

**NRIS Advisory Committee Meeting
April 12, 2000
Montana State Library**

ATTENDANCE (Committee Members):

Dan Sullivan for Gary Gingery, Montana Dept. of Agriculture;
Todd Everts, Montana Legislative Environmental Policy Office;
Bonnie Lovelace, MT Dept. of Environmental Quality;
Chris Smith and Janet Hess Herbert, MT Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks;
Wayne Wetzel, Montana Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation;
Stan Sternberg, Montana Dept. of Transportation;
Robert Rasmussen, Lewis & Clark County;
Mark Baumler, State Historic Preservation Office
Dean Culwell, Westech;
Karen Strege, Montana State Library (MSL);
Sue Crispin, Natural Heritage Program
Duane Anderson, Natural Resource Information System;
Ted Chase, Natural Resource Information System.

ATTENDANCE (Other Interested Parties): Gerry Daumiller, Velda Welch, Pam Smith, and Ed Madej, Natural Resource Information System; Jane Horton, MT Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation; Cathy Maynard, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service.

WELCOME and APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Bonnie Lovelace, chair of the NRIS Advisory Committee, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Introductions were made around the table.

NRIS DIRECTOR:

Strege read a statement from the former NRIS Director, Jim Stimson. In it he stated that the NRIS strategic plan was completed, but funding for the program was a problem.

Strege then told the Committee that she will not hire a new Director immediately, rather she will wait until the issue of "too many chiefs" or top heavy management in the program is addressed. She asked for volunteers to work with herself and NRIS staff to look at the functional needs of NRIS and see how changes may be made. Hess-Herbert volunteered to work with the sub-committee. Strege asked that this work be done as soon as possible and would need a decision from the sub-committee within a month. Chris Smith asked if the sub-committee was to focus on all NRIS management or just the Director position. Strege answered - both.

Lovelace asked the Committee what involved they wanted in this process. Chris Smith stated that he would like to have a brief meeting of the Advisory Committee to review the recommendation of the sub-committee. Everts stated that it is imperative that NRIS have a strong "point person" at the Legislative level.

New Proposals for NRIS Funding:

Strege, the Montana State Library accountant, and NRIS staff met with the Governor's budget office and with representatives of source agencies in order to acquire more core funding for the NRIS program. She outlined the following objectives to the Committee:

1. Decreasing dependency on contracts to fund the NRIS staff
2. Funds from the RIT/General Fund would be used to fulfill clearinghouse role
3. Develop logical basis for source agency contributions
4. Agency contributions as a fixed cost

Strege distributed a handout (attached) of the current status of funding and the new proposals.

Anderson also distributed a handout (attached) explaining the formula used to derive the amount of support needed from each of the source agencies. He also explained that staff developed the formula in response to a directive from the Governor's Budget Office to devise a defensible plan for source agency contributions. The Budget Office will speak to each separate agency about their individual contributions.

Horton asked if the handout included non-state agency related requests. Strege answered -no- that General Funds should be used for all users. Lovelace asked if the funding request could be linked to the requests. Anderson answered that at this time we can not because our tracking system- request log needs to be updated.

Chris Smith asked, with reference to the handouts, if the funding figure from source agencies was based upon a percentage or a number. Specifically, did the Budget Office direct MSL to fund 40% from source agencies? Strege answered that she did not receive that direction. Wetzel asked if someone from the Budget Office would offered guidance to the agencies, because the managers at DNRC had placed the core funding of NRIS as a low priority on their EPP list. Strege answered that the Budget Office would work with agencies to advance the proposal.

Strege stated that she hopes to obtain the funding requested, but that the agency probably will not attain full funding this legislative session. The strategy, however, is in place to continue to pursue funding in subsequent sessions.

Hess-Herbert stated that it is critical that the NRIS Advisory Committee play more of a role in their support of NRIS. Everyone on the Committee needs to communicate the support of NRIS to their own individual agencies. Committee members are in the position of providing a lot of support to the program.

Lovelace stated that the funding problems at NRIS need to be addressed in the Legislative Natural Resource Committee. Everts agreed and told the group that he would investigate the Legislative Rules to see if this is possible.

Lovelace asked the group for its opinion about the funding distribution proposal. Hess-Herbert asked how often the distribution would be reviewed and Strege answered that it would be reviewed every EPP cycle or every two years.

Everts asked if the Heritage program would be included in the funding presentation before the Commission. Crispin replied that the Heritage core funding was included in the handouts that Anderson distributed. She said that the current funding for Heritage from core money is \$258,000 per year and would increase by \$75,000. The Heritage program's FTE would increase from 4.5 people to 6 people on core funding with this proposal. Chris Smith stated that the Heritage funding should be clearly identified in the budget proposal.

Maynard commented that much of the state funding for core that comes through DEQ, DNRC,

and MDT is funneled from federal agencies. She said that the link needs to be made to the broader audience.

Wetzel commented that NRIS should be funded primarily from the General Fund instead of the shared contributions of the core agencies. Then if a change occurred there could be one EPP proposal instead of six. Strege responded that with the advent of a new governor taking office that perhaps the contemporary view of funding NRIS will change.

Hess-Herbert stated that each source agency should send a note to the Budget Office in support of their contribution.

Strategic Plan and Reorganization:

Strege circulated a memo from Jim Stimson outlining the reasoning behind the Strategic Plan. Strege stated that the old strategic plan was much too broad in scope and asked Jim to begin the planning process. One of the major reasons for her to do this was her realization that with the loss of the ARCO contract five years ago that there would be no 'super contract' to replace it. In the period since the ARCO contract was phased out, the NRIS program has been dependent on a variety of smaller contracts, some of which do not meet the core mission of the program. Staff are distracted or unable to work on meeting NIRS's core mission by working on these contracts. Also, staff finds the volume of contracts time consuming to administer.

Strege has heard rumors that NRIS is moving away from doing contracts. Strege stated that in the future, before NRIS accepts a contract, managers will evaluate a contract to see if it can contribute to the clearinghouse or otherwise has merit. If it is judged unacceptable that contract will be rejected.

Strege told the Committee that they have three options:

1. Accept the reorganization plan and submit to the Library Commission
2. Accept the reorganization plan with modifications and submit it to the Library Commission
3. Defer acceptance- in which case, Strege would ask the Advisory Council for a decision in two weeks

Strege told the Committee that there was not a consensus between NRIS staff and managers in regards to the reorganization. NRIS staff opposes it. She also stated that the Library Commission can make the final decision without any input from the Advisory Council.

Sternberg asked who is on the Library Commission and when do they meet. Strege explained the basic make-up of the Commission to the Advisory Committee.

Anderson distributed a handout to the Committee on the current NRIS Model and the proposed NRIS Model. He explained that some of the objectives he has are to integrate services more closely with Heritage and actively pursue data exchange agreements with other agencies.

Lovelace asked for comments.

Sternberg asked if the proposed model was part of the NRIS Strategic Plan. Anderson replied yes and that in actuality, much of this has already begun happening. He said that we have the infrastructure in place and that there are many opportunities not yet exploited. We need Web development to improve the way we provide mediated requests.

Hess-Herbert asked what the alternative would be if the core funding proposal went down the drain – would we attempt to get more contracts?

Chase replied that NRIS still needs contracts and grants.

Maynard asked if there would be changes made in traditional data delivery. Anderson replied that he is not proposing any changes. Lovelace asked what would NRIS stop doing. Anderson replied that as an example a small \$3,000 contract to a Conservation District probably would not be accepted. The Conservation District could obtain assistance through the private sector. NRIS will be more selective in the contracts we accept. Maynard disagreed with this. She stated that Conservation Districts would contract with NRIS because it is housed in a Library and its political neutrality is important. Also, it is much easier for a Conservation District to obtain technical assistance through the Library than it would be through a private contractor. Anderson then replied that he hopes not to eliminate technical support as part of the core services that NRIS provides.

Karen asked the Committee to submit any comments on the program model to her in writing.

Discussion of Goal 5 of the Strategic Plan:

Anderson told the Committee that the goal was to secure adequate stable funding for the Program. Management looked at the staff allocation and asked the question “what skills do we need?” This resulted in the proposed FTE allocation. Currently there are 5.4 FTE on the books for 13 staff positions. 12 of these positions are working 45% on core money and 55% comes from contracts. Currently NRIS needs \$450,000 a year in contract money.

The proposal on the table is to reduce the staff from 13 to 11, with 10 having core funding. This would reduce the four grade 15 GIS programmer/analysts to two positions. These positions would be for an application developer and one GIS programmer/analyst. The reasoning behind this is that NRIS does not need as much capacity for GIS coverage development as previously because agencies have begun to develop their own GIS programs and data.

Anderson commented that Arcview training for state agencies has been a very popular program and well received by state agencies, however, in terms of priorities and consistency with the NRIS core mission, this service fell low on the list of priorities and was eliminated as an isolated function. Rather, the outreach program in the new plan would focus on a broader suite of outreach activities focused on the whole program, not just one computer application.

Maynard commented to the Committee from a federal perspective. She told the Committee that she has worked with the NRIS program for over ten years, and agencies she has been with have contributed almost a half a million dollars to the program. She asked how the principle users were derived in the Strategic Plan. She stated that it is appropriate to identify NRIS program users and not use the statistics derived from the Heritage strategic plan. Also, though agreeing that the Web is the future for data delivery, many people do not yet have Internet access. Services to these people cannot be de-emphasized. She also spoke to the need of being more creative with funding issues. If NRIS' partners had become more involved earlier in the process, other ways to provide funding may have been found. She said that when staff are laid off, the expertise is lost and cannot be replaced. Cathy voiced her support of the NRIS program and stated that she would like to help strengthen and contribute to helping find solutions to the funding issues.

Rasmussen stated that basically Web-based services were good, but not everyone has access. He also asked if the use of the system is increasing, will decreasing FTE be fiscally responsible or could staff be re-deployed?

Karen stated that she is committed to providing access to information for all.

One new position is proposed in the plan, that of a web administrator. This position will be shared with the Statewide Library Resource (SLR) Program. The current 1 FTE system administrator position at NRIS will be split and also shared the SLR.

Staff Comments to Strategic Plan:

Ed Madej read a prepared statement to the Committee. All but one NRIS employee and all Heritage employees signed the statement. Gerry Daumiller commented that with previous directors, promotion of the program was highest priority and concern for the core mission second. Two years of no leadership, in the interim between Cox and Stimson hurt the Program. Velda Welch commented that personally her workload has significantly increased, RIFing will make it worse. She does not feel that the Strategic Plan should be implemented without a director in place.

Hess-Herbert stated that FWP has had an evolution similar to NRIS. She stated that the plan provides a basis to move forward. She also stated that with the difficulties in recruitment for state jobs, that it is essential supervisor's recognize weaknesses in their managers and provide support and training to help them.

Horton stated that although she is not on the Council that she works closely with NRIS staff and knows that the reduction of 'worker bees' makes it harder to get the job done. She would like NRIS to retain its resources— its employees.

Lovelace asked for comments from the Council.

Chris Smith asked if the Council was deciding to endorse overall direction or management structure. Strege stated that the Council is tasked with making a recommendation to the Commission whether or not to support the goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan and the reorganization.

Hess-Herbert asked if NRIS staff supports the overall plan. Madej replied that parts of the plan are good, however there is a problem with the data delivery via the Web far outweighing outreach. He stated that the Web is also a great outreach device and as more data is delivered in this manner, more will be requested. RIFing 2 people will become a major detriment to the delivery of services to our patrons.

Sternberg asked if there are any vacant positions now in the program and if there are can existing staff be used to fill them. He asked if the managers could do outreach. Strege stated that the managers would be assigned outreach duties.

Rasmussen said that though Lewis and Clark county has evolved to the point that they now have their own GIS support staff, that there are many counties and other governmental entities that still need the services that those small contracts provide. He also stated that a strong look should be taken at the layoff of employees. Shouldn't we be "beefing up" our services at this

point instead of laying people off?

Strege stated that she is dedicated to providing excellent mediated services. She also stated that the evidence from public libraries show that as information becomes available on the Web, requests for mediated services go down. She asked that the Council endorse the Strategic Plan and in six to eight months evaluate it.

Crispin commented that her program has gone through the Strategic Planning Process. She decided before the process began, that layoffs were necessary. Also as a result of the Planning Process the program was reorganized. She stated that the Strategic Planning Process for NRIS has not been perfect. Communication has not been what it should have been. The Outreach subgroup of the strategic planning process struggled with the definition of outreach, and key functions still need to be clearly articulated at the level of funding available. Nonetheless, there are real strategic and fiscal imperatives that are driving the changes being proposed.

Lovelace proposed that the Council support the strategic planning effort with oversight from Karen and with the intent of staff involvement. She also suggested that the Council could help strategize ways that items like the Arcview training program be funded.

Strege stated that not everything that the staff wanted was included into the plan. She is not willing to bring items like Arcview training to the table because managers have discussed all aspects and the pros and cons of this activity. Managers have decided not to continue this service.

Lovelace (DEQ) proposed the endorsement of the plan as presented with oversight of the Advisory Committee.

Wetzel asked if NRIS was cutting contracting out all together or just those that are difficult to administer. Chase answered that with contracts, once the contract ends, the FTE ends. It is a fiscal imperative. Lovelace asked what criteria would be used to filter what contracts would be acceptable. Wetzel asked about staff concerns of needing someone to solicit contracts.

Anderson stated that the worst case scenario would be that NRIS does not get any of the requested funding of FTE in the EPP proposal. He stated that we would still be in a better position if the RIFs occur. He said the program will still rely on contracts for 20% of the funding, but we must be more careful in what contracts we accept. The GIS program is no longer a "GIS job shop for the State". The focus has to change.

Everts (EQC) will support the motion, however he did comment on necessity of the strategic plans of the NRIS/Heritage program merging. He stated that the Heritage plan did not address NRIS and the NRIS plan did not address Heritage.

Wetzel (DNRC) will support the motion.

Smith and Hess-Herbert (FWP) will support the motion.

Rasmussen (Lewis & Clark County) will support the motion.

Strege told the group that Phase II of the Plan would be to make a merged NRIS Strategic Plan, including Heritage and NRIS programs. Maynard commented that it is critical that the Advisory

Council plays a role in implementing the plan.

Sternberg asked if the Program would be able to contract out for services lost with the RIF. He realizes that changes are difficult, but the staff needs to go along with it. The last thing NRIS needs is a disgruntled staff. **Sternberg will support the motion.**

Mark Baumler voted No if the Plan included Goal 5 and the reduction of staff.

Smith stated the plan needs to move forward with an active participation from the Advisory Committee especially in legislative matters.

Sullivan (AGR) stated that in Gingery's absence that he would approve the plan with the reservation the non-computerized users would still have access to the information.

Culwell stated that he is a non-voting member of the Committee, but he would vote no to the plan as it stands right now. He stated that he got the plan just a few days before the meeting. His final comment was 'Listen to your staff'.

Of voting members, the final tally is 7 for, 1 against. Lovelace will attend the Library Commission meeting tomorrow and will convey the Council's support of the Strategic Plan. She will also tell the Commission of the reservations expressed.

Strege commented that the Legislation that created the Advisory Council may need to be revisited. Does it need to be changed? Strege did not realize that Culwell was not a voting member of the committee.

Strege told the Council the three issues to be considered at the next meeting will be:

1. To get feedback on what the Library Commission decides on the Strategic Plan.
2. Identify what we want this body to do
3. Review the management structure of NRIS and the recommendations of the subcommittee

The date for the next meeting was set for Tuesday, May 23rd from 9 -12:00.