MGEC meeting with NSF Program directors
Sept. 9, 2011
Tom Brutnell, Chair, Maize Genetics Executive Committee
Meeting notes

Bill Tracy, Ed Buckler and I met with Diane Okamuro, program director for the Plant Genome Research Program at the Awardees meeting on Sept. 9, 2011 to discuss several items that members of the Maize Genetics Executive Committee have brought to our attention related to the Plant Genome Research Program.

Below is a summary of our discussion.

1. Continued support for the Plant Genome Research Program.

Discussion topic: As you know, much of the research conducted by the maize research community is funded by the PGRP. Thus, we were concerned to hear that the funding for the PGRP program within IOS may be getting reduced. Could you please clarify if this is indeed the case and if so, how the funds are being distributed? What can the maize community do to help support this program?

Diane: Moving the PGRP to IOS was a good decision. The newly appointed Assistant Director for BIO, Dr. John Wingfield, is a strong proponent of the PGRP and wants to leverage the success of this program within NSF. As are all programs here at NSF, the PGRP program is very efficient (maintains a very low overhead rate) and delivers high impact science.

The PGRP has funded single investigator grants and would encourage submission of additional single investigator and CAREER applications. I would also like to point out that we have a new call for postdoctoral fellowship applications and anticipate awarding 15 grants of $189,000/ 3 yrs in FY 2012.

2. Peer review of PGRP grants

The conflicts of interest (COI) list of large collaborative grants associated with the PGRP, are often several pages long. This is often due to multi-author publications (e.g., the maize genome sequencing paper) where there is little if any direct interaction among co-authors. This is problematic when some of the best qualified reviewers are also co-authors. Is it possible to redefine a conflict of interest for PGRP to ensure that the most qualified reviewers are will be permitted to review proposals? Perhaps it would be possible to implement a narrower definition of COI, e.g., such as a funded collaboration or co-author within the previous 24 months?

Diane: We recognize that with large genome-sequencing consortium papers, many coauthors of publications have little direct interaction, so it is important to list as conflicts only those co-authors with whom you have a direct interaction. It is also important for applicants to suggest reviewers that you are not in conflict with to help ensure the most knowledgeable reviewers are selected. In regards to panel selections, we seek representation from all members of the research community. This includes scientists from international and R01 institutions as well as small colleges. We also aim to have a balanced panel with respect to male and female panelists and scientists from underrepresented groups. Finally, we generally allow only one scientist from a given institution/university and no more than two from any one state per competition to serve on a panel.

3. Maize genome annotation and assembly.

The maize community continues to ask for improvements to assembly and annotation and we're encouraged that resubmission of the RCN submitted by Lawrence was suggested by program staff. Are there other funding mechanisms available for maize genome annotation and assembly?

Diane: Yes, I encouraged Carolyn to resubmit the RCN with an emphasis on getting community input and establishing best practices. The RCN will also support international collaborations and these are encouraged.

4. Role of iPlant in helping drive informatics tool development.

Several in the community have engaged with iPlant on informatics tool development and outreach. However, it is unclear if iPlant will continue to receive funding giving pause to some investigators to commit strongly to developing tools through an iPlant interface. Could you advise PI's on how to best interface with the iPlant Collaborative.

Diane: Members of the maize community should continue to utilize iPlant infrastructure where appropriate.

5. Maize stock center

As USDA budgets for germplasm maintenance are dwindling, there is increasing concern that the maize stock center will struggle to meet demand. We realize that funding the stock center is under the purview of USDA but are there ways to support seed stock maintenance and distribution?

Diane: NSF is willing to support funding seed stock increases or storage costs if they are directly relevant to Plant Genome Research projects, such as generating a mutant collection or propagating accessions used in a PGRP-supported project for community access. Applicants should discuss with PGRP

and with Marty regarding what mechanism for funding is most appropriate and be sure to budget appropriately.