FACT SHEET

Selecting and Establishing Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units

Introduction

A network of Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units (CESUs) has been established to provide research, technical assistance, and education in support of federal land management, environmental and research agencies and their partners. Their broad scope includes the biological, physical, social, and cultural sciences needed to address natural and cultural resource management issues at multiple scales and in an ecosystem context. Each CESU is composed of federal agencies, a host university, and partner institutions. This fact sheet: 1) provides background about CESUs, and 2) describes the competitive process used to select and establish CESUs.

Background

CESUs are based at universities and organized around biogeographic areas. CESUs function as "virtual" organizations, linking several institutions to increase access to expertise and facilities. Universities provide space, basic administrative support, and access to university faculty, students, staff, and resources. Federal agencies contribute research scientists and/or other professionals working collaboratively with CESUs, administrative support funds, and funds for specific research, technical assistance, and education projects. Cooperative and Joint Venture agreements allow each of the participating federal agencies to efficiently transfer funds to university partners while maintaining responsibility for agency-sponsored activities with CESUs. Federal agency participation in a CESU does not alter previous arrangements or cooperative agreements. Individual CESUs are administered and managed at the field/regional level. CESUs are linked together in a CESU Network, which is coordinated by the CESU Council. The Council includes representatives of participating federal agencies operating under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the CESU Network. For more information, visit the CESU website <www.cesu.org/cesu>.

Between FY 1999 and FY 2003, five rounds of formal competition have been conducted to establish CESUs in 17 biogeographic areas (providing full coverage of the United States and its territories): Californian, Chesapeake Watershed, Colorado Plateau, Desert Southwest, Great Basin, Great Lakes-Northern Forest, Great Plains, Gulf Coast, Hawaii-Pacific Islands, North & West Alaska, North Atlantic Coast, Piedmont-South Atlantic Coast, Pacific Northwest (including southeast Alaska), Rocky Mountains, South Florida-Caribbean, Southern Appalachian Mountains, and Upper and Middle Mississippi Valley. All Research I universities were eligible to compete as a host university.

Competition

Each CESU competition followed a formal process, developed by the CESU Council, and approved by the Department of the Interior Solicitors' Office. The process for each competition is outlined below.

- A formal *Program Announcement and Request for Proposals* was distributed to all Research I universities in the states in a CESU biogeographic area, published for 10 days in *Commerce Business Daily*, and posted on the CESU website <www.cesu.org/cesu>.
- Proposals received by the postmark deadline were accepted for review. As each proposal was received, the postmark or ship date was checked, the proposal was stamped with the date of receipt, assigned an ID number, and recorded on a log-in sheet. An administrative review was conducted for each proposal to ensure that the submission instructions had been followed.
- CESU Council members received copies of the proposals to review, accompanied by evaluation forms and instructions. The evaluation forms were constructed using the criteria described in the Program Announcement/RFP. Additional agency reviewers (one per agency) with specific expertise in the biogeographic areas were identified by CESU Council members and also received proposal review packets. All reviewers were instructed to complete the evaluation forms prior to the review session.
- The CESU Council met with additional agency representatives to review the proposals and select tentative winners for each biogeographic area.
- The Coordinator of the CESU Council (non-voting staff) led the meeting and described the specific steps followed for the review:

1. Reviewers with a conflict or perceived conflict of interest were asked to recuse themselves from participating.
2. Each CESU biogeographic area was considered separately.
3. Each proposal from a potential host university and its partner institutions was evaluated.
4. Each reviewer was asked to orally report their draft score (the score assigned prior to the meeting) for a proposal. Individual scores were recorded on an overhead transparency for all reviewers to see.
5. Each individual reviewer was invited to comment on the proposal, and then the reviewers had a general discussion about the proposal.
6. Each reviewer had the opportunity to revise their score.
7. Each reviewer reported their final score. The formal score was the final score that each reviewer reported orally and was recorded on the overhead transparency. This procedure ensured an open process, where all reviewers could hear and see the final, reported scores.
8. An average score for each proposal was calculated.
9. Steps 4-8 were repeated for each proposal.
10. After the average scores had been calculated and ranked, reviewers confirmed the highest scoring proposal.
11. The host university (with its partner institutions) with the highest scoring proposal was selected as the tentative winner for the CESU biogeographic area.
12. The reviewers then discussed clarifications and improvements that the tentative winner would need to address during the site visit (keeping to the criteria of the RFP).
13. Steps 3-12 were repeated for each biogeographic area.

- Site visits to the host universities by CESU Council members and agency field representatives were organized. The purpose of each site visit was to learn more about the facilities and services of the host and partner institutions described in the proposal. Each site visit provided an opportunity for Council members to discuss clarifications or requested improvements identified in the proposal review. (Each host university was asked to provide a proposal addendum responding to needed clarifications and requested improvements identified in the proposal review.)
- Each member of the site visit team completed a formal evaluation form and made a recommendation to the full CESU Council about whether to establish the CESU with the tentative winning host university and its partner institutions.
- Copies of each proposal addendum and site visit evaluations were made available to the CESU Council.
- The CESU Council voted on formally approving the CESUs at each of the host universities and their partner institutions.
- The primary contact people at each host university were notified of the approval of each CESU host and partners.
- After review by the host university, partner institutions, and federal agencies, cooperative (and joint venture) agreements were prepared and signed.

Current Participation in the CESU Network

Thirteen federal agencies have signed the MOU, participating in the CESU Network. These agencies include the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Geological Survey, National Park Service, USDA Agricultural Research Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA Forest Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, and National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

For more information, contact:

Dr. Gary E. Machlis, National Coordinator
CESU Network
Tel. 208.885.7129
Email: gmachlis@uidaho.edu