

**NSF Response to
FY 2014 Committee of Visitors (COV) Report
Division of Polar Programs (PLR)
Section for Arctic Sciences**

Date of COV: September 16-17, 2013

The Directorate for Geosciences (GEO) expresses sincere appreciation to the Committee of Visitors (COV) for their time and effort in conducting a comprehensive review of programs in the Section for Arctic Sciences. In view of some unique difficulties presented by weather and personal circumstances, we are particularly appreciative of the thorough preparation and active engagement of COV members in preparing a thoughtful and helpful report.

We are also grateful for the strong endorsement the COV voiced regarding PLR program management and the work of Arctic Section staff over the past three years. Throughout the report, they acknowledged the work and dedication of the Program Officers (POs) in managing the review process and reviewer selection, producing clear and thorough review analyses, and providing helpful communication with the research community. They also appreciated the awareness and attentiveness of the Research Support and Logistics team to the evolving needs of the funded science projects.

We welcome the recommendations for improvement and below provide specific responses to those recommendations.

The first area of concern expressed by the COV was panel review. While urging the Program to continue to use panels, the COV stated that the “panel process may not be providing as much useful information for the Program as is desired. The Committee urges the Program to review its use and make-up of panels so as to improve the role they play in the review process.” They specifically urged strengthening panel summaries, assuring adequate coverage of interdisciplinary work, and continuing diverse panel membership.

Arctic Program Staff highly values panels for their comprehensive review of both individual proposals and groups of proposals in a given competition. Panels review each proposal on its own merits, and when all the proposals have been evaluated individually, the panel is invited to consider the slate of meritorious proposals from a balanced portfolio point of view. During panels, Arctic Program staff take extensive notes of panel discussions and often draw from their notes in addition to the panel summary when they develop their recommendations. To address the COV concern, however, Program Officers will be encouraged to communicate key findings in the analysis to the proposers if the panel summary and ad hoc reviews do not clearly describe the basis of the proposal recommendation. In addition, the Section will continue to assess the use and effectiveness of virtual panels.

Secondly, the COV offered a specific recommendation for strengthening the Arctic Observing Network (AON). The primary concern is that such a complex and important program requires more resources, both in staff and funding.

The AON program is recognized as a leading effort both within the US federal government and internationally. We agree with the COV that the scale of the NSF AON program and the total need –

nationally and internationally--may be mismatched. The research community has begun to consider this issue and we encourage continued discussion by program staff and by relevant advisory groups. The Division will explore ways to stabilize and increase staffing, and will seek to better prioritize and focus the program. In fact, the AON program officer has sought broad input from the research community and other stakeholders and the synthesized input will be used to reshape the program. We are considering using a Dear Colleague Letter to report this synthesis back to the community prior to revising the program announcement. We will also employ a program review process to obtain a more detailed review than possible in a COV.

Thirdly, the COV recommended that Arctic Program Officers attend at least two significant Arctic Science meetings each year to remain current with research developments and community members.

We agree that engagement of Program Officers with the community is very important and will give high priority, within budgetary constraints, to science Program Officers attending major meetings and/or other venues such as university site visits and visiting field research locations.