

NRIS Advisory Committee Meeting December 8, 2000

Attendance:

Bonnie Lovelace, DEQ; Wayne Wetzel, DNRC; Janet Hess-Herbert, FWP; Stan Sternberg, DOT; Dan Sullivan, Ag; Mark Baumler, Historical Society; Dean Culwell, Westech; Gerry Gerbance, L & C County Planning; Sue Crispin, NHP; Jim Hill, NRIS; Duane Anderson, NRIS; Katrina Scheuerman, NRIS;

Introductions:

Lovelace, chair of the committee, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Introductions were made around the table. Committee members were asked if they planned on being on this committee for the future. All in attendance felt that they would continue as members. Jim Hill, the new director of NRIS, gave a detailed introduction.

NRIS Status:

Hill wanted to get the message out that NRIS is "alive and well". Hill went on to describe the newly filled positions at NRIS as well as vacant positions:

System administrator-a 50/50 shared position with Statewide Library Resources; this position was filled by Mike Carrol, who has been an NRIS temp in the past, worked for TRW, and is now back with NRIS.

Information systems tech-this position, filled by Katrina Scheuerman, was Pam Smith's old position, with many changes. It is now only 25% administrative, leaving 75% for database and GIS projects. The remaining administrative duties have been taken on by library centralized services.

GIS Programmer Analyst-TJ Abbenhaus was hired for this interactive database/web development position. He comes to NRIS from Missoula.

Web master-This is a vacant position that will be shared 50/50 with Statewide Library Resources. A qualified applicant has not been found for this position. NRIS is looking for someone with interface development experience, database and web development experience, as well as server experience. In the meantime, Mike Carrol will put some time into the duties of this position and NRIS may contract for services until the position is filled.

GIS Coordinator-This position was kept open until a new director was hired. Now that Hill is here, NRIS is ready to move on with that position. The job description will need to be rewritten.

NRIS has 10 FTE right now and feels that level of staffing is needed in order to maintain the broad range of expertise necessary.

The Metadata contract with ISD that fully supports one FTE ends June 30, 2001. Hill reported that NRIS is looking at dropping the Metadata position to ½ time to ease the transition. There is less need for this type of outreach, but some outreach is needed to make sure that metadata is developed. NRIS is also working with ISD to extend the contract. Lovelace suggested finding mechanisms to bring some money in from each contract to pay for the Metadata position.

Hess-Herbert asked Hill to clarify the funding for the position. Hill stated that if funding from ISD is dropped, the FTE cannot be supported. Hill stated that this position is funded fully by contract and is not built into the Core budget. Lovelace suggested that maybe NRIS could use the Metadata person for other positions/work that are available. Anderson explained that it is necessary for NRIS to reduce overhead.

Budget Status:

Hill told the group that core funding level is better than it has been in the past couple of years so NRIS is not in danger of having to reduce staff, but is below where it should be to adequately support the program.

Contracts:

Anderson gave a summary of the current contract activities and went over the "Current active contracts at NRIS for FY 2001" handout. He mentioned that the contract budgets are often not fully expended. The reality of the contracts is either NRIS doesn't use all the hours or they end up carrying over or renewing the contract for the next fiscal year.

Hill added that many of the contracts end in June 2001, so NRIS is always looking ahead for projects. He described management of so many contracts as difficult and described how NRIS is working to develop a new method for overhead calculation. The new contract format would be similar to DEQ's, which allows for a 40% overhead on direct personnel charges. This ends up being less than the overhead amount currently charged, but will make management of contracts and personal services easier because of the flexibility it allows.

Natural Heritage Program:

Crispin gave an update of NHP.

Staffing:

1) Web developer-Chuck Tilly was hired for this position, which is shared 60/40 with FWP. This will help limit other staff time on web issues. Chuck has good experience with database programming. The Forest Service supports the funding for this position on the Heritage side.

2) Heritage is currently recruiting for a lead Zoologist. This has been difficult; they are on the 2nd round of recruiting for this position and may have three very qualified applicants. This position would also partner up with FWP, which will be funding 25% of the position for at least the 1st year. There is also some funding from the Forest Service and BLM.

3) NHP just posted a job for a GIS and Biological data coordinator. Cedron Jones has been the GIS person on ½ time. NHP needs are growing and they now need someone in the GIS position full time. Cedron will be concentrating solely on the Stewardship Mapping program. NHP has 2-year commitments for funding the full time GIS position from private organizations.

NHP Budget:

Crispin told the group that the core budget was looking good. This is due to efficiency and expense consciousness, as well as having a couple of vacancies. Heritage has about 30 different projects going on including work with: NPS, EPA, BLM, FWS, NRCS, DEQ, TNC, and PPL. Work includes inventory, biological survey, easement mapping, web development, conservation management for species of special concern, and wetland work.

Crispin also mentioned that the international network, the “conservation data network” is due for a technology update. Heritage is beginning to develop prototype for this project.

Crispin told the group about a new book that has been published based on a compilation of nation wide Heritage data. This book, “Precious Heritage,” is the first ever put together by the Science Dept. of TNC.

Legislative Issues:

Hill walked the group through the “NRIS Funding Comparison” handout and mentioned the proposed funding is a little on the low side. NRIS is now at 5.4 FTE and the Governor’s budget proposal increases that to 6 FTE. NRIS has asked for a \$180,844 increase in funding. The Governor’s budget reallocates the funding from source agencies, adding funding from DNRC and the University system. The budget is approved as of now by Governor Racicot, but it is unknown what governor elect Martz or the Legislature might do.

Hess-Herbert asked Hill to explain why the increase in funding is more than needed for the additional .6 FTE. Hill explained that the additional funding included \$75,000 for the Heritage Program that will fund staff, but not FTE in the legislative sense, and that the remainder will go to operations. Hill also mentioned that there could be problems getting the funding asked for because additional funding from DEQ and DNRC would come out of the General Fund.

Hill told the group that NRIS Funding would be discussed in three different committees during the legislature. Funding from DOT will be in the transportation committee, NRIS will go to the education committee, and DNRC and DEQ funding will be discussed in the natural resource committee. Coordination of the three committees will be difficult. Lovelace added that DEQ does support this budget and the budget office is behind it at this point in time. She has not heard any reports of agencies not supporting the budget as of yet. Crispin mentioned that a good thing that could come out of some of the funding changes is that they will be line-itemed commitments, which is a big improvement.

Crispin asked that NRIS advisory committee members attend "Library Day" where they will have the ability to talk about NRIS users from agency perspectives. Hill added that "Library Day" is a chance for legislators to learn about the library and its programs. It will be Jan. 11, 2001. Hess-Herbert asked what level at the agencies would NRIS like to have attend Library Day. Hill suggested those who could communicate best with legislators on the importance of NRIS to their agency.

Legislation:

Hill went over some of the proposed legislation that might affect NRIS, including a proposal to revise IT laws and create a Dept. of Technology. This bill would place a member of the new department on the NRIS advisory board. Other titles were mentioned but details are unknown at this time.

Strategic Plan:

Hill thanked those who helped with the strategic plan, which is now being implemented. In order to implement the plan Hill proposed a modification in NRIS structural hierarchy, forming two sections: "User Services and Support," involving planning and outreach, and "GIS and Information Systems Development," involving programming, database management, and Internet work. Hill went over the NRIS organizational chart and section functions handouts. Sternberg asked about the feedback from the staff. Hill responded that he has generally been hearing good comments. Hill also stated that NRIS plans to wait out the Legislature before filling the vacant position to verify that adequate funding is available.

Crispin added that Heritage has 10.5 FTE's and 1.5 vacancies. (These are not State FTE's).

Anderson mentioned that the original organizational chart in the strategic plan had different sections than those now being proposed. They had been struggling with a how the mixture of functions would be divided between the sections, and Anderson feels that the new organization provides a more logical break up of duties.

Lovelace requested to read the new job description for the vacant position when it has been written. She asked if only the “user services and support” section would go out and seek work. Hill answered that both sections will. There are people very successful at it in both sections. Crispin added that Heritage and NRIS need to work on improving their outreach skills. She felt that the thinking behind the sections was to give appropriate attention to outreach, but not limit it to one group.

Hill mentioned that there would be teams formed to cross all program lines. Members from the State Library, NRIS and Heritage will all be on teams. The teams consist of NRIS management, System Administration, Web, GIS, and Database. He feels that there is a big need to coordinate with each other and erase the boundaries between the programs. Hill explained that NRIS will also combine its current three request tracking systems into a single request center.

Crispin described the Heritage organizational chart. Baumler asked if there will be redundancy, or people doing the same job on both sides of the program. Anderson replied that in terms of overlap, there is plenty of work to be done to avoid redundancy. Baumler wondered if NRIS would end up absorbing Heritage like it did with water resources. Crispin stated that just wasn't possible because Heritage is not a state agency.

Lovelace said that there is more integration now than there ever has been, and that Heritage gathers information and NRIS is not charged with that responsibility. Wetzel added that to affiliate Heritage with the state would not be a viable political strategy anyhow. NRIS would need to go in and ask for additional 12 FTE rather than the .6, which would not go over well with the legislature.

Issues of Concern:

Hess-Herbert brought up the issue of the role of the advisory committee. The initial use was to help build the program. Now the committee just gets together to tell everyone what is going on with NRIS and then the members go back to work. Hess-Herbert asked if the committee is functioning and does it have other roles to play. If not, is the committee needed anymore? Should it be redefined?

Wetzel commented that there are two functions that the committee serves; development and to provide input in terms of agency support and budget. He feels that the committee does not do much development anymore. Wetzel doesn't look at the details of how to run NRIS; that is NRIS' decision.

Anderson feels that the committee could be a conduit for agency needs and ideas. Wetzel said if the committee goes in that direction, other people may be

better suited from his agency. If it's budget issues, he's probably the one. He added that the roles are splitting.

Lovelace stated that the committee has been all over the board in terms of what it has done for NRIS. She feels that the role of the committee should remain flexible. There are still issues out there that the group hasn't resolved, things that are still on the table. Does the committee want to explore that? Lovelace feels that those things need to stay on the table. A role does exist to address change, future activities. The committee should be prepared for that. Lovelace wants to meet during or after the Legislature and then decide what to do.

Hill also said there is a role to be played by the committee. This group is more involved with NRIS than others are. It carries more weight having the committee oversight and approval than just having NRIS staff make decisions on program direction.

Hess-Herbert asked Hill to think about the position of the committee during the session and the role the members could play. If NRIS needs support let the committee members know so they can help. Hill replied that he would keep the members informed on the issues and ask for help when it is needed. Lovelace offered her help during the session, and added that the entire committee should. Crispin mentioned Library Day and stated that it would be good for committee members to attend to give examples of information that is used and needed by other agencies.

Culwell commented that the role of NRIS is totally objective. They are not the decision making body, and don't lean one way or the other. This is important to let legislators know. NRIS provides the information and others make the decisions.

The group decided that the next meeting should be after the legislature.

The meeting was adjourned. Anderson then demonstrated examples of new and upcoming interactive Internet applications.