

# **Path Forward 2.0**

## **Implementation Plan**

## **Path Forward Task Force 2.0 Recommendations:**

### **Management (Recommendation 1)**

The Path Forward 2.0 Task Force wrote:

The national headquarters office should set strong performance expectations that accompany the funding it distributes annually. The evolution that has been occurring from a collection of independent regional efforts to a single cohesive national program led by headquarters should continue. The success of this approach will be dependent on headquarters acting in a service leadership role with active engagement, input and buy-in from the regions. Management should consider developing more clearly defined staff roles and procedures for headquarters staff to have more systematic input into performance of regional staff. Input from the regions would also be valuable to the reviews of headquarters personnel.

In order to address the disparity between the current cost reimbursement level for residue field trials (\$6500) and the true value of the Field Research Directors' time, IR-4 management should consider, when resources are available, increasing the reimbursement level”.

### ***Proposal***

***Performance Expectations: The IR-4 Project (IR-4) concurs with the need to develop detailed IR-4 centric performance expectations for Regional Directors, Region Field Coordinators, Regional Laboratory Coordinators, QA Unit members, Study Directors, Biologists and Headquarters management. Headquarters will take the leadership in drafting these performance expectations and how the information will be obtained. The performance expectations will be vetted with members of each group and submitted to the Project Management Committee for acceptance. Proposed timeline for completion and implementation are:***

- ***Regional Directors & IR-4 HQ Management; November 15, 2022***
- ***Regional Field Coordinators; December 15, 2022***
- ***Regional Laboratory Coordinators; January 15, 2023***
- ***Quality Assurance Unit; February 15, 2023***
- ***Study Directors/Biologist; March 15, 2023***

***In addition to establishing performance expectations for IR-4 employees, IR-4 will also perform an annual assessment of performance expectations for employees in the above categories. Specific process and procedures for annual assessments will be presented to the Project Management Committee at the July 2023. The results of these annual assessments will be shared with employee's supervisor for consideration in that person's formal performance evaluation. IR-4 will consider the assessment of performance expectations when making future financial commitments.***

***Field Funding Reimbursement: IR-4 recognizes that adequate funding of field research units (Field Research Farms or research cooperators) is paramount to the success of the entire IR-4 Project. There are increased fiscal demands on these IR-4 field research units.***

*To keep our field research units strong and fiscally supported, the Project Management Committee has agreed to increase the standard funding for residue field trials in the 2023 season; funds reimbursed will increase from its current level \$7,222 (\$6500 plus indirect) to \$7,777 (\$7000 plus indirect).*

*Additionally, IR-4 Headquarters will open meaningful dialogue with the Regional Field Coordinators to increase funding reimbursement for product performance, integrated solutions and environmental horticulture research for the 2023 field season.*

*Future increases in all program areas involving field funding reimbursement will be considered based on total Project funding.*

## **Communications-Internal/External/Resources (Recommendations 2, 3, 4)**

The Path Forward 2.0 Task Force wrote:

**Internal communications** platforms and practices should receive additional attention. The dispersed management of the program across multiple functions, regions and institutions presents unique challenges that can best be addressed through good communications. These needs include the array of data management platforms that can support better information sharing; planning and management communications systems that can work seamlessly across multiple institutions; systems to capture best management/standard operating procedures; and descriptions of roles and responsibilities of various staff positions.

In addition to deployment of the systems which support information sharing, it is important to increase cross-functional and cross-regional communications activities. Many aspects of the Project suffer from a silo effect. Although the current system has worked well in the past with long-term experienced staff, the influx of new staff has created the need for people to better understand how their particular role meshes with the other functions to deliver results.

There are many examples of people working in one function regularly engaging with their counterparts in other regions. This increased collaboration should be applauded and encouraged moving forward. However, there are fewer examples of people actively engaging across functions within regions. Regional directors should increasingly play a role in improving better coordination among functions within their regions. They should also insure improved communication regarding staffing, funding issues and other updates coming out of PMC meetings.

**External communications** activities warrant additional attention. Considerable improvement has occurred over the past year. However there is still a perception that stakeholders close to the Project do not adequately understand how the Project is funded and functions. People outside the Project do not appear to have easy access to information that “markets” the Project and answers their questions. The Project could benefit from increased attention to communicating the societal, nutritional and food security benefits derived from the IR-4 Project. We have also heard that potential new hires and legislative staffers have not been able to find the information they seek on the current communications platforms. In addition, stakeholders have expressed interest in being able to have more user-friendly access to the status of projects. The development of a landing site on the website should be considered. Management should also consider assigning a single point of contact to each project who could provide status updates to stakeholders.

Increased attention to internal and external communications require the investment of additional human resources to this area. The current national communications program consist of one full- time professional. While funding remains a serious constraint, a reallocation, even on a limited basis, will likely generate a considerable return on the investment over the long-run. If increased funding is forthcoming, then definite consideration should be given to increased investment of resources in this area. Another consideration may be the appointment of an advisory committee including regional staff to support the Communications Officer.

### ***Proposal***

*The need for improvements in IR-4 internal and external communications is highlighted in many parts of the Path Forward 2.0 report. The IR-4 Project Management Committee acknowledges that this deficiency needs attention at the national, regional and local level. Addressing this issue will require involvement by many.*

*The IR-4 Project Management Committee proposes the following:*

- *The four Regional Directors will establish a monthly Regional meeting with field, lab (if appropriate) and QA staff to share issues, listen to concerns and gather additional feedback.*
- *After every scheduled PMC meeting, the Executive Director will hold an “All Hands” meeting with field, lab, QA, HQ staff and interested stakeholders to debrief the participants on important information from the recent PMC meeting. Additional “All Hands” meetings and information will be shared as needed and warranted. We will attempt to transition these meetings from the traditional one-way communication to encourage staff to participate in open discussion and provide feedback.*
- *The Executive Director will reinstitute annual visits to the Regions to meet with team members. These meetings will consist of a general overview and listening session.*
- *IR-4 will establish an internal intranet site to facilitate removal the overabundance of technical information from the main IR-4 webpage and transfer this to the intranet page. This page can also host a forum that will facilitate groups focusing on issues or suggestions. We will also*

- explore if an IR-4 app for android and IOS is feasible in lieu of an intranet site.*
- *The IR-4 National Communications Officer will attend in-person Regional meetings to solicit input from the State Liaison Representatives and Field Research Directors on what could be provided on a local basis to share new information about IR-4.*
  - *IR-4 will reach out to commodity groups and similar outlets to establish relationships that will facilitate the sharing news of success (new registrations) and other IR-4 relevant communications.*

*The IR-4 Project Management Committee agrees that IR-4's external communications have improved tremendously over the past 18 months. Unfortunately, since writing the Path Forward 2.0 report, the IR-4 National Communications Officer, Jennifer Heiss, has resigned from this position. IR-4 is in the process to refill this position. We anticipate that a new communications professional will be on staff on/about September 1, 2022.*

*IR-4's communications channels are many; written reports, website, social media, electronic bulletins, etc. IR-4 Headquarters is committed to provide the new National Communications Officer with resources to assist in the many diverse functions of this job to help this professional succeed. Depending on the person hired, their skill sets and strengths we will evaluate next steps. Specifically, IR-4 will evaluate options to hire additional communication professional(s) or works with communications consultants to obtain assistance.*

*The suggestion to establish a Communication Advisory Committee is sound and this will be facilitated by December 31, 2022 by the new National Communication Officer and the National Chief of Staff.*

## **Training (Recommendation 5)**

Increased staff cross-training across regions, across functions and across disciplines should be encouraged. Historically, IR-4 has had the benefit of long-term staff staying with the Project for much of their careers and becoming extremely proficient and experts in their roles. The relocation to NC State has resulted in a new generation of staff which may have more fluid careers. The new headquarters location provides a rich talent pool to hire from but also offers a wealth of other career opportunities for IR-4 staff who have gained valuable experience through the Project. More frequent staff turnover may be a fact of life for the Project going forward. Increased staff cross-training will help minimize disruption, maintain program continuity and provide staff a greater sense of ownership and opportunity within IR-4.

Training of staff and partners to be prepared to work with new and emerging technologies should be prioritized. A team should be appointed to determine how best to develop training materials for headquarters and regional staff. Serious consideration also needs to be given to increased professional development opportunities across all staff within the Project.

The task force fully supports the PMC decision for IR-4 Headquarters to have the authority to make decisions about QA audits, inspections, and other associated assignments and funding. In the future, consideration should be given to an analysis of ways to broaden QA training to external stakeholders to further support the IR-4 program.

## ***Proposal***

***Working with the Regions, IR-4 Headquarters will establish a Leadership Development Program. Anyone currently working within IR-4 would be eligible to apply for this program.***

***The vision of the program would consist of a 3-4 day session every 8-10 weeks over an 18 month period to explore many and diverse aspects of the IR-4 Project. Anticipated sessions include:***

- 1. Overview of IR-4***
- 2. Regulatory Studies/GLPs/QA***
- 3. Product Performance/Integrated Solutions/Environmental Horticulture/Project Planning***
- 4. Regulatory field trials/Analytical chemistry***
- 5. EPA pesticide regulations***
- 6. USDA interactions***
- 7. International/Harmonization of MRLs***
- 8. Crop protection industry***

***In addition to the Leadership Development Program, IR-4 Project Management Committee will encourage “sabbaticals” to become more familiar with a specific job function. During that time, the person on sabbatical learns the duties of that position and enhance their skill sets.***

***IR-4 will also develop a standard orientation/training program. New hires will be asked to view an on-line program, which includes an overview of the IR-4 Project, functions, culture, how to use the website, common jargon and acronyms and organization understanding.***

***IR-4 Headquarters and Regions would be able to open up “mini-sabbatical” opportunities as soon as reasonable. The Leadership Development Program would take some more time to organize. We believe the first class could start in mid to late 2023. The new employee-training module would be targeted for completion in late 2023***

## **Technology (Recommendation 6)**

There were a number of areas where additional investment in new information technology is needed in terms of both staff and financial resources across all operational areas. The Task Force suggests the appointment of a dedicated task force in the near future to identify and evaluate specific options, costs and potential funding plans.

## ***Proposal***

***The IR-4 Project Management Committee strongly agrees with this recommendation. In fact, IR-4 has taken some immediate steps to implement. Specifically the pilot of Electronic Field Data Notebook.***

***There are other areas where IR-4 is already making a transition from existing paper centric process to new electronic means. IR-4 also needs to explore if existing electronic technical tools (e.g. eQA) are still relevant.***

***Moving other systems to electronic means is not only a technology challenge but is also a culture challenge. IR-4 will need to address this uneasiness and pushback to new systems. Frankly, some people do not want change.***

*As suggested, IR-4 will establish a dedicated Task Force to identify and evaluate options for further transitions of systems to take advantage of technology. It is feasible to get this Task Force organized and operational by October 1, 2022. As part of the charge to the Task Force, they should be requested to address not only the technology but any potential resistance to implementation. While we cannot allow a small number of individuals to defer progress of many, we should go into this process with clear understanding that fear of change is real. To minimize the resistance, the IR-4 Project Management Committee will come out with a strong statement to the national IR-4 team members supporting the move to utilization of more electronic technical tools.*

*The Task Force will include representatives from all regions/ARS as well as representatives from all aspects of the Project (i.e. Field Research Director, Regional Field Coordinators, Laboratory Coordinators, Quality Assurance Unit, Study Directors, Biologists, and Project Management Committee.*

## **Analytical Laboratory Backlogs (Recommendation 7)**

The following options are offered for consideration in addressing the analytical laboratory backlogs and overall efficiency across all IR-4 and ARS analytical laboratories:

***Opportunity to Reallocate Work*** – Develop a process to provide a “safety valve” or “off ramp” and identify back-up resources when a lab runs into challenges. It would be helpful to create procedures to reevaluate work assignments and to determine progress and identify additional resources needed to complete projects. Additionally, there should be a process developed to consider the complexity of a project instead of just counting the number of field trials represented during laboratory assignments and evaluations.

***Early Input on Projects*** – Consideration should be given to allow the RLCs to screen the grower’s priority list prior to the Food Use Workshop and perhaps when it is sent to EPA for the spotlight analysis. The RLCs could be asked to identify any potential issues that might prevent a

lab from being successful. For example, when registrants are making presentations on possible projects, the labs could determine if there are reference samples available to the lab, is there a working method, and is special equipment required to complete an analysis. Identifying issues earlier in the process may help the labs resolve them prior to IR-4 committing resources in the field.

***IR-4 Headquarters Centralized Coordination of Lab Assignments/Priorities*** – Management should consider creating a position associated with IR-4 headquarters to function as a coordinator of laboratory work/priorities for all labs. Such an individual will need the right skill sets and experience. It would be important for the person to be a chemist with experience working in an analytical laboratory who understands the complexity/requirements of lab analysis and the quality assurance requirements.

This position could provide additional accountability when a lab runs into problems and projects are not completed on time. Having someone who understands what was going on in all the labs could help trouble shoot problems. The backlog issues that some labs have experienced are related to staffing shortages or getting stuck on an analysis and there is limited ability to reassign the project or divert other projects.

In addition, this position could provide coordination of lab analyses that are contracted out to commercial labs.

***Create a Central Depository for Analytical Methods*** – To gain efficiencies across all the IR-4 and ARS analytical laboratories, consideration should be given to creating a central repository where all successful analytical methods developed are stored so other labs have access to this information. An adoption of e-notebooks would be ideal but at a minimum a central location of scanned pdf copies that everyone has access to would be desirable.

### ***Proposal***

***The IR-4 Project Management Committee acknowledges the tremendous improvement in cooperation and coordination between the IR-4 analytical laboratories. This is a huge improvement from the past when the laboratories were in competition with each other. While there has been great progress on cooperation and coordination, there still remains some fundamental issues with meeting timelines and delivering quality data. The issues are not with every location or with every project, however, it is serious enough to warrant additional attention.***

***IR-4 concurs with the recommendation of the Path Forward 2.0 Committee to assign a qualified person at IR-4 Headquarters the assignment of better coordinate the laboratory activities. In fact, the following MOTION has been approved:***

“IR-4 Headquarters will maintain project-wide awareness and oversight of all GLP residue projects, while they are in the analytical phase. This includes the authority to make decisions regarding lab assignments/reassignments, prioritization of studies, establishing and adhering to timeframes for successful completion of studies, and determining a path forward for studies where difficulties are

encountered. The lab directors will maintain oversight of the day-to-day operations in each lab. Because the ARS labs fall under a different authority structure and have funding independent of the IR-4 NIFA grant, IR-4 will work with the ARS Minor Use Pesticide Coordinator concerning the ARS labs.”

*Furthermore, the person assigned to do the coordination will also be asked to develop a simple system to assign a value of resources to analysis of samples from a study based on size of study, difficulty of sample analysis and methodology. Not all studies are created equal; some are more complex than others and the associated costs may be much higher. Having this reasonable measure of residue study analysis cost will allow IR-4 to implement more appropriate priority setting financial models that are based on a fee-for-service approach.*

*IR-4 anticipates that these additional duties can be outlined and a HQ staff member identified to take them on prior to October 1, 2022.*