

# WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

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## SETTING THE RESEARCH AGENDA FOR WOOD— IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

National research funding, a critical issue for wood scientists and the forest products industry, is undergoing significant change. The USDA spends about \$1.7 billion annually on research related to the nation's system of food, fiber, and natural resources, of which about \$120 million (~7%) is spent on merit-based, peer-reviewed research funded by the National Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program (NRI).<sup>1</sup> The balance (nearly \$1.6 billion) is distributed through intramural research grants to USDA staff (including coops), formula funds to state agriculture experiment stations, and special grants for targeted initiatives.

The USDA CSREES celebrated their 10-year anniversary and unveiled a new website <http://www.csrees.usda.gov> on April 9, 2004. We challenge you to find the words "Wood and/or Forest Products" on their site! Have we (i.e., the greater wood science and technology research community) dropped the ball? In stark contrast to the neglect of forest industry issues, the agricultural sector appears to be fully in step with the national funding agenda.

The final report by the Blue Ribbon Panel on America's Forest Research Policy (April 2, 2004, <http://www.ctwoodlands.org/afrp/frpreport.html>) states unequivocally "America's forest research capacity is declining . . . (will result in) ineffective and inefficient use of the nation's forestlands leading to a loss in overall economic and ecological benefits."

So what, if anything, can we do? Paul Winistorfer posed the question in his June 2003 feature article in the *Forest Products Journal*: "Who is the voice of forest products and who represents the interest of forest products and wood science in the United States?" In our opinion, this is the fundamental and burning question.

Let's first examine the reality. The USDA's NRI program is currently restructuring to implement changes recommended in a study report written by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences.<sup>2</sup> Key to these changes includes: (1) the implementation of issues-based research programs; and (2) issuing larger awards to foster interdisciplinary and multi-institutional research teams. As a result, traditional discipline centric programs, such as the *Improved Utilization of Wood and Wood Fiber*—spanning the areas of wood composites, preservation, mechanics, chemistry, genetics, structures, manufacturing, and marketing—will be eliminated.

As NRI moves to issue-based, team research, it is clear that the expertise of wood scientists and engineers can contribute greatly if we are included in the agenda. However, if we are not proactive in determining and communicating our research priorities, we will most likely be in the unenviable situation of looking in from the outside, hoping to hit the issue(s) determined by others. Two FY 2004 RFA programs where wood scientists should be key contributors include: (1) bio-based products and bioenergy; and (2) nano-scale science and engineering for agricultural and food systems. But how competitive will traditional wood science researchers be in programs that neither specifically mention wood nor potentially retain wood science experts on their panels?

<sup>1</sup> NRI is the Competitive Research Grants and Awards Management Division of USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES).

<sup>2</sup> National Research Council. 2000. National Research Initiative: A Vital Competitive Grants Program in Food, Fiber, and Natural-Resources Research. National Academy Press, Wash., DC. 189 pp. <http://books.nap.edu/catalog/9844.html>

In addition to USDA funding opportunities, other government agencies (i.e., HUD [Housing and Urban Development], NSF [National Science Foundation], and DOE [Department of Energy]) provide for additional competitive funding opportunities. Should we be more proactive in educating these competitive research organizations regarding our collective interdisciplinary expertise?

Let's get back to Paul Winistorfer's point. Considerable energy has been expended debating the pros and cons of having two professional groups—the Forest Products Society (FPS) and the Society of Wood Science and Technology (SWST)—to represent wood science and technology. On the one hand, FPS (with approx. 1800 members) does not have lobbying in their mission and typically looks to SWST to address these concerns. Alternately, SWST is incorporated as a 501-c(6) organization and, as such, may engage in lobbying, but may be required to provide notice to its members regarding what percentage of member dues are applicable to lobbying activities. For perspective, in 2003, SWST had approximately 330 members (241 full members) and a total budget of just under \$160,000. How much of a direct lobbying effort can we realistically expect for a percent of our annual SWST budget? Is there another way—a better, more effective method to have our voices heard at the national level?

The AF&PA is widely recognized as a powerful and effective trade association and does provide a unified, balanced, and informed voice for national industry issues. However, is it the appropriate venue to put forth a research agenda for academic institutions? Is any association properly staffed to organize an issue as complex, and potentially divisive, as a national research agenda?

The success of the agricultural community, in part, is due to the involvement of industrial agricultural concerns, whereas forest products companies appear reticent to be visibly involved in such activities. Many in Congress find the inclusion of corporate representatives, along with the jobs they represent, to be key in these discussions. How can SWST more actively engage corporate perspectives and issues?

The National Planning Committee for Forest Products Research (NPC) was initially formed as a

joint Forest Service-Academic bridge to provide liaison to The National Association of Professional Forestry Schools and Colleges (NAPFSC) and to champion the national forest products research agenda; however, many think the NPC has been less than successful in providing a cohesive forum for action pertaining to a research agenda for wood.

NAPFSC, in combination with the 17,000 members of the Society of American Foresters (SAF), has also been relatively effective in having their collective voices heard. On the other hand, Wood Science is, at best, a department within a Forestry (or Natural Resources) College. Often, wood science is not an official unit, but simply a non-administrative program within Forestry. These inherent challenges go to the heart of organizing our academic programs at the national level.

So, what is the solution? How do we identify a body with both the expertise and the objectivity to advocate for the common good? How do we empower this entity with the mandate to "speak for the forest products and wood science community?" Or do we simply accept the inevitable?

Stephen Shaler and Michael Wolcott stirred the debate with a presentation entitled "Ad Hoc Committee on NRI Report" at the 2004 Sunday Morning SWST program June 27. However, more work is needed. We are seeking suggestions. One possible objective may be to investigate opportunities for developing a broad-based Research Needs Assessment Workshop (with agency [NSF? USDA?] funding). Regardless, your input and participation is essential. The longer we procrastinate—and do nothing—the more deafening the silence coming from our profession.

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