



Toolik Field Station Steering Committee Winter Meeting 2026

Thursday, January 29, 2026, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. AKT | [Presentations webpage](#)

Attendees

SC (12): Syndonia Bret-Harte (TFS), Steve Oberbauer (co-chair), Jason Dobkowski, Mario Muscarella, Brian Barnes (TFS), Frank Rack (NSF), Arial Shogren, Jessie Motes, Rose Cory (on behalf of ARC LTER), Brett Biebyuck, Chris Baird (NEON), Mike Wientraub

Staff (9): Marin Kuizenga, Amanda Young, Lindsey Clark, Joe Franich, Stevie Goetz, Abby Jackson, Rachel de Sobrino, Haley Dunleavy, Adam Chisom

Others (8): Trace Wright (B-ARO), Patrick Proden (B-ARO), Melissa Head (BLM), Joe Orton (B-ARO), Bevin Luna (B-ARO), Diane O'Brien (IAB), Kate Ruck (NSF), Brian Hawkins (B-ARO)

Minutes

Introductions: Welcome to the new student representative, Jessie Motes, and the new UAF IAB representative, Mario Muscarella.

Opening remarks from NSF: NSF is undergoing a reorganization where OPP has moved into the Office of the Director, in a new Office of Research Infrastructure. Renee Crain is acting supervisor for the ARSLS group. There are active solicitations for Arctic research. Projects should continue to apply for funding. FYI: the merit review and PAPPG are being revised. No appointment yet for the NSF director; the chief of staff is acting director. The APP with Battelle is in the process of being finalized.

Updates on 2026 Operations: See [operations slides](#) for information presented by TFS management and staff. Many SC members offered recognition of the many years of service given by those who left Toolik in the past year.

Drones: The Arctic LTER had a question about what services the new drone will offer. The big difference in the new drone is that it has a lighter payload and can carry only one sensor at a time. Projects should expect a learning period with the new system, but GIS anticipates providing the same services as those provided in the past. It may take multiple flights to get those data products.

Spatial data embargo: TFS needs to archive spatial data with the Arctic Data Center in compliance with NSF requirements. Toolik GIS has been working with the ADC and expects to release all current data in one run. But going forward, what should the embargo period be so projects that have requested the data can have time for analysis and publication? TFS has proposed different

timelines for degree levels and general projects. Steering committee members suggested adding project members as authors on the dataset so they can get credit in addition to TFS. Members also suggested having one standard period of embargo, regardless of degree, and to use the degree conference data as the project end date. Members also emphasized needing to have one clear policy out front, so projects are informed before data is collected. The NSF policy is that all samples, data, and associated code must be provided to an appropriate repository within two years of collection/creation or by the end of the award, whichever comes first.

Field courses: TFS will host field courses during the peak season and asked the committee for ideas on how to reduce impacts to researchers. There was support from committee members for increased courses. Student rep Motes said to make sure graduate students and RAs know about the courses and any commitments made by PIs. Brett Biebyuck shared that RMBL's education and outreach programming (including hosting workshops and meetings) has been successful at diversifying their funding, especially when addressing reduced research user days and the gap in winter use. These programs are charged more to use RMBL than researchers. He also cautioned that these extra activities are big lifts. Being busier in the off-season can add strain to staff by taking away the winter reprieve in operations.

Student, postdoc, and research assistant perspectives: Jessie Motes and Jason Dobkowski presented results from their surveys of [students and postdocs](#), and [research assistants](#), respectively. There were no major problems identified, but there were several smaller issues to address, including creating pathways for undergraduate students to engage with other projects, increased social opportunities for short-term visitors, and uncertainty about proper kitchen etiquette and the responsibility of bailing boats after storms.

The limitations of the 25-year-old age restriction for NSF vehicles were also discussed as a continuing issue; there may be project trucks provided by NFS/PFS that will just sit on the station pad for large portions of the summer because there aren't any team members old enough to drive them. One committee member asked if it would be possible to negotiate with Battelle to pay a higher insurance rate on one vehicle to allow younger drivers.

Strategic plan: TFS provided a brief update on our progress on strategic plan initiatives. There was one question about how we are approaching the stated priority to diversify funding. We are seeking projects that will bring user days from other funding sources, including PolarIN and field courses. But we will continue to seek base funding from NSF, as that is still the funding source for the majority of our users. Biebyuck advised that it takes a lot of investment to make donations a substantial part of an organization's budget; RMBL has built its fundraising program over 15 years with a team of 2-4 people working year-round on development. Biebyuck also emphasized that hosting meetings not only brings in user days for the meeting but also increases connections with outside groups, who could bring in more funding through research use or philanthropy.

All Scientists Meeting 2027: TFS plans to hold an ASM in January 2027, which will be held jointly with the Arctic LTER planning meeting. There was support from committee members for a joint meeting and a clarification that the joint meeting will be appropriately jointly funded by TFS and the LTER.

Updates from collaborating organizations

NEON has received NSF approval to change network-wide operations by canceling, suspending or modifying some of its sampling and data products. NEON will suspend plant diversity sampling at all sites, resulting in ~140 fewer user days at TFS. The aquatics campaign will be similar to last year. They are removing some sensors from the tower and will no longer measure wet deposition. Additionally, the Airborne Observation Platform won't travel to Alaska this year. The changes will be available on the NEON website before the field season begins.

NEON has renamed its assignable assets to the research support program. NEON is using existing permits for sampling at TFS sites, and TFS has not been able to report these sampling locations or projects supported.

NEON will host a Polar STEAM teacher in the first week of August. They'll also split time for a field technician with Roxaneh Khorsand's pollinator project.

BLM: There are lots of changes happening at the BLM with land status. There is a move to lift a public land order so that the State of Alaska would have the selection of lands in the Dalton Highway Corridor. If it went through, the BLM would still take care of BLM admin sites, like the campgrounds, but the state would take over waysides. While that is in progress, the BLM is reviewing projects and permitting so that if the land is transferred, it will be a smoother process. Other updates are that the BLM has authorized the LNG pipeline, which would be managed by the State. The RMP was signed but no longer exists. The Toolik RNA is still there, but not the ACEC.

Arctic LTER has received 80% of their year 4 funding. They are currently transitioning their leadership and will apply for another round of funding. In 2026, the LTER will host REUs, an RET, a Polar STEAM teacher, and the artist Nikki Lindt. They will also feature an Arctic ecology program at the University of Michigan Earth Camp for high schoolers. This year is the 20th year of the fertilization gradient experiment, and so much of their focus this field season will be on that. Long-term information manager Jim Laundre is retiring. Graduate student Julie Gan participated in the Network Office synthesis group.

Battelle-ARO Facility & Helicopter Plans: Trace Wright provided an update on the 2026 FEMC plans, available for review in the [FEMC presentation slides](#). New docks will be procured this season, and may be installed depending on purchase date. Patrick Proden provided an update on helicopter operations at TFS. There will be one R66 on site from June 28 to July 14 and from Aug. 4 to 19. Three projects will be supported with 67.5 helo hours in addition to the demobilization of some boardwalk, including those at the Anaktuvuk River Fire burn. The helicopter coordinator will be staffed from the Fairbanks Ops office, such as Molly Timm or Dan Pyle.

Other discussion

Soda gun: TFS is interested in replacing the soda gun with a less noisy, more reliable machine that only makes soda water. Committee members supported the change, stating that the soda gun is not as well used as canned soda was, which shows that residents can go without soda.

Snowmachine permit: There were some unexpected staff changes at UA Lands, which has subsequently delayed the process of obtaining a snowmachine permit. The application has been resubmitted to UA Lands.