

Northern Marianas College Combined Research and Extension. Plan of Work 2020-2024

Status: Final
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I. Plan Overview

1. Executive Summary

Due to the current economic downturn and the subsequent challenges due to two destructive supertyphoons in 2015 and 2018, there is increased urgency to provide innovative programs and services that prevent and mitigate problems that have or can result from climate change, food and biosecurity security issues, labor shortages, workforce development, and/or health issues. This plan describes the critical issues that Northern Marianas College (NMC) Cooperative Research, Extension, and Education Services (CREES) must be positioned to respond to in order to ensure the sustainability of the CNMI's agriculture, aquaculture, human capital, health, and economy. Faculty and staff from CREES' four programmatic areas, Agriculture Production, Aquaculture and Natural Resources (A&NR), Family, Community, and Youth Development (FCYD), and Nutrition and Health, have formulated the critical issues effecting our community based on our community needs assesment, meetings with stakeholders and our four programmtic advisory councils, key informant interviews, and locally and regionally conducted research.

Although our department has experienced major setbacks in the last several years, including reduced research and extension personnel, unanticipated leadership changes, the complete destruction of our main campus department building on Saipan in 2015 and 2018, and experiment station damage on Saipan, Tinian, and Rota, we remain committed to positively impacting agriculture, community development, aquaculture, and nutrition & health for the people of the Northern Mariana Islands.

2. FTE Estimates

Year	1862 Extension	1862 Research
2020	14.0	9.0
2021	16.0	12.0
2022	16.0	12.0
2023	18.0	14.0
2024	18.0	14.0

II. Merit / Peer Review Process

The merit/peer review processes take place for the plan of work development and for scientific and extension

proposals. Proposals are subject to a rigorous, internal (CREES program leaders) and external (research scientist from other institutions of higher learning and/or recognized experts) peer review process prior to submission to funding agencies. The process ensures that the proposal has a sound and established scientific basis and that the proposed project adheres and is consistent with the principles of the merit review process. A draft of the proposal to be reviewed is e-mailed to all department faculty for suggestions and comments based on the establish timelines prior to the face-to-face review meeting. All available professional research and extension faculty participate in the review. Staff are also welcome to attend. During the review, we assess: 1) the priority of importance of the proposed project based on community need and/or critical issues; 2) the relevance of the proposals; 3) the quality and scientific value of the proposed research or extension activities and 4) the opportunities for cooperation with others, and 5) available resources. The proposals are then revised to incorporate the suggestions given during the face-to-face merit/peer review and then finally reviewed by the dean prior to submission.

III. Stakeholder Input

1. Actions to Seek

Stakeholder engagement is a critical component of the development and improvement of programs. As such, the following actions are taken to engage stakeholders and to encourage their participation in the formulation and improvement of programs, projects, and services:

- Use of print and social media to announce public meetings and listening sessions
- Targeted invitation to traditional stakeholder groups
- Targeted invitation to non-traditional stakeholder groups
- Targeted invitation to traditional stakeholder individuals
- Targeted invitation to non-traditional stakeholder individuals
- Targeted invitation to selected individuals from general public
- Survey of traditional stakeholder groups
- Survey of the general public
- Survey of selected individuals from the general public

2. Methods to Identify

Local advisory group members are selected through a key-informant interview process. Key informants recommend individuals from their respective communities to advise on current and emerging community needs. Potential advisory council group members are then asked by research and extension personnel if they would be willing to be a member and provide input in group and individual settings. Extension and research personnel also use their knowledge and experience of local industry, farmers, health personnel, and those who actively participate in CREES program areas to recommend individuals for local advisory group membership. Additionally, Extension Agents, who represent NMC-CREES on various councils and groups, solicit input from stakeholders in these venues. Focus groups have also been used to identify issues and concerns as well as potential ways to address issues to meet local needs. Program leaders regularly collect input from stakeholders and recipients of program services. Other methods include:

- Use of Advisory Committees
- Use of Internal Focus Groups
- Use of External Focus Groups
- Open Listening Sessions
- Needs Assessments that take place every 3 years
- Use of Surveys
- Feedback link on department website

3. Methods to Collect

Stakeholder input is collected through established frameworks at the department level and through the four programmatic areas through:

- Meeting with traditional Stakeholder individuals

Survey of traditional Stakeholder individuals
Meeting with the general public (open meeting advertised to all)
Meeting specifically with non-traditional groups
Survey specifically with non-traditional groups
Meeting specifically with non-traditional individuals
Survey specifically with non-traditional individuals
Meeting with invited selected individuals from the general public
Survey of selected individuals from the general public
Schools Parents Teachers and Students (PTSA)meetings

Local advisory groups are convened periodically. Department personnel are present at meetings to listen to concerns and recommendations from stakeholders. Minutes of meetings are recorded and summarized for review by department personnel. Online survey results are also used to gauge the community readiness of identified village communities to participate in research and extension programming.

4. How Considered

The input provided by stakeholders from community meetings, focus groups, advisory group meetings, and survey results is considered when planning programs and assessing progress in meeting program objectives and addressing community needs. The minutes or notes garnered from the aforementioned data collection methods are centralized online for all department personnel to access. Stakeholder input (clientele, government) is used to create yearly plans of work for each of the four program areas: Family, Community, and Youth Development, Nutrition and Health, Aquaculture and Natural Resources, and Agriculture. The yearly plans of work are used as part of the process by department administration to determine prioritization of funds.

IV. Critical Issues

1 Climate Change Effects & Mitigation

Description:

Climate Change trends are affecting the CNMI and more increasingly so. We have seen environmental changes such as rising temperatures, stronger typhoons with increased frequency, rising sea levels, and more severe drought and heat waves. Local food production and resources are decreasing due to some of these changes, with limited insurance options for producers. Human health and development is also affected as a result of the trauma and stress that is experienced prior to, during, and after natural disasters. Schools and colleges are shutdown for prolonged periods of time following severe typhoons, which interefers witch educational attainment and learning.

As islands with limited land mass for land based aquaculture, the push to conduct more fish farming in the ocean (mariculture) around the CNMI is beocming an attractive proposition. Climate Change's effect in the ocean, however, due to rising temperatures, ocean acidification, lower oxygen levels, and its effect on the ocean's productiivty and food web will make mariculture more challenging in the future. Mitigative practices such as Integrated Multi-trophic Aquaculture or IMTA is an expample of an area where CREES can conduct research and share knowledge on a production system that addresses both climate change mitigation, macroalgae production, while allowing concurrent mariculture production.

Improving the research, extension, and education programs is important to mitigate the effects of climate change in the local aconomy, local food production, and human health.

Term: Long

Science Emphasis Areas

Agroclimate Science
Bioeconomy, Bioenergy, and Bioproducts
Education and Multicultural Alliances
Environmental Systems

Food Safety
Human Nutrition
Sustainable Agricultural Production Systems
Youth Development

2 Food Security

Description:

The Northern Mariana Islands imports approximately 95% of food consumed in the islands. Most of the food is brought in by ship and fresh produce by air from the U.S. and Asian countries. The dependency on ocean and air carriers to bring in food not only has made food expensive in the NMI and unavailable when ships cannot unload cargo due to inclement weather or infrastructure damage due to natural disasters. Port lock outs due to labor and other issues has also affected the CNMI's food supply system in the past. The number of farmers has decreased in the last 10 years due to many factors: urban development, high inputs costs, fluctuating economy, environmental challenges, and an aging farmer population. The aforementioned factors have led to declines in fresh local produce, meats, and starch/root crop production. In the last 4 years, the islands have experienced two super-typhoons which destroyed much of the islands including farms. This resulted in limited produce availability, and in some cases, the closure of commercial farms. The CNMI can work to reduce its dependency on imported foods, the need to transport food, and be food secure by addressing constraints to agricultural production through research, extension, and education in areas such as labor through mechanization, sustainable agriculture methods (no-till farming), reduce input cost through supply cooperatives and sustainable practices, and crop varieties suitability and marketability.

Food security affects the islands not just from a commercial standpoint, but also on the household level. Studies have found that approximately half of households report running out of food. Food cost is high. A study conducted in 2015 found that a family of 4 on Rota living on NMI median household income, would have to spend approximately 70% of income in order to be able to afford the USDA Thrifty Meal Plan.

Term: Long

Science Emphasis Areas

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3 Biosecurity and Invasive Species

Description:

The CNMI is highly vulnerable to the impacts of invasive species due to its limited land mass and unique flora, fauna, and native species. The islands' biodiversity is being altered or lost because of invasive and threatful species. Improving our Biosecurity and Invasive species management programs will mitigate the threat and allow for thriving ecosystems. Currently, the NMI does not have an integrated plan to address prevention and mitigation of these threats, which are pervasive across the U.S.-affiliated Pacific Islands.

Designing, developing, and implementing biosecurity programs will help maintain the CNMI's strategic advantage as a pathogen free location for aquaculture production. Continued collaboration and partnerships with like agencies and organizations as well as research and public education are crucial in preventing further introduction and suppression of invasive species that are a threat to resource depleted CNMI.

Term: Long

Science Emphasis Areas

Education and Multicultural Alliances
Environmental Systems
Food Safety
Sustainable Agricultural Production Systems

4 High Cost of Production

Description:

Cost of production, specifically, energy cost continues to be a critical issue for aquaculture producers in the CNMI. As a United States territory, the CNMI is required to conform to waste water discharge regulations covered by the Environmental Protection Agency's Concentrated Aquatic Animal Production guidelines that prohibit release of effluent from fish farms. As a result, most aquaculture farms operate using Recirculating Aquaculture Systems which is energy intensive due to the need to operate mechanical and biological filtrations 24-hours a day, 7 days a week. As a result of intermittent power outages, aquaculture producers must also have back-up power generators (which run on gasoline or diesel) available, which further increases the cost of production. The CNMI has one of the highest energy cost per kilowatt-hour in the nation at \$0.33/kW, and as a result, energy represents 30% of the cost of production for aquaculture farms operating in the CNMI.

Term: Intermediate

Science Emphasis Areas

Agroclimate Science
Education and Multicultural Alliances
Environmental Systems
Human Nutrition
Sustainable Agricultural Production Systems

5 PSEs Built & Food Environments

Description:

The environment affects emotional, social, and intellectual well-being. Physical, chemical, and biological features of the environment and low social cohesion in lower-income neighborhoods have been found to contribute to poorer health outcomes. Research demonstrates that built and food environments influence food intake and physical activity. The design of the environments that people live, work, and play is therefore important. Communities that are not well designed may have higher rates of undesirable health, economic, and well-being outcomes. It is essential that communities have policies that govern community design to ensure that communities/villages are purposefully designed to encourage social cohesion, sustainable economic opportunities, and environments that make it easy to to access healthy food choices and opportunities for physical activity.

Term: Long

Science Emphasis Areas

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6 Workforce Development & Human Capital

Description:

The 2010 Census revealed 82.4% of the CNMI adult population are high school graduates, while 20.4% have a baccalaureate degree. Businesses report that it is challenging to find competent and creative workers that are necessary to compete in the global economy. A well-trained workforce is necessary for a healthy economy, productive citizens, and strong families. Due to the rapid growth of the NMI economy in the last several decades and the limited pool of skilled workers, the NMI is dependent on foreign labor. The CW-1 permit program, which allows for the employment of non-U.S. citizens in the NMI, will end in 2029, which will significantly impact our economy due to the lack of labor available in the NMI. The exact extent of the digital divide in the CNMI in quantitative terms is currently unknown. However, a survey conducted by the Public School System in March 2020, found that a significant percent of students do not have adequate digital access at home (including but not limited to access to internet and/or devices to access the internet) to attend school through online platforms. The anticipated increase in the use of digital platforms for work, education, and socialization, expedites the need to increase digital skills among residents. Human capital is a key ingredient in a thriving economy, therefore, it is imperative that we focus our efforts on workforce development, youth professional and workforce preparation, soft skills development, community capacity building and civic engagement through volunteerism.

Term: Long

Science Emphasis Areas

Education and Multicultural Alliances
Family & Consumer Sciences
Sustainable Agricultural Production Systems
Youth Development

7 Overweight and Obesity

Description:

A study of child overweight and obesity (OWOB) prevalence on children ages 2-8 residing in the Northern Mariana Islands found that 16.7% of children were obese with 9% showing some degree of acanthosis nigricans (AN). Children who develop AN are at higher risk for developing type 2 diabetes. A study which looked at the predicted prevalence of children ages 2-8 residing in the Northern Mariana Islands based on publically available child growth assessment data concluded that at age 2, 25% of NMI children are overweight or obese. By age 8, 47% of NMI children are predicted to be overweight or obese. Children who are overweight or obese are more likely to stay obese into adulthood and to develop noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular earlier in life. They are also more likely to be bullied and marginalized.

Among adults, 64% are overweight or obese (30% obese). Adults ages 25 to 34 have the highest prevalence of overweight and obesity (73%) among all adult age group categories. Among ethnic groups, Chamorro and Carolinian having the highest rates of overweight and obesity (82.5%, 86.4%). Overweight and obese adults are at increased risk of developing high cholesterol, high blood sugar, and heart disease.

Yet, despite these harrowing statistics, the NMI is not included in national health surveys (such as NHANES). The local data infrastructure is limited and needs further development in order to establish trends and to understand the extent and causes of the overweight and obesity issues across the lifespan. Data infrastructure enables individuals and programs to understand the extent of the problem, establish trends, and to formulate programs and interventions that address overweight and obesity, the resulting health consequences of OWOB,

and improve health outcomes.

Term: Long

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8 Youth Development & Advancement

Description:

According to the 2017 CNMI Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Report, 24.8% of middle school aged students have used marijuana, 44.3% of high school aged students have used marijuana and 3.4% have used methamphetamines. Additionally, 44.5% of middle school aged students had suicidal thoughts while 25% of high school aged students had suicidal thoughts. Among middle and high school aged students, rates for thoughts of suicide, there were 21.4% and 13.4% attempts respectively; of the 13.4% attempts among high schoolers, 4.3% resulted in injury.

We aim to decrease the numbers of students at risk and increase resiliency by providing opportunities for volunteerism, personal and professional capacity building, and leadership development. Through our efforts, we are empowering students and young adults to promote acceptance, camaraderie and self-esteem in order to actively seek positive engagement that directly apply their skills to suitable positions upon entering the labor workforce.

Term: Intermediate

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Youth Development