be useful to OPP as it manages its efforts, and therefore should be reviewed in their entirety, we ask that OPP management respond explicitly to the following recommendations according to the standard NSF protocol.

## **ARCTIC SCIENCE DIVISION**

The Arctic Science COV provided the following recommendations in rank order of importance.

### **ARC COV Recommendation 1:**

To proactively reduce dwell time... **a)** process the obvious declines as soon as possible after panels; simply processing the obvious declines two weeks earlier would result in ~60% of proposals being cleared within six months; **b)** for the period 2009-2012, track these dwell time metrics at the end of each specific solicitation to evaluate whether the issue is being adequately dealt with; and **c)** consider whether moving back to 2 target deadlines per year instead of 1 would significantly affect dwell time without other negative impacts.

### **ARC COV Recommendation 2:**

Consider evaluating the RSL program on a longer timeframe (e.g., 5-6 years) than the standard three year window used for COV reviews of science programs. Such a short, recent window for review fails to capture much of the work of the logistics program for individual projects and hampers adequate review.

### **ARC COV Recommendation 3:**

Make the bulk of the content in the Review Analysis available to PIs (with reviewers' names excised). These documents are much richer with respect to the decision making process and review weighting components that are often missing from the panel summary. Providing Review Analysis or similar document to PI in case of declines will help avoid the common practice of misinterpreting the overall significance or weight of individual review and panel comments in the final decision. Having more complete analysis would allow resubmissions to be targeted more effectively where the most benefit to the science could result most easily.

The COVs concern with this recommendation is that POs might feel constrained in preparing Review Analyses for public consumption, and their quality and informativeness would correspondingly decline. This would defeat the purpose of the recommendation. The COV review panel also does not want to increase the already heavy workload of the POs. An alternative is to formally encourage POs to rely heavily on their Review Analyses in communicating the results of panel deliberations to PIs (e.g., by 'cutting & pasting' sections of the Review Analysis into the email notifications).

### **ARC COV Recommendation 4:**

Whenever possible, obtain at least three ad hoc reviews in addition to a panel evaluation, thereby minimizing the use of panel only reviews. The COV's opinion was that ad hoc reviews in combination with panel review led to the best science being funded and to the best and clearest documentation of those funding decisions.

### **ARC COV Recommendation 5:**

The program should assure that the postdoctoral funding competition is regularized, and that the Program Officers effectively use this mechanism to facilitate the transition of underrepresented investigators from the status of trainees to senior investigators.

## **ANTARCTIC SCIENCE DIVISION**

Based upon our review and assessment, we offer the following recommendations to help ensure that the US Antarctic Program is able to take full advantage of the opportunities currently available and is best positioned to address emerging opportunities and challenges in the years ahead.

### ***Proposal Solicitation, Review and Award Management***

**ANT COV Recommendation 1.** Evaluate current program director workloads and add staff as justified

### ***Research Data and Long-Term Measurements***

**ANT COV Recommendation 2.** Ensure data sets from past, current and future ANT projects are in the public domain and are readily accessible

**ANT COV Recommendation 3.** In collaboration with other mission-oriented Federal agencies, ensure key long-term observations in Antarctica are continued and are adequately supported

### ***Strategic Planning and International Collaboration***

**ANT COV Recommendation 4.** Implement rigorous strategic planning process to set short-, mid- and long-term objectives for infrastructure and science support in Antarctica

**ANT COV Recommendation 5.** Aggressively explore and exploit international collaborations to expand research opportunities for US investigators in Antarctica

## ANTARCTIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND LOGISTICS

The COV's principal recommendations regarding the AIL and PEHS divisions are few, because the COV found the structure of both divisions appropriate to their tasks and the performance of both divisions very good to outstanding for most areas, though rated less highly regarding marine science support, over the period of review. OPP might, however consider the following:

**AIL COV Recommendation 1.** OPP should consider support for community workshops on the development of access capabilities to new remote field sites of great scientific interest.

**AIL COV Recommendation 2.** OPP long-term logistics planning should allow for recurring logistical challenges, for example work in remote areas requiring services such as ice coring, ship-based helicopter operations, and helicopter support in remote or mountainous areas. The expectation of such programs should be built into the planning for resource allocation.

**AIL COV Recommendation 3.** OPP should continue to proactively explore collaborations with international Antarctic program operators that may provide greater access to remote areas of the Southern Ocean and Antarctic margin and interior for US scientists.

**AIL COV Recommendation 4.** OPP should consider improvements in coordination and reporting of marine projects support and integration with the rest of the OPP program, possibly via restructuring of staff responsibilities. There is also a need for OPP and the Office Advisory Committee to review and track progress towards safeguarding ship support for polar marine projects, and to evaluate the current organizational structure of the program and consider strategic options to better meet future requirements. For example, such an evaluation might examine the feasibility of redirection of project-specific science support funding into ANT in order that ANT may more closely manage its science support requirements.

**AIL COV Recommendation 5.** OPP should examine its staffing with respect to overall responsibilities. Some funded positions remain open even in the face of massive workloads for the present staff, for example the Antarctic Research Integration and Support position for long-range planning within the science side of OPP. Marine projects support staffing is another area of COV concern, especially given the challenges of upcoming ship replacement / contract renewal, and COV observations that that marine projects support is not documented or supported via planning by AIL at the same level as are activities at McMurdo, South Pole, and Palmer Station.