

BER Response to the Report of the BERAC Committee of Visitors Review of the Biological Systems Science Division

Date of COV: June 13-15, 2011

Date of Response: November 6, 2011

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Introduction

The Committee of Visitors (COV) reviewed program management in the Biological Systems Science Division (BSSD) in the Office of Biological and Environmental Research (BER) for the period October 1, 2007 through September 30, 2010 (Fiscal Years 2008, 2009, and 2010), including the processes used to create and manage the research portfolio. The COV presented findings and recommendations in a report presented to the Biological and Environmental Research Advisory Committee on October 7, 2011. The report provided helpful recommendations and constructive comments for the management of the programs in the division, which comprises a wide range of scientific programs and research projects, a major national user facility, and several larger research centers, including three Bioenergy Research Centers. Additional special portfolio elements are comprised by research efforts at the DOE National Laboratories, organized into team-based Scientific Focus Areas (SFAs).

BER has compiled the following responses to specific COV recommendations; although some responses are specific to BSSD, others apply more generally to business practices for all of BER.

Responses to comments and recommendations

COV Recommendation	Program Response	Action Plan
<i>Funding opportunity announcements and proposal processing procedures</i>		
<i>Transparency for preapplication processing</i>	The program initiated the use of preapplications and preproposals to reduce the burden on the reviewer community. Although BSSD has made efforts to apply consistency in preapplication screening and disposition, the program agrees that these efforts should be made transparent to all applicants and reviewers.	BER will include standard language on preapplication evaluation in future funding opportunity announcements.
<i>COV recommendations for scientific advisory committees for specific program elements within the division (BRCs, JGI, Structural Biology specifically mentioned)</i>	BER recognizes that input from the scientific community is an essential component in the Division's decision making. Several mechanisms are used to obtain this input, including BER-organized workshops, attendance by Division staff members at meetings organized by other agencies, at meetings of professional societies and at Gordon Conferences and similar specialized meetings, and periodic BERAC reviews. Additionally, all larger program projects (such as the BRCs) funded by the Division have external advisory committees.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No new advisory committees will be organized by the Division at this time. 2. BER will continue to hold annual meetings of funded PIs; additional input will be solicited with workshops.
<i>Improved documentation for future COVs</i>	BER welcomes suggestions for improved preparation and documentation for COVs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summary documentation for funding opportunity announcements will be standardized and available for future COVs. 2. BER will provide documentation of standard operating procedures for multi-agency reviews for future COVs. 3. BER will continue to adhere to the official Office of Science merit

		<p>review criteria outlined in 10 CFR Part 605, specifically</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Scientific and/or technical merit b. Appropriateness of the proposed method or approach; c. Competency of applicant's personnel and adequacy of proposed resources; d. Reasonableness and appropriateness of the proposed budget <p>Determination of proposal or application relevance to programmatic priorities will be made by BER program staff. Greater efforts will be made to document this information for future COVs.</p>
Computational Biology		
<i>Continue community outreach for Kbase</i>	BER acknowledges the importance of community outreach and engagement to the successful deployment and implementation of the knowledgebase.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BER will provide public updates on progress and available resources for Kbase at major scientific research community meetings and workshops. 2. BER will continue to coordinate Kbase implementation with other federal agencies involved with biological research.
<i>Clarify the respective roles of Kbase and JGI</i>	BER acknowledges the importance of coordination and complementarity of genomic resources developed through Kbase and the JGI.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. JGI is developing a strategic plan that will explicitly state the relationship between JGI and Kbase. 2. BER will improve outreach to explicitly describe the respective roles of the JGI and Kbase.
Bioenergy Research Centers		
<i>Improve communication and public outreach of the BRCs</i>	BER agrees with the need for openness and public engagement of the BRCs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BER will recommend that the BRCs improve their public websites. 2. BER will request that the BRCs provide a link on their respective websites for DOE reports and publications regarding the BRCs.
<i>Increase transparency of BRC interactions with the</i>	BER agrees with the	BER will work with the BRCs to provide improved transparency for

JGI	recommendations.	genomic projects performed at the JGI.
Encourage BRCs to prioritize new innovative science and terminate less productive activities	BER will continue to encourage the BRCs to pursue innovative research that accounts for developments in the renewable biofuels community.	BER is conducting on-site renewal reviews of the BRCs. Pending the outcome of these reviews, this recommendation will be included.
BSSD should conduct a community workshop including the BRCs and the broader research community to discuss new opportunities and leverage interagency interactions.	BER recognizes the value of communication, synergy, and coordination between the BRCs and the broader Genomic Science program.	BER will continue to hold an annual Genomic Science principal investigators' meeting, including robust participation by BRC scientists. BSSD will continue to reach out to other federal agency participants and engage them in this annual research meeting and other workshops.
Radiochemistry and Instrumentation		
Encourage continued cross-fertilization of the program with bioenergy and bioremediation research areas	BER also appreciates the synergies between the radiotracer and imaging instrumentation development and research in medical and plant and microbial molecular imaging fields.	BER will continue to encourage participation of radiochemistry and imaging instrumentation researchers in other program workshops and principal investigator meetings.
Joint Genome Institute		
Conduct a workshop addressing future directions in the genomic sciences to facilitate strategic planning for the JGI	BER agrees that the JGI is facing a transition from traditional sequencing services, brought on by the acceleration of sequencing technologies and new scientific demands from the user community.	BSSD program staff will conduct a workshop in FY2012. The results from this workshop, the triennial JGI Science and Operations review, and the JGI's own strategic planning will be communicated at a future BERAC meeting.