

# Sea Grant Association

**President**

**Robert R. Stickney**

Texas Sea Grant College Program  
Texas A&M University  
2700 Earl Rudder Freeway S.,  
Suite 1800  
College Station, TX 77845  
P: 979-845-3854  
F: 979-845-7525  
stickney@tamu.edu

**President-Elect**

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University of Maryland

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**External Affairs Director**

**Jennifer M. Greenamoyer**  
Sea Grant Association  
1755 Massachusetts Ave., NW  
Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20036-2102  
P: 202-448-1240  
F: 202-448-1241  
jgreenamoyer@sga.seagrant.org

[www.sga.seagrant.org](http://www.sga.seagrant.org)

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To: Robin Alden  
From: Bob Stickney

RE: SGA comments on recent Communications Review Report

The Sea Grant Association delegates each received a copy of the draft report and were asked to submit comments to Jennifer Greenamoyer. We heard back from a number of the programs, though not all. Jennifer organized comments by topic and recorded them verbatim. Aside from minor editing for typos, the comments below are presented without changes and without attribution. You will notice that while the comments on a particular topic are not identical, some recurrent themes are clearly present in most instances.

We hope these comments are useful as you prepare your final report. We appreciate having had the opportunity to provide feedback to your committee.

cc: SGA Board

## **General**

Maintaining the media relations effort, focused on dissemination of "real news" tips to national-level media, is essential if we expect to position Sea Grant with national media as a useful and credible source of marine-related information.

Overall, we are impressed with the scope of the review and the committees' recommendations on the three communications projects. In general we endorse the recommendations, with wholehearted support of re-establishing the National Media Relations Program as soon as possible.

There is certainly a need to establish a National Communications Program (NCP) with a program director based in NSGO and guidelines/mechanisms to assure coordination with the appropriate NSGO and network entities/groups. My main concern is that a NCP would focus on the NSGO relationship with NOAA. We have recently seen press releases from NOAA describing awards to our program that did not even mention Sea Grant and other instances of reference to NOAA Sea Grant--which is not an image we want to provide most of our constituents. In other words, a national image is necessary for certain audiences, but should not be developed in a manner or to a level that jeopardize state and/or local support.

Although I hate the idea of further delaying NCP establishment, it may be prudent to see what the response is to the Ocean Commission's report regarding NOAA and Sea Grant before taking action.

In defining a National Communications Program it is important to recognize that the components of the network will have somewhat different foci in implementing communications programs (ie. state programs and SGA programs may be focused on different audiences and purposes). A National Communications office should add value to the other communications functions within the Sea Grant network.

The report should address local, regional, and national efforts underway for delivering various bodies of Sea Grant information (AquaNIC, SGNIS, Haznet, etc). The Sea Grant Library has greatly improved their holdings in recent years; however, these other efforts have a much better market. The gap between content holders and market providers could be shortened and ultimately eliminated if these groups collaborated.

I strongly disagree with the statement on page 11 that the 2001 National Communications Network Strategic plan has been "effectively superseded" by the Wittman Plan. They are 2 entirely different plans with different audiences and missions. They complement eachother and need to work in concert with eachother. Without the 2001 plan, we would have no direction or need for the national communications steering committee and its various subcommittees. It is essential that this part of the document be reworded.

One gets the impression, not necessarily from this report, but in general, that the NSGO would like to exercise more control over the state efforts, and be able to dictate more about how their communicators contribute to the national effort, rather than invest in the capability to run a communications program on their own (and our) behalf. It appears they want to give the state program quotas, mandate web design (where they have failed miserably since web pages were a part of life), etc.

## **Proposed NMRAC; NCP Structure & Management**

I see no reason for two new national advisory committees, such as the proposed new Nat'l Communications Program Advisory Committee and the National Media Relations Advisory Committee. I do not support more administrative monies going to such entities. There should be some thought to working out advisory roles for national activities into the state communications roles and their existing national structure, e.g. the Communicator's Assembly.

Certainly one, good, well-crafted advisory committee is needed for the overall program. NSGO staff, library staff, and media relations staff should be held accountable to meeting with the National Communications Program Advisory Committee. If this is well coordinated and time is spent carefully, this should be sufficient.

Part of the reason for problems in the three communications efforts studied in the report is lack of management oversight. A huge committee(s) was supposed to manage the activities and this is a major reason they are the sad situation depicted in the report. Management by committee does not work. No one is accountable to volunteer managers. A smaller management committee is proposed. Being smaller won't help. It will also not be accountable. The communications functions need accountability and strong management.

It is unclear who the "Chair" of the Executive Committee of the National Media Relations Advisory Committee will be. It does not seem appropriate that the media relations person reports to that chair. If NSGO has the right person in place for the Communications Director, then that person should oversee the work of the library staff and the media relations office.

One aspect of the report that gives me concern is designating the chair of the advisory committee as the manager of the media relations project. This could conceivably lead to all sorts of difficulties with regards to fiscal oversight and management if the chair is not located within an organization that is set up to receive and monitor federal grant funds. I don't have a suggested solution to this potential issue at the moment, but I thought the possible problem should be identified.

The Task Force's concern about having a more cohesive Sea Grant national and state communications program is best obtained through existing structures, not new ones.

Streamlining the oversight system and designating a single primary contact person, and channeling funding through a non-Sea Grant entity, perhaps CORE, will improve what already has proven to be an effective outreach effort.

With the proposed Advisory Committee, I think we are headed down the same road that created problems for the NMRP prior to this review. The recommendation actually establishes a more complex, tiered committee structure to oversee the projects – and management by committee, in my opinion, has been shown not to work, and it will likely not work in the future.

An important role for the proposed advisory committee is missing; that is, to provide strategic and tactical planning guidance and support for the NCP. In my opinion, this is more than providing coordination and dispute resolution. What will the strategic goals and objectives of the NCP be?

The Subcommittee process failed for the NMRP before, so why do we think it will work this time around? Each of the members of this proposed subcommittee have full-time job

responsibilities, and I can tell you from direct experience that the NMRP requires A LOT of attention, sometimes on a daily basis. This is why it did not work before, and why I feel it will not again, regardless of the membership.

Someone needs to clarify how a National Communications Program would differ from the current set up we already have with regards to the national office staff and the national communications steering committee, which is made up of representatives from all of the Sea Grant regions who now work on all of the elements the task force recommended needed to be covered. If a "National Communications Program" took over these activities, what's the communications steering committee supposed to do?

Except to liaise, recognition of and interface with the Sea Grant Communications Network and its officers and committees is missing in the proposed program, role of a national program director and vis a vis the Pell Library. The program is not going to draw its substance from the national office; neither is the national director, neither is the library.

There needs to be less concern with governance and more with definition and expressed limitations of function, to not do all things. This relates to both the communications program and to its director. Both of these will be met with perspectives that are very different for NOAA, the National Sea Grant Office, the state communications programs and SGA interests.

The draft report calls for a definition of a National Communications Program, but stops short of providing a basic structure for one. Two points: (1) In theory this makes sense, but will then the NCP be a NSGO-oriented, rather than a Sea Grant network program? (2) It appears by the text that the NCP is now a sum of the individual projects. Where are the strategic goals and objectives for the NCP, and how do the three (soon to be two) projects fit? This context is not provided, so this question cannot be answered.

My principle concern with this report is that it is incomplete if there is no organizational structure for a new National Communications Program defined. Even a draft structure would have been helpful to respond to. My feeling is that, if these are national investments funded solely by the NSGO, then it should have been more of a straightforward exercise to define a proposed structure.

The SGA PMC liaison should not be the only SGA rep to the proposed NMRAC.

The Report should explore the idea of term limits for NMRAC positions.

### **Staffing, Roles & Affiliation**

I am strongly opposed to a stand-alone National Media Relations Office that would be, yet again, separate from the NSGO and the Communicators Assembly. There have been problems in the past with isolation of the Media function from the NSGO and State programs and the lack of dynamic interchanges. I would suggest that the Media Office report to the Nat'l Communications Director.

A National Media Relations Program should function within the National Sea Grant Communications Program and in concert with the expressed mission and goals of that program. Its director should report to the director of communications. Its concentration should be public

information through national media in service to the National Sea Grant Communications Program as it represents the National Sea Grant Program Office and all of the state programs.

The report is consistently unclear about the relationship between a “National Communications Program Director” and the current “Communications Program Coordinator.” The report should clearly state whether this is a function to be assigned within the NSGO or if the Task Force is recommending addition of another staff member to the NSGO.

Several items listed as proposed elements of the National Communications Program (pg. 13) are inherently governmental functions.

Its not at all clear how the committee viewed the role of NSGO---either as communicators or coordinators or even in a staffing context. Clarification in this regard seems essential . Does the report suggest adding another communications position to NSGO? Given new hires already in place and the real lack of scientific support at NSGO this would be difficult to support.

It needs to be clear how program director would interact with existing staff such as Jamie's position. Is the position new, or is her position to be elevated. How would other staff currently working with Jamie and others be folded into a new program.

I thought we HAD a National Communications Program Director, Jamie Krauk? Please clarify this for me, are we talking about another position, a title change, or what?

There needs to be more clarification of how the National Communications Program Director position fits into the current staffing of NSGO. Is this Jamie's position? I don't think there needs to be two positions (Director and Coordinator). One person doing the job well should be sufficient.

An important, and the most viable, option has been left out. I suggest that the existing NSGCP communications coordinator (Krauk) be identified as a possible option to assume the duties of the NCP. This is a more permanent option than an IPA. Regardless of the pros and cons, I think this option needs to be included in this section. It saves money, she can do the job, and she is earning the respect of the network.

The Task Force suggests using an IPA recruited from those Sea Grant Communicators with the specified qualifications. A rotating position will not work for a National Communications function, this person needs to build long term relationships with media contacts in addition to building and maintaining databases of media contacts. Credibility and consistency are key to this function, similar to Extension Agents.

The National communication program as well as the media relations program should follow the strategic principles established by the NSGO and the network. There should be a dynamic relationship between the office and programs such that programs will feel a buy in to the media process. I'm not sure the media person would have free latitude as a professional in pursuing tasks as a NSGO federal employee. It may be better to have some other type of affiliation.

Locating the office in Washington DC, outside of NOAA and within easy access to related organizations and national news media offices, is a good idea.

The document states that the previous NMRP Director did not have a competitive benefits package while employed. THIS IS INCORRECT. Ben had all the standard and optional

benefits that any employee of South Carolina is entitled, including three weeks of annual leave, three weeks of sick leave (both at the beginning of employment), 11 state holidays, state BC/BS health plan coverage, a medical spending account, supplemental long term disability, optional life, and access to the state retirement system (which he declined in lieu of an IRA). He also received significant pay raises each year; at much higher rates than any of our other employees.

It is excellent that the Review Panel appreciates the need for two professionals in the Nat'l Media Relations Office. Will both these professionals serve in a full-time capacity? This would appear to be essential considering the national scope of work and coordination with state SG programs. There is inconsistency in the title for the second position. On p. 23, the title is described as a Media Relations Specialist; however, on p. 10 it is listed as an Administrative Assistant (which seems far more clerical in nature). We would support the more professionally skilled Media Relations Specialist to work with the Media Relations Director.

Who will be responsible for making the clarification on the relationships between SGA staff and the media relations director, as well as between the NSGO and the media relations office? (p. 23) These are worthwhile recommendations that just need to be more clearly sorted out.

The proposed methods of supervision are problematic because the NMRP Director will be working for an organization (as per the recommendation later in the report, whether it be CORE or NASULGC, etc.). Our experience with hiring the SGA External Affairs Director was extremely informative in this regard. The subcommittee chair, by (labor) law, will have no legal authority to supervise or evaluate this individual; on the contrary, a designated official with the host organization will have to assume this responsibility, and to deal with issues of leave, workmans comp, liability, etc. My point here is that this is not necessarily a simple solution to the problems we have had in the past.

### **Ensuring Usefulness, Participation & Cooperation**

The discussion of the Library function in the context of compliance and enforcement is inappropriate and unnecessarily authoritative. If this is a function to serve the Network, it should be presented within the context of ensuring usefulness, accessibility and ease of submission with an emphasis on cooperation. The Task Force should encourage a needs survey and a continuing dialog with the SG Directors and SG Communicators to guarantee fulfillment of these goals.

The use of the term "enforce" regarding program submissions to the Library is inappropriate. This does not recognize the culture of a higher education and research institutions. If they can somehow help programs with some tools to make it easier to get publications info from our PIs so that we, in turn, can easily supply that information to the Library, then we'd have better performance (not compliance).

The report should focus on issues related to the function and operation of the communications projects, and not upon real or perceived publication submission difficulties at the local program level. Also, rather than including text that appears punative, I suggest that, if the recommendation related to this topic is included in the final report, it should be positive in its approach and leave open the option for the PAT teams to recommend that local programs submit "missing" publications to the NSGL within a specified period, rather than penalizing the program by having to ignor their existence during the PAT process.

"Enforcing" publications submissions is a bad idea. Providing additional incentives is a better one. Why don't we know on a regular basis how individual programs perform? So, if you did know, go after the "low" performers, don't put this into some sort of police procedure. There are problems with the current system. If 10 books are published as Sea Grant publications; and each copy costs for example \$150 each, 3 required copies cost \$4,500. Where do these funds come from?

In principle, using the Sea Grant Library as a means of validating publications listed in PAT briefing books is solid. However, there is an inherent lag between the time a Sea Grant Program submits a set of publications and when they are cataloged.

The Task Force strongly recommends that existing publication submittal requirements be enforced. What enforcement procedures will ensure that this takes place? One aspect that has been troubling with publication submittal is the fact that we are required to provide numerous copies of some of our most expensive publications, which can be a hardship for programs with limited publications budgets. It would also be preferable if the publication submittal process could be simplified.

### **Relationships with Partners**

While a National Sea Grant Communications Program has not been defined, there is nothing to suggest partnering with other communications programs within NOAA. Internal communications with DOC and NOAA is not sufficient and is probably of questionable value. Collaborations with communications programs of other NOAA divisions and programs needs consideration.

Report states "The Task Force recommends that SGA's national communications activities be closely coordinated with the National Communications Program." The Task Force/Panel recommendations should focus on the activities of a potential National Communications Program. This recommendation could read: "The Task Force encourages the National Communications Program to coordinate national communications activities with SGA." Or development of an MOU.

As noted in the report, SGA has very specific mandate as defined by its members. While there are a myriad of ways that coordination can and indeed should occur, failure to recognize the different roles that each of the parts of the Sea Grant enterprise play is a serious problem. If those lines blur we run the risk of losing identity and effectiveness on all fronts. It is not at all clear what governance means in the context of this report and how much the committee appreciated the importance of separate identity.

Aspects of SGA's activities can be coordinated with the national program but other aspects of SGA's activities have nothing to do with the National Communication strategy that comes from the National communications Program.

I am somewhat confused about what are "SGA communications activities." Are these SGA's Exec Director activities?

I respectfully suggest to the Panel that they tone down or eliminate the references to the SGA as not playing well with Sea Grant. SGA has its mission and objectives and, at times, it in fact disagrees with the National Office. An excellent example deals with the appropriations

process. Once the President announces his budget, the NSGO staff and the Panel must tow the line and promote before Congress and others that the President's budget for Sea Grant is adequate. The SGA, however, is not under that constraint and can speak on behalf of the network for increased funding for Sea Grant. We therefore are not in formal agreement – but we all wish for the same thing. A better example occurred when the President recommended moving Sea Grant to NSF. Again, the NSGO had their hands tied, but the SGA was able to work to deal with this issue, and actually actively and successfully engaged the NMRP in the effort.

SGA should be looked at as a vehicle for promoting Sea Grant's interests, not compromising its value. I would therefore suggest that the SGA recommendation be rephrased to reflect our mutual interests in enhancing communications while recognizing that there will be differences in our communications strategies and messages at times – but for all the right reasons.

Nevertheless, while the NSGO and SGA share common interests related to the welfare of Sea Grant, the way the two envision the best way to ensure the survival and growth of the organization often diverges sharply. A good example of this currently is the focus by the NSGO on making SG the outreach arm of NOAA, and serving NOAA's interests in a top-down approach, which is counter to our historical approach of bottoms-up efforts.

We strongly concur with the finding that "SGA's efforts with Congress should be greatly enhanced by Sea Grant's broader National Communications Program . . . This is a governance matter of highest priority for Sea Grant." (p. 15) Communicators' expertise should be tapped to develop messages for all Sea Grant audiences, including the Congress. The recommendations do not address **how** to coordinate between SGA's national communications activities and the National Communications Program. This should be considered.

The discussion of "providing training" to the SG Directors in media interaction (pg 24) is more appropriately presented as opening a dialog regarding the needs of the Directors in relation to national media assistance or materials.

Why is the training suggestion directed solely at Sea Grant Directors (pg. 24)? I suggest that all pertinent staff (e.g., extension and communications) be included in this as well.

The report indicates that the SG directors need to be trained in media relations. I disagree. The NSGO needs to make sure that communications are a part of the management structure of each SG program, that the director and communications staff talk to each other and that there is clear policy on how to involve communications. That will solve the problem, not training SG directors.

## **Funding**

The Report states "Funding for the National Communications Program will come from all of the sources in Sea Grant: NSGO budget, the 1 percent money that is currently used to fund NSGL, Abstracts and the NMRP." Report should explicitly state that SG program base funds should not be touched.

## **Review**

A four-year PAT review process is excessive. The National Sea Grant Communications Program is not equivalent to a state program, nor is it on a par. The proposed program should adhere to a scope of work and implementation plan against which the program and its director are held accountable. Annual reports of accomplishments and shortcomings should be routine. Regularly scheduled TATs might effectively address deficiencies. It is the responsibility of the National Sea Grant Office to monitor and manage the National Sea Grant Communications Program, just like they supposedly monitor programs. However, they want to function as the 34<sup>th</sup> SG program, attend conferences, hold proposal competitions, etc., which take time away from monitoring activities like the national communications effort.

I agree that the National Communications Program should be subject to some periodic review, but I'm not sure why this would be a PAT. The "PAT" is a defined process under legislation that the NSGRP implements to review state programs. A review modeled after the PAT process might be fine, but shouldn't we also review the National Extension Program and the National Strategic Initiative Program, etc.?

I do not support the expansion of the terms of reference for the NRP to evaluate the Nat'l Communications Program. This is a slippery slope; are we to then see a call for NRP evaluations of the Extension Assembly, Educator's, Theme Teams?! Evaluations of the national communications portfolio should be conducted as part of a regular review of the NSGO; and should not be conducted by the NRP.

## **Library Specific**

The concept of an advisory committee to the national communications program has merit (particularly if it represents the perspectives and limitations in number 2 above), but the National Sea Grant Library does not warrant one of its own. Neither does it warrant special funds to support expenses associated with one or to pay for staff development. The library needs a scope of work and a business plan (or annual plan of work) for which it is held accountable, and that is performed by competent staff with the requisite skills and expertise. The contract or grant should be buying these, not paying to develop them.

Online library submission has already been established and programs should use it; State Sea Grant program tracking is not a Pell Library affair; inherited or future abstract requirements should be included as a function of the library/library staff; marketing and outreach efforts should be limited and fully defined in a scope of work that has received prior approval. Having a National Sea Grant Library has been touted as being highly important and valuable. But it is not as important as having Sea Grant-funded research, Sea Grant research from other funds, and Sea Grant publications in the national library system. The process is more important than the broker. In other words, this function would largely take place - even if a National sea Grant Library did not exist - through the state programs.

I disagree with the task force's recommendation that the National Sea Grant Library staffing increase. With respect to aquaculture information, I worked with the Web for delivering aquaculture information two years before the Sea Grant Library had zero digital aquaculture publications online. I think the reason was primarily my interest and job responsibility to deliver information in the most efficient manner possible. A great deal has changed in regard to how libraries function in the age of the Internet. I draw your attention to the Agriculture Network

Information Center (AgNIC) at <http://agnic.org>. I support the approach of a distributed network of libraries with a coordinating body over an expanded centralized library proposed in the communications review document. I can envision the AgNIC concept being applied with Sea Grant, especially if we use the Theme Teams as a base from which a distributed network could be developed within Sea Grant. In closing, I do not support expanding the funding to the National Sea Grant Library unless a better effort is made to work with existing surrogate library and Web portal efforts.

I'm alright with increasing the staffing at the library, but only if the budget can afford it.

It is inappropriate to tell URI what to do with their staffing issue at the Pell library.

It is logical to upgrade computer equipment and associated procedures at the National Sea Grant Library, and firm up ties with the Pell Library. There is no question that information seekers are heavily reliant on accessing digitized information via the Internet. Sea Grant must ensure that we make our information available in a variety of forms, with special emphasis on electronic access.

### **Abstract Specific**

It seems quite appropriate that Sea Grant Abstracts be abandoned; as mentioned in the report, its usefulness has dwindled, and dollars will be better spent on promotional activities that can be implemented by the National Sea Grant Library staff.

I agree to let the Abstracts go and re-program those funds for the Library.

I fully support the recommendation to discontinue the Abstracts and use additional resources to upgrade the capabilities of the Library.

The lag in implementation of modern publishing technology, and apparent unwillingness to incorporate modern methods, with the Woods Hole Database company was surprising. Given the limited circulation of the hard copy abstract publications relative to the cost involved, and considering the great potential for substituting modern electronic techniques for pursuing the otherwise worthwhile objectives of Sea Grant Abstracts, the task force's recommendation to end Sea Grant's contract with the Woods Hole Database company seems wise. It also is reasonable to reallocate a large portion of the money previously allocated to the Woods Hole Database contract to efforts that will help strengthen the National Sea Grant Library.

We totally agree that the SG Abstracts should be terminated. It is a waste of money in today's world. It is offensive to learn that the NSGO has funded this archaic process without review for many years.

Regarding Sea Grant Abstracts, the last statement on pg 20 should be revised to read "The recommendations should be implemented by the end of FY2004 funding with all..." The project is funded through SCSGC from March 1, 2004 to February 28, 2005. The project should not be terminated before that date. I also suggest that before funds are redistributed to the Library or the NMRP, that proposals be solicited from those projects to justify the need for increased funding.

## **Miscellaneous & Editorial**

My first comment is that it needs to be closely proofread. Necessary punctuations are missing, and I found some extra words.

Page 13 - the section on strategic communications includes no mention of strategies for reaching multiple audiences or how the three projects address the topic. So why have it there?

Page 13 - under NCP - we do not have 33 programs in the network. Vermont, Pennsylvania and Guam are projects, not programs. As of May 27<sup>th</sup>, we will actually have 31 programs since ME and NH split.

As with the National Sea Grant Library, the media relations office must also be equipped with state-of-the-art communication tools.

In the conclusion section of the *Sea Grant National Media Relations Program* (p.59), several thought-provoking questions were raised regarding justification for investment in the Sea Grant National Media Relations Office. We think this report never directly addressed how the Task Force determined the answers to these questions. It would be enlightening and informative to learn how their thought process unfolded with regard to these overarching, highly significant questions. Could this information be added to the report?

Regarding web usage statistics, just for comparison, the Aquaculture Network Information Center (<http://aquanet.org>) had a budget of around \$36,000 during approximately the same time frame (2001-2002). In 2003, 1.64 million people from 195 countries used AquaNIC 16.54 million times with 37,960,000 documents downloaded. When money is tight and more funds are being requested, I would be careful about using a misleading term like 565% increase. A 100% increase over one is still only two.