



September 25, 2007

The 2007 CSREES Review Team for University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service and the Alaska Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Dear CSREES Review Team:

I am the Chair of the Advisory Council for Alaska Cooperative Extension Service (CES). I am writing you as an individual as I was unable to organize a collective letter from the whole council due to problems of space and time. However, I am confident that the issues I mention here are those they would agree with, though they might wish to express them differently.

This year is an International Polar Year. In Alaska it is always a polar year, and the needs associated with this are always our priorities. Polar warming right now is visibly affecting our west coast communities.

The Advisory Council welcomes the review team and believes the review is especially timely, given the administrative changes that have taken place in AK CES in the last year. CES nationwide is looking at our evolving society and asking in what ways it needs to adapt its programs to current needs. In Alaska the Advisory Council feels that we are indeed making appropriate changes and keeping up with the times as far as we are able to offer programs with our shrinking resources. It is essential that applications of Polar Year research be readily available to our widespread and diverse public.

Increased attention to outreach is a current concern of land grant institutions, and has been emphasized by the UAF Chancellor. With this we, of course, agree. We are well-recognized in the rural regions where we have field agents and/or staff. I believe that our major problem with outreach in Alaska is that there are four large regions of the state that are off-road, where one travels mainly by air, containing a large percent of the population, and where we have no field presence because we don't have the resources. Printed material is useful, of course, but has its limitations with rural populations that by custom relate and learn through human interaction. Teleconferencing can work well with some topics and some audiences.

I am greatly concerned for our youth. It is hard to imagine any priority higher than providing better leadership to youth in a state with rapid cultural change, high youthful suicide rate, and distressing dropout, alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, and unemployment rates among our rural youth. There should be a youth leadership development club of some sort in every community of Alaska, no matter how small or isolated. Due to the changing demographics of Anchorage and Fairbanks caused by increased immigration from rural Alaska and from other countries, plus all the problems of urban America, there is a growing urgency of need for urban youth programs as well. CES must be able to address these complex needs of youth, and I am disturbed that we are not doing more.

AK CES has been in a state of flat funding for some years. Due to rising personnel costs (over most of which, such as benefits rate, we have no control) our real budget continues to shrink. AK CES also does not have financial support of local/ borough governments, with one small town exception. Most of the smaller towns are insolvent now or verging on it. Meanwhile, over recent years, many rural agent/staff positions have not been

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filled after employees left for whatever reason. Within CES there has been inevitably a drive to pursue grants, and I believe it is a concern as to just how far we can grow and improve while forced to rely increasingly on grants and partnerships. In the end, we must have an increase in basic funding to keep up with rising costs, let alone expand.

Most of the attention of UAF administration toward CES this year has been toward changing its structure and leadership, a process still going on and now awaiting the outcome of this review. The Council was not included in the early decisions regarding change of leadership, and protested this. Although we are advisory, we take our responsibility seriously. In the next stage of changes, we were included in the membership of a task force to look at CES structure. One big issue for this task force was how to elevate the visibility of CES within the University community. Specific proposals addressed this, but the main one on which the others depended was rejected by the administration. Following this, a new group was appointed and assigned to recommend improvements for CES, again in structure, visibility, outreach, etc. We again were included on this group, but its work was postponed when the administration decided to request this CSREES review of AK CES. The Council was pleased with that decision, but also frustrated that the search for a CES Exec. Director has been delayed.

The Council agrees with administration that CES needs to be more visible within the university community, that more outreach can and should occur, that 4-H can be a bridge to encourage youth to go on to higher education. I believe that there are probably savings to be had in operations, as there are in any organization, and that these need to be looked at rigorously, also accepting that better accountability for results is required. However, Alaska is unique in ways we can't change and that have to be recognized. Our huge, isolated regions with small communities and high poverty and unemployment rates and cultural differences are going to remain that way for the foreseeable future. Likewise, our urban centers' problems will continue to grow in complexity.

The Advisory Council believes in AK CES and knows that many of our communities will continue to look to CES for help through programmatic delivery of applied research. We must build our capability to deliver to ALL of Alaska in a sustainable manner for the 21st century.

I thank you for the Council for the time and thought you are giving to this review and assure you we will take it to heart.

Sincerely,

Nancy M. Mendenhall, Chair  
University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service Advisory Council