CSREES Portfolio Review Expert Panel Report

Portfolio 2.2
CY 2000 – 2004

REPORT

External Review Completed: February 2006

Portfolio Overview

Through research, education, and outreach that seeks to better understand the economic, demographic, and environmental forces affecting regions and communities, and the use of this knowledge to develop strategies that make maximum use of local assets, CSREES promotes the well-being of Americans. Through higher education, research, and extension, CSREES supports the education and training of residents and community and business leaders in order to help their communities thrive in the global economy.

In support of Portfolio 2.2, CSREES actively engages, through unique partnerships with agencies, states, institutions, the land grant system, and the private sector, in improving the quality of life and well-being of rural American people in the areas of health, safety, biosecurity, resource management, technology and sociology, human development and family well-being, families and youth at risk, 4-H youth development, housing and indoor environments, and community planning and development.

Portfolio 2.2 is comprised of the following knowledge areas (KAs):

KA 607:	Consumer Economics
KA 721:	Insects and Other Pests Affecting Humans
KA 722:	Zoonotic Diseases Affecting Humans
KA 801:	Individual and Family Resource Management
KA 802:	Human Development and Family Well-Being
KA 803:	Sociological and Technological Change Affecting Individuals, Families, and Communities
KA 804:	Human Environmental Issues Concerning Apparel, Textiles, and Residential and Commercial Structures
KA 805:	Community Institutions, Health, and Social Services
KA 806:	4-H Youth Development (New Knowledge Area)
KA 813:	Adult Aging and Development (Proposed Knowledge Area)

Introductory Remarks

Please note that throughout this document the panel uses the following abbreviations:

CSREES	Federal office (in DC)
Federal/Land-Grant system	The entire network that encompasses the partnerships with state programs funded in part or full through CRSEES

The panel wishes to praise CSREES for using the process mandated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as a planning vehicle. Rather than simply complying with a directive, CSREES has adapted the required accountability exercise to think deeply about its varied programs and make positive changes. During the on-site visit, the panel was impressed with the dedication of CSREES staff, their

ability to accomplish a great deal with limited resources, and their desire to receive honest, if at times critical, feedback. While the panel's specific charge was to evaluate programming activities, outcomes, and impacts for the past five years, panel members wanted to compliment the Deputies and NPLs who have already embarked on a system-wide review of practices and infrastructure needed for assessment purposes. Panel members with many years of experience with CSREES were very enthusiastic about the new directions they have seen occur recently. In particular, they mentioned the new spirit of entrepreneurism that the CSREES staff has deployed in efforts to find new partners for funding critical programs. The agency is to be congratulated for fostering an environment in which creative, hardworking, dedicated staff can serve their constituencies and be agents of change. The panel firmly believes the agency is on a positive change trajectory which is no small feat for any bureaucracy. The panel conducted their review within the context of deep appreciation for the spirit of optimism and responsiveness that they observed.

Relevance –

The panel operationally defined relevance as *the ability of the* Federal/Land-Grant system *to make good investments and to focus on real and critical issues.*

Scope (discussed by panel as relating to "breadth")

The panel felt that the portfolio demonstrated exceptional coverage. The panel members believe this breadth was possible because of the hard work of the Federal/Land-Grant system as they engaged with a variety of other entities to deliver programs. The panel was particularly impressed with the creative leveraging of funds and other resources by the Deputies and the NPLs. However, this breadth was also seen as a weakness: The panel was concerned that resources may be spread too thin to accomplish significant, long-term outcomes in the highest priority areas. The evidence in the self-review document and in the presentations gave the panel an impression that programming was "scatter-gun" (i.e., too broad or dispersed). They were uncertain as to whether this was a reflection of an inadequacy in the data collection systems or an accurate representation of the scope of the portfolio.

Funding was discussed explicitly as it affects possible scope. Given the realities of how funds are allocated and how reporting has historically been managed, the panel was very impressed with the quality and quantity of programming that CSREES presented in this portfolio. This level of productivity within a tightly constrained environment is remarkable.

Additionally, the panel applauds the efforts of NPLs and Deputies in partnering with other agencies in order to augment the resource base for meeting priority goals. The panel encourages the agency to continue developing these partnerships, but in a more focused way. The best asset of Federal/Land-Grant system is its access to a network that can optimize communication among CSREES, the states, and local citizens. This is the unique and powerful asset other agencies need to fulfill their own missions. This broad-based communication network that sends information in all directions should be strategically leveraged to acquire new funding/partners, which, in turn, should form the foundation for a new agency strategic plan to guide Portfolio 2.2.

As a final point, the panel believes it essential that CSREES have sufficient discretionary funds to react to rapidly-emerging problems of national priority, to leverage opportunities, and to attract partnerships. The extent to which the current budget supports this is not known by the panel.

Focus (discussed by panel as relating to "depth")

The panel operationally defined 'focus' *as "the ability of the 2.2 Portfolio to remain focused on issues, topics, and critical needs of the nation"* using the language found in the Criteria and Dimensions section of the self-review document (Section IV, p. 258). Based on this definition, the panel felt linkages to issues that are of critical needs to the nation, and appropriate to Portfolio 2.2, are moderately focused.

Overall, the panel was not convinced the portfolio prioritized the highest, most critical needs of the nation to address *Quality of Life in Rural America.* The panel attributed this to a lack of a targeted strategic plan for the portfolio. Further, the review panel believes the strategic plans developed by USDA and CSREES (pp. 4-5) do not seem focused enough to truly guide Portfolio 2.2.

When panel members asked individual NPLs what their top funding priorities would be if given an infusion of dollars, some were unable to respond immediately. This hesitancy suggests that a *focused* strategic planning exercise is overdue within the agency. The panel stresses that such a strategic plan can only be developed through consultation with stakeholders. It is only through true collaborations with stakeholders that a focused plan can be jointly created.

Because budget can be a good proxy for inferring an agency's priorities, CSREES should articulate the relationship between funding levels and priorities for possible realignment. The panel recognizes that there are constraints but encourages CSREES to provide greater leadership in focusing resources on programs that will be identified as top priorities in the strategic planning process. The panel recognizes that the focusing of programs is tantamount to reducing or eliminating certain programs. This is unfortunate, but may be necessary for significant national impact. The Federal/Land-Grant system should be involved in ongoing cost-benefit analyses which may help in the determination of priorities.

Emerging Issues
Although the panel felt the portfolio as a whole identified many contemporary and/or emerging issues, they also felt the documentation of these issues, as presented in the self-review document, was inadequate. From what the panel gathered, there does not appear to be a clear-cut, systematic method, that the Federal/Land-Grant system is able to use to sort out and identify the most critical issues. The panel further believes that the detailed articulation provided by the states on critical issues is largely missing from the self-review document, the presentations by NPLs, and the other evidentiary materials. Communication between the NPLs and states can be improved and it is suggested that NPLs, the administrators, and the states find new ways to communicate so that solicitation of input from partners can be enhanced.

Integration (Given the fact that CSREES is explicitly mentioned in this dimension, the panel focused scoring on CSREES as the central agency. This score does not reflect what is occurring at the state level.) The panel scored CSREES as moderately integrated. First, the panel wanted to note that new grant proposal criteria requiring integration are greatly helping CSREES deal with this issue (e.g., AREERA legislation has required that 25% of the resources be spent on integrated projects). While the panel believes CSREES has responded to this requirement, additional improvements can and need to be made. The scope of the portfolio is so broad that it is difficult for it to be fully integrated. This may be dealt with if NPLs are able to become more proactive rather than reactive. The panel suggests NPLs take initiative to integrate their work beyond what is required.

In regard to this review process itself, the panel felt the self review document they were provided did not adequately address education and teaching activities. The panel recognizes that these activities were discussed in Portfolio 2.1 but stresses that they need to be included in this review. For example, there is essentially no mention of how current students are able to be involved in current projects through internships and scholarships. This is critically important. Addressing these issues in support of the aforementioned legislation will allow the portfolio to progress in this dimension of integration.

Multidisciplinary Balance
The panel felt that the self-review document did not provide sufficient relevant information to allow for the evaluation of this dimension. The panel noted that while some multidisciplinary examples were provided, the self-review document did not do an adequate job of illustrating what the panel believes to be the breadth of true multidisciplinary projects. Also, as per their presentation in the discussion of multidisciplinary balance in the Criteria and Dimensions section of the self-review document (Section IV, pp. 264-265), the panel noted that multi-state projects are not necessarily multidisciplinary. Given these difficulties, the panel brought to this scoring dimension their own knowledge of the existence of true multidisciplinary projects contributed to by CSREES in support of this portfolio. They were thereby able to rate the work of the Federal/Land-Grant system as highly balanced.

Quality

The panel operationally defined quality as whether the *portfolio focused on the "right things" and contributed to significant outcomes (in contrast to outputs.)*

Significance

The panel was disappointed with the evidence provided in the Portfolio 2.2 self-review document to support its claims of long-term, significant outcomes. However, the panel also recognized that this issue may be clouded by the lack of a good reporting system, a well structured database, and the fact that states are not consistent in the format they use when reporting. (It was noted that the Federal/Land-Grant system did not have a good scientifically-based system to collect data during this review period). The panel felt that, while some significant findings surely exist, the self-review document did not address them in any systematic fashion. Additionally, there was a major concern that the Federal/Land-Grant system needs to move from counting outputs to developing and using outcomes measures. Outputs simply quantify the number of programs delivered, persons in attendance, publications produced, or other such measures. These do not, in and of themselves, ensure the goals of enhancing the quality of rural life are being met in any significant way. Only carefully designed outcome evaluations can determine if strategic goals are reached.

Further, there was a major concern regarding the lack of consistency and rigor of reported measures, and the quality of data used to determine whether there were significant outcomes (in contrast to outputs). The panel was concerned about the latitude given to stakeholders in how they report data (i.e., success stories are trumpeted but failures may not be mentioned). CSREES must exert leadership and define a minimum level of rigor to be used in data analysis and reporting. This will allow CSREES to amass a body of data that may be used to effectively evaluate long-term programmatic outcomes. On the other hand, CSREES receives reports from grantees annually but seems to have limited ability to use those reports effectively in either the integration of the information or in the dissemination of it to stakeholders (from Congress to the citizens). For this reason, the Federal/Land-Grant system needs to make a concerted effort to both collect better data and make better use of reported data.

In summary, in regard to this dimension of "Significance," the panel felt the portfolio showed only some evidence of significant findings. It was noted that data collection efforts during the 2000-2004 time period were not systematic and could not easily be used by the Federal/Land-Grant system. However, the panel was encouraged by new efforts such as *Plan of Work* and *OneSolution* and is hopeful that these will lead to positive improvements in the documentation of significant findings. Concerns were raised that some of the evidence provided by the States to CSREES was not incorporated into this review process. If information is requested of the States, it should be used in an appropriate fashion.

Stakeholder Input

Although the panel scored the portfolio as having many stakeholder/constituent inputs based on their personal knowledge, these were not adequately represented in the self-review document. The panel is aware that the states actually do utilize a variety of avenues to provide stakeholder input such as "town hall" meetings, surveys, etc., but clear reference to these techniques was not included in the self review document.

Communication with stakeholders, beginning at the community level, is critical. The panel noted that while Deputies communicate with state extension directors, many times the NPLs do not. The panel felt that establishing and increasing two-way channels of communication is of critical importance to improving efforts in this portfolio. Additionally, the Federal/Land-Grant system needs a uniform system for reporting so it is better able to extract the information needed for planning. The gathering of input is not sufficient, this input must be used.

Portfolio Alignment

The panel found much of the portfolio to be well aligned with the current state of science. The data reported between 2000 and 2004 were significant. However, the panel questioned how CSREES (and therefore how the panelists themselves) would know if programs were always consistent with the current state of science if good research and evaluations were not conducted. The panel strongly believes that

CSREES should make funding a high-quality evaluation system a priority and that leadership must be provided by the NPLs to promote consistent system-wide evaluation. Beyond just doing the evaluation, the panel stresses the importance of a feedback loop. the Federal/Land-Grant system needs to work together to disseminate the findings of evaluations so that the portfolio can continue to be well aligned with the current state of science and that ineffectual or lesser priority programs can be reduced or eliminated

Appropriate Methodology
The panel believed that the portfolio demonstrated that the Federal/Land-Grant system usually applied appropriate/cutting edge methodology. Panel members recognized the peer-review process for research proposals assures current methodologies are being used. Technology is ever changing and therefore it is necessary for everyone to keep up to date on methodological advances. It was recognized that many personnel involved in CSREES projects need help in using cutting-edge technology and pedagogical advances. The panel recommends that there be professional development activities for and/or mentorship for individuals who need to upgrade skills in this area.

Performance –
The panel operationally defined performance as whether or not CSREES staff did a good job and whether or not the portfolio was comprehensive.

Portfolio Productivity (Given the fact that CSREES is explicitly mentioned in this dimension, the panel focused scoring on CSREES as the central agency. This score does not reflect what is occurring at the state level). While the panel recognized NPLs are all extraordinarily busy, engaged in many activities and are quite productive, they did not believe this productivity was demonstrated through the self-review document. While the panel recognizes NPLs are doing the best that they can, they themselves (in the self review document) describe the reporting system as unsystematic and incomplete. It is because of these recognized flaws in the system that the portfolio could not be rated as fully successful. Two specific flaws noted were:

a) Reporting extension productivity is currently problematic because the system does not fully account for it.
b) Formula funds help support the infrastructure that affords the states the ability to conduct relevant programs and activities but they too are not accounted for under the CRIS system.

The panel also recognized that CSREES is often a rather minor funder/contributor to many of the states' programming efforts. It was understood that this can then set up barriers for the creation, planning, and ultimately reporting on productive activities. The panel would like to note that this reaction is based upon the review period of 2000-2004 and recognizes lessons have been learned and improvements are already being implemented. They are hopeful that there is enough expertise to push the new State Plan of Work systems forward and improve the ability of the portfolio to demonstrate productivity for future panel reviews.

Portfolio Comprehensiveness
Of all of the dimensions in this review, the panel struggled most with how to evaluate this dimension. In scoring it the panel operationally defined comprehensiveness as reflective of depth and breadth. The panel recognized breadth quite easily (and also noted concern that it was too broad and too reflective of what some referred to as a "scatter-gun" approach) This then gave rise to discussion as to whether the portfolio actually contributed to enhancing rural life along the <u>most</u> critical dimensions. The consensus of the panel was that the portfolio was moderately comprehensive (quite broad yet not deep enough). The panel discussed ensuring that model programs, with truly significant findings, be disseminated more broadly before new programs of unproven or questionable outcomes are implemented. It was their stance that CSREES should focus on doing a few things very well rather than many things satisfactorily.

As a caveat, the panel discussed the dimension in relation to what it termed "current realities." This judgment of comprehensiveness was done within the context of current levels of funding. Given the current dollars available, the panel believes that it simply is not possible for the portfolio to successfully

achieve both breadth and depth. The portfolio needs increased funding, more and better strategic planning and thinking (tied to thoughtful outcome measures), and greater focus on critical issues.

Portfolio Timeliness
This dimension was very difficult to evaluate given the extremely limited information provided. Despite this, there was some knowledge provided by the panelists about funding in the states. With this knowledge the panel arrived at a consensus that *some* projects achieve closure on time. In regard to future reviews, the panel suggests that there be more clarity in the definition of this dimension and, also, more information provided to the panelists. While timeliness is certainly of value, the panel would like to emphasize that requesting an extension to a program/project is not necessarily a weakness. Extensions can be very valid and in effect provide greater contribution to science in the long term. This should be taken into consideration when clarifying this dimension.

Agency Guidance (Given the fact that CSREES is explicitly mentioned in this dimension, the panel focused scoring on CSREES as the central agency. This score does not reflect what is occurring at the state level). This dimension needs to be more clearly defined for the purpose of this evaluation. Both management and leadership are listed in the scoring criteria, but *management* and *leadership* are two very different functions. Overall, given the knowledge the panel brought to the review, what was presented in the document, and given the time frame of 2000 - 2004, the panel would evaluate *management* as satisfactory and *leadership* as somewhat weak. The consensus for the dimension as a whole was that CSREES performed satisfactorily.

This issue of leadership relates in part to the discussion of accountability below. While the panel did not have detailed budgetary information, it was clear most of the funds allocated by Congress pass through the agency to the states. The states set their own priorities and define their own outcome measures. While the agency has nominal authority to approve or disapprove projects, in reality it holds very little power. Additionally, the panel recognizes CSREES has been able to amass a shared portfolio of accomplishment only through aggressive partnering with state networks, other agencies and foundations. While the panel does not find this structure problematic, it does raise the question about how much CSREES can be held accountable for programs disseminated throughout the broader network. Authority and responsibility are, to a great extent, currently uncoupled within the funding formulas. The panel compliments all parties on managing to produce positive work given this arrangement. Even so, it is urged that CSREES provide leadership within the context of distributed responsibility to ensure priorities are set and emerging issues addressed.

Communication among all partners needs to be enhanced. For example, the panel noted inconsistent and uneven communication methods/frequency/effectiveness across programs. A recommendation is that CSREES act as the leader in ensuring that a communication conduit exists from *Federal Government (which includes NPLS) ↔ Regional Consortia ↔ State ↔ Local Communities ↔ Citizens*. The implementation of a more reliable communication conduit will help build a strategic and focused plan that will necessitate new structure and processes, with information flow to other partners (NGOs, universities, local governments). While the panel believes this is a potential strength, some state representatives do not believe the communication is bi-directional at present because of the limited proportion of federal resources available for these programs. It is difficult for CSREES to provide leadership when most of the resources are coming from state and other funds. To achieve its mission, seamless and focused flow of information among all stakeholders is essential.

The proposed Plan of Work has been explained as being developed with extensive input from stakeholders. The panel applauds this approach and hopes to see the new Plan of Work system operational soon. Additional input from the panel is that the process itself should include purposeful, in-depth evaluation as an expectation and a requirement for all future programming.

Portfolio Accountability
As discussed above, the panel was concerned that the current system requires CSREES to be responsible for decisions over which they have little direct authority. Given the current funding and goal-setting structures, the panel regarded *accountability* as actually dispersed; yet, the partnership system

itself puts the onus on CSREES. The panel believes the onus should be shared with the partnership states that receive the funding. The system does not capture variations in accountability among the states or allocate accountability between CSREES and the state partners. It also says nothing of all the other funding partners. For these reasons the panel scored the portfolio as having a moderate level of accountability.

Summary Remarks

The following outline was developed as a tool to summarize the thoughts the panel felt most important to share. This is also what we presented during the exit briefing to CSREES staff. The panel hopes that this can be used as a framework for future efforts related to Improving Quality of Life in Rural America.

1. ***Leadership***: Create and lead a shared vision for the entire organization that focuses on the desired outcomes
    a. Capitalize on and expand the national network to include other federal agencies, NGOs, etc.
    b. Build partnerships based upon desired <u>outcomes</u>
    c. Ensure that administrative structures support the portfolio
2. ***Strategic Planning***: Build a **strategic plan for the national portfolio**, based on desired outcomes
    a. Plan for depth instead of breadth: target and focus
    b. Frame planning as a change agent: anticipate needs of consumers (trends and outcomes)
    c. Incorporate stakeholder input at all levels
    d. Align Funding with top priorities
    e. Understand and capitalize on unique advantages of the system: leverage public trust and utilize the grassroots network
    f. Develop a Logic Model to start with desired outcomes, not programs or knowledge areas
3. ***Accountability:*** Build a program planning, evaluation, and reporting infrastructure for the system
    a. Coordinate formatting and data collection
    b. Validate outcomes in the Logic Model via research
    c. Collect, systematize, and enhance strategies for easy retrieval of data
    d. Acquire feedback between/among planning, evaluation, and reporting (this is crucial!)
4. ***Information Dissemination***: Proactively communicate, market, disseminate the outcomes of the portfolio. This effort should be tied to or utilize these aspects:
    a. Clearly define the strategic Vision for various constituency groups
    b. Stress how cutting-edge research, extension, and education methodologies were used to attain goals and explain outcomes
    c. Insure that audiences understand lessons learned: both successes and failures ;
    d. Use best practices for multi-way communication;
    e. Invite conversation about joint collaborations and funding opportunities.
5. ***Funding***: Seek and invest funds to support and strengthen goals of the portfolio and all segments of the CSREES mission (as related to research, teaching, and extension)
    a. Amplify the Research Portfolio:
        i. Invest in competitive social science research in the KAs (e.g. NRI)
        ii. Work with states to ensure formula funds support the social sciences
    b. Provide funds for Resident Instruction:
        i. Enhance graduate training and support
        ii. Improve distance education
        iii. Provide professional development, curriculum development, infrastructure; and
        iv. Encourage internships, service-learning, etc.
    c. Leverage the Extension System
        i. Seek funding partners by using unique assets (network and public trust) to become the partner of choice for other agencies
        ii Provide internships, professional development

Comments on Data and Evaluation Issues

Data Issues

CSREES receives reports from grantees annually, yet seems to have limited ability to use those reports effectively to integrate information or disseminate it to other stakeholders (from Congress to the citizens). The panel identified a number of problems that need to be addressed in order to improve data reporting.

Some examples are:

- Success stories are trumpeted, but failures may not be mentioned
- Systems and infrastructure within CSREES are insufficient to utilize data provided by states
- There is inconsistent data quality
- Stakeholders are given great latitude in selecting what data is collected and used and how to report it.

The panel would like to point out that it takes considerable time and effort on the part of the states to submit reports and it is disheartening to think this information is not being utilized to its full capacity. The panel realizes the reporting system is not adequate and CSREES is making a concerted effort to develop a new reporting system (OneSolution) that will be better able to disseminate information and outcomes. If CSREES is going to increase its methodological rigor and place more requirements on the states, the requests must be more targeted and there must be evidence that they will make use of what they receive. CSREES must exert leadership to define a minimum level of rigor and appropriate methodology to be used in programming, data analysis, and reporting. Methodology used to demonstrate outcomes must meet the rigorous standards of modern social science in order to unambiguously identify best practices. This may require training for some personnel. By implementing these suggestions, CSREES will be in a position to amass a body of data which can be used to effectively evaluate long-term programmatic outcomes, inform policy, and encourage additional resource investment. The panel is hopeful that the State Plan of Work and OneSolution software will help improve the identified problems in the collection and analysis of program impacts.

CSREES should charge the Planning and Accountability (P&A) office (serving as its research arm) to mine data coming in from the many studies supported through formula and competitive funds. This presupposes an adequate, consistent, and complete reporting system from grantees (including failed projects). P&A should also be responsible for and held accountable for wide dissemination of broad outcomes to stakeholders and decision-makers, with a possible stress on economic value. If no new funding becomes available, this would likely require reallocation of funds from other functions.

Evaluation Issues

Comments on Research & Development Criteria and Dimensions

When trying to assess Portfolio 2.2, the panel struggled with the ambiguity of the score sheet. It was difficult for panel members to discern whether they were being asked to evaluate CSREES efforts or to evaluate outcomes of the Federal/Land-Grant system funded activities. The entire network that encompasses the partnerships with state programs funded in part or full through CSREES is engaged in funded activities. In order to be consistent throughout the process, the panel chose to score the portfolio based on the funded activities of the Federal/Land-Grant system. The only dimensions where this was not the case was in those dimensions (*Integration*, *Portfolio Productivity*, and *Agency Guidance*) where the scoring criteria referred specifically to CSREES. Throughout the discussion the panel clearly identified the dimensions in which we used this interpretation of the scoring method so that the readers can more readily interpret their findings.

This section is divided into two focus areas: (1) The considerable need to upgrade the evaluation systems used by the partnership to insure that programs that receive funding are truly worth the investment; and (2) the need to refine the portfolio review process.

1. The panel found need for outcome (in contrast to output) measures to be built into the logic model. Ultimately, this will help drive funding priorities. Measures must not be derived post hoc

but rather be built into the original planning efforts. Future programming must be predicated on the use of research findings. This in turn depends on the reliable collection of data from stakeholders. In particular, outcomes identified by the logic model must become benchmarks for success (i.e., programs and activities can evaluated against identified outcomes). In addition, there needs to be a formative process to feed back into the logic model so that it may be an evolving and adaptive model.

Knowledge Areas are a convenient way to organize work, but do not themselves define strategic priorities. There was a concern that some in CSREES might mistakenly believe that knowledge areas drive the programming or research efforts. This is not and should not be the case. Instead, outcomes related to enhancing rural life must define those priorities. (Please note that other related comments are found throughout this review document.)

2. The panel recognizes that this first round of Portfolio review needs refining and appreciates the opportunity to offer the following comments on what they all understand to be an ongoing process:

The Review
The panel would have profited from more explicit direction ahead of time in terms of expectations. Many questions could have been answered in a pre-panel orientation (perhaps as a conference call) on such issues as panel member responsibilities, priorities for panel attention, and so on. For example, many panel members assumed they would be scoring each and every KA separately to then define an integrated score, when, in reality, they were scoring the portfolio as a whole. Also, the panel felt that their time in DC was not optimally deployed. In particular, time with NPLs would have been better used by a Q&A session, rather than used by NPLs to reiterate information from the portfolio document that panel members had already read. In addition, a preview of a panel report from a previous portfolio review would have been helpful.

The Score Sheet
The panel recognizes the score sheet itself is a work in progress, and has several comments related to this. The entire scoring tool provides many items which are unacceptably ambiguous, without metrics for calibration, and provided without specification of the appropriate evaluative contexts (in what sense do the questions reflect CSREES work versus the Federal/Land-Grant system). For other items, one question confounds several dimensions of effectiveness (leadership versus management). And more specifically, section 3 on performance needs much more fine tuning. The panel appreciates the opportunity to help improve this scale for future reviews.

Makeup of the Review Panel
Committee members noted a concern that panel membership seemed heavily weighted toward individuals who had more knowledge about extension than other focus areas of CSREES (Research and Education). The preponderance of extension expertise in some cases swayed discussion, but was counterbalanced by the relative paucity of extension emphasis in the Portfolio self-review document. It is recommended that CSREES take more effort to put together a well balanced review team.

The Logic Model
The Portfolio was framed within the Logic Model which was an identified strength. However, there were several critical ways in which it could be improved. For one, program descriptions were fit into logic models post hoc, rather than being built from the ground up. Thus, models tend to be situation (problem) driven rather than outcome driven. The best Strategic Plans first identify long-term desired outcomes, then map a process that will lead to those outcomes (i.e., identify a desired long term outcome and work backwards to identify the steps needed to achieve that outcome). As mentioned previously, <u>outcomes</u> (societal changes that would indicate an enhancement of rural life) are given little emphasis compared to outputs (programming activities).

Additionally, there was a strong concern voiced that feedback loops are missing and should be incorporated into future logic models.

The Knowledge Areas (KAs)
The organizational method used in the self-review document to describe the portfolio was found to be inappropriate. Rather than using strategic goals to explain the work of the portfolio, KAs were used. While this method may have been an efficient way to respond to the OMB mandate, this tactic does not support a leadership/visionary role for CSREES. This discussion is related to a conclusion made earlier by the panel; there are issues about the use of KAs as an organizing device. The panel felt that if CSREES continues to use the KAs in this fashion in future reviews, the assignment of certain KAs to this portfolio should be reconsidered. For example, there was concern that KAs 721 and 722 did not seem to belong with this portfolio and could be better assigned elsewhere.

Comments on Future Directions

- CSREES should assert a leadership role. This must be predicated on healthy trusting relationships with its stakeholders in setting priorities, building collaborative partnerships, helping leverage resources of time, money, and people, and evaluating outcomes of decades-old programming. Additionally, resources and staffing patterns should be re-examined to insure they parallel an investment in the highest priorities.

- CSREES should capitalize on its unique niche, which derives from the broad grass-roots network that has been built over more than a century of partnerships with states and local agencies. It is better positioned than any other entity to deliver information, services, and programs to multiple diverse populations and should be the partner of choice for all other agencies. In order to achieve this goal, the Federal/Land-Grant system *can and must build upon the "trust capital" it has painstakingly built with multiple stakeholders*.

- It is the panel's perception that the Federal/Land-Grant system has chosen breadth over depth, as reflected in the portfolio. We find this to be problematic. The necessity to direct additional funds to a smaller portfolio, which is tightly focused in response to stakeholder needs, will produce better outcomes than the current practice of spreading resources widely but thinly. Additionally, the panel is concerned about the best use of limited resources. Examining cost-benefit ratios would be a useful way to establish priorities. However, the legitimacy of that process depends on identifying the appropriate variables to enter into costs and benefits and on the use of other evaluative criteria such as adequacy, equity, and efficiency. Amplifying the resource base (programming dollars, staff attention) for CSREES will require arguments based on outcomes, not outputs. In other words, focusing on improved quality of life with focused priorities will provide the basis from which to make the case for additional funding. To deal with some of these issues the panel identified five critical areas that CSREES needs to address as it takes strides to accomplish its goals for the future. They are leadership, strategic planning, accountability, information dissemination and funding.

- Multidisciplinary approaches permeate Portfolio 2.2, and the panel believes a true collaboration of disciplines is the only viable approach to achieving the outcomes articulated. None of the desired outcomes in the portfolio can be achieved through the use of a single approach and therefore the panel encourages CSREES to continue emphasizing multidisciplinary approaches to solving complex societal problems. There also needs to be better documentation of these multidisciplinary efforts for the next review cycle.

- The panel is deeply concerned that diversity was not mentioned directly, yet the increasingly diverse needs of our society must drive the prioritization of research goals and the investment of resources. There is a great need to ensure quality of life for **all**, and therefore diversity issues should demand more attention in Portfolio 2.2.

Portfolio 2.2 Score – 81 out of 100 possible.

GLOSSARY

CSREES	Federal office (in DC)
the Federal/Land-Grant system	The entire program, including states that receive formula funds
Grantee	Any entity that receives funds (including pass-through formula funds) from the CSREES office
Stakeholder	Citizens and communities across the country; state research, extension, and education personnel; state coordinators; local, regional, and state governments; other federal agencies; nonprofits and other NGOs

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