National Estuarine Research Reserve System Science Collaborative

Guidance for Reviewing and Identifying Adjustments to Project Plans

This document is intended to serve as a reference for NERRS Science Collaborative project leads as they reflect on reviewer comments about their proposal and potential impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The document includes the following sections:

Grant and contracting flexibility

The NERRS Science Collaborative strives to offer a personalized and flexible approach to grant management, which is particularly important this year. We realize that the many direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect collaborative science projects and will likely require you to rethink and adjust some of the activities outlined in your proposal to the NERRS Science Collaborative. We also want to provide you with the opportunity to make adjustments based on reviewer comments and recommendations. Therefore we are encouraging project teams to carefully review both reviewer comments and potential covid impacts and suggest adjustments to their proposed plans before we finalize award contracts.

Before grant contracts are finalized, teams are able request adjustments such as:

- Changes to planned activities that better accommodate anticipated constraints while still achieving the outputs and outcomes described in your proposal;
- Shifting the timing of activities currently laid out in your timeline;
- Delaying the project start date up to 12 months (no later than October 1, 2021);
- Bringing in a new partner to fill a specific gap or need; or
- Shifting funds within your budget (but not changing the total award amount).

Once projects are underway, we encourage project leads to stay in close touch with your program officer and communicate about any hurdles that may lead you to further modify plans. You will have some flexibility to move funding among budget line items and between years, typically you can re-assign up to 10% of your total grant award. Unlike many federal funding programs, no-cost extensions are not guaranteed; these requests will require discussion with your program officer, careful review, and are typically offered for periods of less than a full year.

Process for finalizing adjustments to your proposal

A. With your team, identify potential changes to your project

1. Consider all reviewer comments and whether you would make any changes based on their recommendations.
2. Review this reference document and the pandemic-related guidance in particular to identify potential vulnerabilities assuming a worst case COVID-19 scenario, what you might do to adapt and mitigate unanticipated impacts during your project period, and any specific changes you would like to make now, ahead of contracting. As noted above, there is also the potential for discussing adjustments with your program officer during the course of the project should the need arise.

B. Communicate with your program officer

By August 7, send your program officer an email message with short, bulleted responses to these three questions:

1. Considering the potential impacts of COVID-19, what adjustments, if any, do you propose to your project scope and/or timeline in order to deliver the outputs and outcomes as described in your proposal?
2. Based on feedback from proposal reviewers, are there any additional changes you would like to make to your project plans?
3. What questions do you have for the Science Collaborative program and/or your fellow grant recipients related to pandemic adaptations? We will try to address these questions in the program introductory web workshop from 3-4:30pm EDT August 20.

C. Participate in our program introductory web workshop on August 20

The Science Collaborative is hosting a virtual workshop - **3-4:30pm EDT on August 20** - for all project teams funded this year. Getting a new project underway over this next year will bring a unique set of challenges that we will all be navigating. This workshop will provide an opportunity for program managers to share details about our approach and the support we provide to teams, and facilitate cross-project sharing and learning as you look towards kicking off your project. ***Participation is encouraged for all team members but required for at least one project representative, preferably the project lead.*** Connection details to follow.

D. Provide final documents for grant contract

After your program officer has reviewed and approved your general plan, you will need to provide the following documents ahead of grant contracting:

1. A short summary (1 -2 pages) of your "Project Adaptations". This summary is *required from all teams* and must include the following elements:
    a. Identify the aspects of your project that seem most vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic (see list of potential impacts below);
    b. Indicate the strategies you plan to, or you *may* use, to adjust plans along the way as the impacts of the pandemic evolve;
    c. Outline the specific changes you are making *now* to project plans in order to deliver the outputs and outcomes as described in your proposal. This is where you should also indicate any additional adjustments you are making in response to reviewer

comments and recommendations. Briefly outline the rationale for your proposed changes.

2. An updated project budget (if needed)
3. An updated project timeline (if needed)

Thinking through pandemic-related impacts and strategies

We encourage project teams to review all aspects of your Science Collaborative proposal systematically before identifying specific changes to your project's scope of work. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are rapidly evolving and likely to have implications for projects that cannot be easily anticipated. We also recognize that the implications will vary according to the proposed scope of work and the individual institutions involved in a project. As a result, we are encouraging project leads to think critically and creatively about their projects, following this suggested approach:

1. Systematically think through **potential vulnerabilities** that might emerge for your project and project team, assuming a "worst case scenario" for public health restrictions and economic uncertainty.
2. Consider **what you might do to adapt and mitigate** those worst case scenario impacts. How could you build some flexibility into your plans so that anticipated and unanticipated impacts can be accommodated in a way that allows your team to accomplish your planned output and outcomes? We encourage you to think about changes you *could* make if really necessary, even if you do not plan to employ these strategies at this point.
3. As a project team, **identify the specific changes** you would like to make now, before your grant contracts are finalized. For example, would you delay or shorten certain project elements, would you use different methods, could you seek out a new partner to fill an expertise gap in your team, and would you reallocate resources within your budget?

Potential pandemic-related impacts for different project elements

This section provides some ideas about potential impacts, vulnerabilities, and adaptation strategies for different project elements. These ideas are provided to prompt thinking about risks that may not be top of mind for some project teams; not all of these concerns will be relevant to your project.

Please note: This is NOT a comprehensive list of public health precautions. Project teams should always adhere to the guidelines provided by their state and host institutions. For multiple reserve and multi-partner projects, please keep in mind that you will be navigating multiple institutions and, most likely, state COVID regulations and should build in ample time to appropriately consult with out of state/other partners to understand what implications differing guidelines will have to your project.

- **End user engagement**

  Workshops, stakeholder meetings, focus groups and other events may need to be re-designed to be most effective with virtual engagement methods, which could have implications for a project's budget, timeline, and team composition.

- **Engaging new partners:**
  - Virtual engagement methods can enable teams to engage a wider range of individuals who might not otherwise travel to an in-person event, which could strengthen a project. However, not all potential participants will have reliable internet and be comfortable with the needed technology.
  - Virtual collaboration is generally easier when participants have an existing relationship. Identifying, inviting, and effectively engaging a new participant may take extra effort, including one-on-one phone conversations to check-in, clarify roles and expectations, and establish a rapport before group meetings.
- **Planning and facilitation expertise:**
  - Workshops may take additional expertise and time to plan and facilitate as virtual events. Be sure you have adequate resources and time to plan each interaction, choose appropriate platforms and methods, and engage participants ahead of and after group meetings.
  - Teams may need to engage new partners to help plan, produce, and facilitate virtual events, for example, if the meeting requires some conflict resolution skills around a sensitive issue or the goal is rigorous data collection through focus groups. Additional training in virtual collaboration or facilitation methods could be helpful for some teams.
- **Aligning goals, methods and timeline:**
  - In-person meetings may need to be restructured or re-imagined for virtual methods. For example, full day events may need to be spread out over shorter blocks of time across several days, with each meeting focused on a narrower objective.
  - Teams may want to find alternative ways to engage people outside of virtual meetings - such as phone calls, interviews, surveys, collaboration on shared documents, or other collaboration tools.
- **Engagement budgets:** Specific costs for workshops could increase, including:
  - technical support for video conference (software support & hardware/connectivity needs of partner end users);
  - increased compensation for meeting planning and facilitation; or
  - increased honoraria support for partner end users to incentivize participation, given current stressors and economic hardships.

- **Team coordination**
  - Relationship building may take more time and effort, especially for a team that has not worked together before.
  - Partners will face different restrictions (ie. for travel) depending on their state and type of institution, and these constraints will change over time. Sources of stress for partners from different types of institutions will vary, e.g., new responsibilities or budget cuts may affect some partners. Some partners may need to shift their role in a project given current constraints, for example from core team to advisory group.
  - Thoughtful team coordination best practices are especially important, such as developing clear roles and expectations, regularly scheduled meetings, providing detailed meeting notes, and offering opportunities to collect follow-up input from absent members.

    - Some work may proceed slower than planned given all the many personal and professional disruptions. Additional lead time may be needed for meetings and document review.
    - Consider how your team could continue to make progress under worst case scenarios with strict restrictions on work outside the home.
- **Conference participation**
    - Many conferences will likely move virtual, with lower costs for attendees. This could allow teams to re-allocate some funding in their budgets, for example to support virtual workshops or online collaboration activities.
- **Field work:**
    - Projects with very season-specific (ie, based on a plant's phenology) or rigorous field work schedules, especially shorter projects, may need to adjust their timeline and plans to build in some flexibility. We encourage teams to be realistically ambitious in plans, but also thoughtfully identify what activities could be condensed, delayed, or simplified if necessary.
    - Field accommodations such as bunk houses may be restricted. Personnel may need to travel alone in vehicles. Field crew sizes potentially need to be reduced and work flow may subsequently need to be adjusted. These restrictions could increase the costs associated with field work and the amount of time required to complete the field work.
    - Travel across state lines could be complicated, especially if quarantines are expected before and after travel.
    - It could be difficult to maintain social distancing during ship-based field excursions. Some cruises may be cancelled.
    - Some ports are not allowing research vessels to dock, especially in remote areas that are concerned about exposure to pathogens.
    - Some landowners or property managers may be uncomfortable allowing field crews to visit their location given possible risks of exposure.
    - There may be additional expenses associated with safe practices for field crews, such as gloves, masks, cleaning supplies, or other preventive measures.
    - Any changes to field sampling locations, timing or methods could impact the project's environmental compliance review. These changes should be clearly indicated in the team's "Project Adaptations" summary.
- **Citizen science**
    - Volunteer involvement may be impacted differently than professional field crews. In some places, field-based citizen science initiatives are seeing a boost in participation recently. Volunteers may need additional training about safe field practices.
- **Hiring and purchasing**
    - Many states and institutions have hiring and purchasing freezes, which can also affect contracting. Even after freezes lift, there could be delays in hiring, contracting, and purchasing.
    - Some reserves and partner institutions may be affected by financial concerns and uncertainty, and these concerns could evolve over the coming year. Staff roles may shift.
    - Hiring a graduate student could be delayed.

    - Travel restrictions could complicate hiring from outside the state.
    - When possible, teams should confirm that graduate students and other temporary employees have health insurance.
- **Additional considerations for adjusting timelines and work plans:**
    - Delaying a project's start could affect the policy relevance of some projects. Will the timing of outputs still align with end user needs?
    - Team member and end user availability may change over the coming year, especially if their institution is under stress, or their position relies on grant funding.
    - Is the pandemic changing the issue being studied? For example, boat traffic, noise and air pollution, park visitorship, and even public attitudes may be affected. Will or should this affect research hypotheses or baseline measurements?
    - Are there opportunities to make your project relevant in new ways? For example, there may be increased interest in correlating field and remote measurements, and opportunities to share strategies for adapting research and engagement methods.

Additional resources for adapting to a virtual world

We have created a resource page with references that project leads may find helpful - Adapting Collaborative Science for a Virtual World. We welcome ideas for additional resources to share, as well as needs the Science Collaborative might help address.