

**Site Review Report of the  
*Louisiana Sea Grant College Program***

June 16-17, 2015



## INTRODUCTION

The Site Review Team's (SRT) visit to the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program (LASG) took place on June 16 and 17, 2015.

The SRT members included:

Chris Hayes  
Chair, Federal Program Officer  
National Sea Grant Office

Amber Mace  
Co-Chair  
National Sea Grant Advisory Board

James Eckman  
Director  
California Sea Grant

John Wells  
Director, Virginia Institute of Marine Science  
Dean, School of Marine Science, William and Mary

Paul Scholz  
Deputy Director  
NOAA Office for Coastal Management

Prior to the beginning of the site visit, and in conformance with National Sea Grant College Program guidelines, LASG issued a public notice of the upcoming SRT visit by inviting interested parties to send written comments to the Federal Program Officer (FPO). The public notice was distributed on the Program's website and through email lists. The FPO received one letter in response to the public notice that commended the Program's community-based marine advisory services. The letter advocated continued financial commitment to the locally-focused LASG.

The SRT visit took place June 16 and 17, 2015 on the Louisiana State University (LSU) campus in Baton Rouge, LA. The briefings and discussions occurred primarily in the Energy, Coast, and Environment Building.

During the review, the SRT met with the LSU President Dr. King Alexander, Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Dr. Stuart Bell, the Vice President for Research Dr. Kalliat Valsaraj, and the LSU AgCenter Vice Chancellor Dr. Bill Richardson and Associate Vice Chancellor Dr. Phillip Elzer. The SRT also benefited from fruitful discussions with LASG staff, numerous stakeholders and partners, and a poster session that highlighted the work of Sea Grant funded students. Additionally, LASG aired several short video vignettes that provided succinct demonstrations of valuable partnerships.

This report of the SRT visit follows the guidelines of the Site Review Team Procedures Manual. The SRT discussed broad issues related to the LASG's: 1) Organization and Management of the Program; 2) Stakeholder Engagement; and 3) Collaborative Network Activities. Within each of these areas, each member of the SRT provided expert insights and opinions to the FPO.

The SRT drew on the documentation provided in LASG's briefing book, their 2014 – 2017 strategic plan, the 2011 SRT final report, and the PIER-generated site visit report. The briefing book was clear and concise, and it addressed all the important elements for the team to gain a complete understanding of the program's strengths and its organization. According to the LASG response to the previous site visit, LASG "enthusiastically embraced and have already implemented both recommendations." The FPO

agrees that 2011 SRT recommendations regarding 1) sufficient engagement of the Advisory Council and 2) supporting improved understanding of environmental change on the Louisiana coasts and bayous were addressed. As a result of 2011 SRT suggestions, LASG has improved connections to the Honors College, Law School, and Tulane University.

This report presents the findings of the site visit and presents suggestions to the Program to facilitate program improvement. The Chair has ensured that the review process conformed to the Federal Advisory Committee Act by reflecting the individual perspectives and opinions of the participants in the report. The report is not intended to represent the consensus viewpoint of the SRT.

**Finding:**

- The FPO finds that the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program meets or exceeds the Standards of Excellence expected of all Sea Grant programs.

## I. ORGANIZING AND MANAGING THE PROGRAM

The Louisiana Sea Grant Program is under the relatively new but very capable leadership of Dr. Robert Twilley who has served as Executive Director since 2012. Dr. Twilley has extensive experience in research, education, and outreach in Louisiana. He has brought this pertinent and most valuable experience directly to LASG. His senior management team is highly engaged and deeply committed to the Sea Grant mission. They include: Associate Executive Director Dr. Matt Bethel; Business Manager Kelly Robertson; Director of Communications Roy Kron; Extension Leader Dr. Rex Caffrey; and, Director of Sea Grant Law & Policy Program James Wilkins, J.D. In all, there are 44 individuals in the LASG Program who together hold a total of 31 FTEs (roughly one-third of the FTEs are in marine extension).

The LASG Program is clearly an intellectual and practical leader in the extraordinarily complex and dynamic coastal science of Louisiana. The leadership team has set the tone and offered the necessary support for this to happen. Moreover, the leadership team has gained widespread recognition and respect from administrators at LSU, state agencies, the state legislature, marine industries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the general public. Leadership has effectively guided the program to meet not only the multidimensional goals and objectives of LASG but also of the National Sea Grant Program. LASG leadership certainly offers the potential for carrying forward an appropriate vision for the future through the next strategic plan, and has the requisite positive attributes to ensure excellence in the coming years.

**Finding:**

- Particularly given the modest funding that it receives, LASG is a remarkably efficient and effective organization that benefits from a strong leadership team led by Director Robert Twilley.

LASG is well positioned within LSU, the long-standing host institution. Whereas the Director of the Sea Grant Program reports to the Vice Chancellor for Research and Economic Development, the Director of the Marine Extension Program has a dual reporting chain that is linked to both the Vice Chancellor for Research and Economic Development and to the Associate Vice Chancellor of the LSU AgCenter. It is clear that LASG has an excellent relationship with senior administrators at LSU as evidenced by the ability of the Sea Grant Director to communicate as needed with the Vice Chancellor, to whom he reports. When appropriate, the Director can also reach the Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost, and even on occasion contact the LSU System President and Baton Rouge Campus Chancellor. Senior administrators are knowledgeable about and highly supportive of LASG. In short, they recognize the value of LASG to LSU and are pleased to host the program.

While the Energy, Coast and Environment building provided a great venue for the site review, the Sea Grant building where the Program resides did not appear to meet Program needs. Director Twilley is working on sufficiently resourcing the infrastructure plan that was recently developed. Implementation of the plan would greatly benefit LASG through external leveraged funds.

**Finding:**

- To support the effectiveness of LASG, the staff requires adequate facilities to conduct their work efficiently.

**Recommendation:**

- LASG should continue to actively seek support from LSU and other key partners to move ahead quickly with securing the necessary funding to implement the infrastructure plan.

As currently organized, there are four advisory panels comprised in total of nearly 50 members. The main Advisory Council serves as the overarching board that can be called upon to offer high-level advice in areas such as strategic planning and proposal solicitations. While the Advisory Council does not meet on a regular basis, and perhaps only once a year, its members are willing and able to communicate one-on-one with the leadership team on a frequent basis. Each of the 16 members has considerable stature at the state level and some at the national level. The other three advisory panels are the (1) NGO Advisory Panel, (2) Marine Education Advisory Panel, and (3) Law & Policy Advisory Panel. Each panel functions independently of the others.

**Finding:**

- LASG has made significant progress to reengage the Advisory Council and schedule more frequent meetings, as recommended in the 2011 SRT report. There is obvious value to participants from a two-way exchange of information, where members gain insights on future projects, spend time developing relationships and share mutual priorities.

**Suggestions:**

- The Advisory Council should be central to developing the next strategic plan and enumerating priorities in future requests for proposals.
- To improve efficiencies while still cultivating important relationships with non-governmental organizations (NGO), LASG should consider merging some members of the NGO Advisory Council with the LASG Advisory Council.

LASG has a well-thought-out two-step competitive process for selecting projects to receive funding. The first step is to solicit Statements of Interest from researchers at academic institutions in Louisiana based on the goals and objectives in the Strategic Plan, with particular emphasis on topics deemed to be most relevant to solving problems. Following a screening process by a panel of experts, the second step is to invite a subset of the original investigators who submitted Statements of Interest to submit full proposals. These proposals are sent out for external scientific peer review. Final selection is based on evaluations made by a Technical Review Panel, comprised of outside experts, who weigh the scores and comments from external reviewers and place each proposal into one of three categories: highly recommended; recommended if funds available; and, not recommended for funding.

Statistics gathered by the LASG Program show that over the last three funding cycles the total number of pre-proposals ranged from 37 to 47, full proposals from 17 to 24, and that the number of funded projects ranged from 7 to 11. Seven projects were funded in each of the last two funding cycles with an average award of \$160-\$170K in federal funding. In addition to the projects noted above, LASG

competes for, and has been successful in, national competitions including that for the highly-regarded Sea Grant Knauss Fellowship awards.

LASG has made an effort to cultivate relationships with more institutions within the state of Louisiana. As the Sea Grant Program for the entire state of Louisiana, LASG is committed to identifying and funding preeminent research from multiple institutions. One of the challenges that LASG faces is in deciding how best to identify projects that not only have high scientific merit but also add value to the suite of other projects conducted by NGOs and funding programs, perhaps most notably those under the auspices of the relatively new Water Institute of the Gulf. Given the relatively modest amount of funding available for LASG research projects, the Director solicits input from other funding agencies and organizations to determine where Sea Grant can fill in vital areas that are not being addressed. This step, taken prior to each funding cycle, enhances communication and reduces duplication.

**Findings:**

- LASG has made substantial progress in increasing the number of proposals from academic institutions beyond LSU.
- Overhead on internal subcontracts provides a dis-incentive to work with other Louisiana State University System institutions.

**Suggestion:**

- LASG should continue to cultivate new faculty at other institutions by prioritizing program development funds and soliciting letters of intent for this purpose.
- LASG should work with LSU to modify the policy of charging overhead on subcontracts to allow more funds to be invested in the impactful work of the Program.

LASG received \$6.7 m in Sea Grant federal funding between 2010 and 2014 which equates to about \$1.33 m per year. The State of Louisiana has provided an additional \$6.76 m over the same time frame, placing LASG in a favorable position with regard to support staff, particularly in the extension program. Success in acquiring external grants, leveraged in part with Sea Grant support, has brought in another \$5.98 m thereby elevating the total program funding to just under \$20 m. Approximately 48% of the Core Omnibus Funds (including associated match) are devoted to research, 47% to extension, communications and education, and 5% to administration and management.

While the generous state match has allowed the Program to employ a large staff and engage in some superb education and outreach activities, it is clear that the matching support is unstable and could easily decline in the near future. Unfortunately, this scenario could result in loss of valuable programs that the citizens of Louisiana have come to rely on.

**Findings:**

- The value that LASG provides to the State of Louisiana is recognized through substantial state investment in the Program.
- LASG demonstrates a commitment to research, outreach, and education by investing nearly half of its core omnibus funding in competitive research and keeping administrative costs to a minimum.

## **II. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

Coastal Louisiana is the primary driver of the economic health and vitality of the entire state, and it is an area that is strategically important for the entire Nation. Louisiana is one of the Nation's most prolific sources of seafood, oil and gas production and refinement, and maritime transportation access.

However, recent natural and manmade catastrophes disrupted those industries; calamitous events destroyed livelihoods and ecosystems. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 were followed by Gustav and Ike in 2008 and Isaac in 2012. The Deep Water Horizon oil spill of 2010 was a crippling disaster for coastal communities and ecosystems. Rising seas coupled with coastal subsidence and erosion cause the state to lose a football field-sized area of land every hour.

During each disaster, LASG has admirably catalyzed response and restoration efforts. Even with the slowly developing catastrophe of land loss, LASG provides leadership within the state and the region. The Program's extension/advisory program, and its education and workforce program, are unique to the state and address critical needs that no other government, non-profit or for-profit agency in the state has addressed or can address. LASG also constantly seeks ways to prepare for future catastrophes, and serves coastal residents through trainings and educational products. LASG is also clearly committed to prepare the future leaders to address the next disaster.

The LASG Extension and Education Programs are led by experienced and committed professionals who serve their stakeholders effectively. Staff from LASG Extension and Education programs serve on numerous committees, boards and initiatives which allows for numerous and relevant interactions with stakeholders. Stakeholders from the Extension and Education program are well represented on the Louisiana Sea Grant Advisory Council. There are several best management practices below that other Sea Grant programs should consider.

### **Findings:**

- LASG is clearly a trusted source of information across the state, from local communities to parishes to the Governor's office and the state legislature.
- LASG has actively engaged in programs that are developing the next generation of leaders and are adding significant value to the work of their partners (e.g., Coastal Science Assistantship Program for graduate students and the Sea Grant Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship).
- LASG products, such as the Homeowners Handbook are useful tools in improving disaster preparedness and resilience in the community.

### **Suggestions:**

- LASG should continue to translate science into a useful form and to serve as the honest broker and source of credible information on high priority issues such as water and wetland restoration.
- LASG can build on success in workforce development and partnership building by exploring opportunities to develop a state-based Sea Grant Fellows program.
- LASG should develop and implement incentives to help improve tracking the use of tools and information (e.g., coupons for filling out user surveys or updates for registering handbooks).

### **Best Management Practices:**

- The efforts to add value and diversity to seafood products (e.g. Direct Marketing) demonstrate real economic return for fishermen and fishing communities. Other programs could emulate the combined focus on marketing and micro processing.
- LASG considered language and cultural diversity when hiring extension personnel who are scientifically trained but can engage minority populations who live and work in coastal communities. Other programs should include similar considerations when hiring new extension professionals.

### **III. COLLABORATIVE NETWORK/NOAA ACTIVITIES**

LASG is extremely well connected throughout the Gulf of Mexico region. The Program leads a variety of activities throughout the region and participates in many others. Three major examples used to demonstrate the commitment and leadership were the Gulf of Mexico Alliance work, support of the response to the Deep Water Horizon disaster, and regional visualization efforts for community resilience. Each of those activities included regional, federal, state, and private sector interests in their work.

The Program's commitment to state collaborations was also discussed throughout the site review. For example, LASG partnered with state agencies and fishermen to pilot test direct marketing approaches and innovated micro processing work to add value to seafood products. Crab trap recovery efforts highlighted another public/private partnership in order to collect marine debris. Yet another example of collaboration among federal, state, and local officials is the dam removal and bayou recovery work in New Orleans in order to benefit the resource and the community.

The Program also presented many connections with various federal agencies, particularly NOAA and EPA. Projects that connected with the Coast Guard and the Economic Development Authority showed extensive innovation and persistence on the part of LASG. The work with the Coast Guard on fisheries enforcement and the Harbor of Refuge project included not only the federal partners, but also various local port and community partnerships.

LASG's staff is active in a variety of Sea Grant Network efforts from the Sea Grant Association; to the Extension Assembly; to the education, the communication, and the law and policy networks. The Gulf of Mexico regional research projects funded in the previous cycles were effective, but the region decided not to support a regional request for proposals for this cycle. That may have been a missed opportunity to tackle regional problems at a regional scale.

**Findings:**

- Due to the maturity and entrepreneurship of the Program, LASG has developed a collaborative network with various federal and state agencies, the private sector, regional entities, and other Sea Grant programs that is quite extensive and productive. Throughout the review, presentations demonstrated the program's commitment to those partnerships.
- LASG is an active participant in regional and National Sea Grant networks.

**Suggestions:**

- LASG should continue to define and articulate its niche such that it can add value to partnerships and leverage additional funds to the region.
- Among other potential partnerships, LASG should consider capitalizing on the opportunity to partner with the Water Institute to help translate research findings into useful

- information and tools and use LASG's outreach and communication expertise to connect with the community.
- LASG should consider re-investing in the regional collaborative work with other Sea Grant programs in the Gulf of Mexico.

**Best Management Practices:**

- The enhanced safety and security of the fishing fleet as a result of the Harbor of Refuge effort is another excellent management practice. The combination of the private industry, the Port, and the Coast Guard is a good model for ensuring the safety of the fleet itself in other states.

## IV. FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS and SUGGESTIONS

**Findings:**

- The FPO finds that the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program meets or exceeds the Standards of Excellence expected of all Sea Grant programs.
- Particularly given the modest funding that it receives, LASG is a remarkably efficient and effective organization that benefits from a strong leadership team led by Director Robert Twilley. To support the effectiveness of LASG, the staff requires adequate facilities to conduct their work efficiently.
- LASG has made significant progress to reengage the Advisory Council and schedule more frequent meetings, as recommended in the 2011 SRT report. There is obvious value to participants from a two-way exchange of information, where members gain insights on future projects, spend time developing relationships and share mutual priorities.
- LASG has made substantial progress in increasing the number of proposals from academic institutions beyond LSU.
- Overhead on internal subcontracts provides a dis-incentive to work with other Louisiana State University System institutions.
- The value that LASG provides to the State of Louisiana is recognized through substantial state investment in the Program.
- LASG demonstrates a commitment to research, outreach, and education by investing nearly half of its core omnibus funding in competitive research and keeping administrative costs to a minimum.
- LASG is clearly a trusted source of information across the state, from local communities to parishes to the Governor's office and the state legislature.
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**Recommendations:**

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