

Managing Director Conflict of Interest in MAISRC Proposal Funding Policy

This policy addresses the need for MAISRC to have its director(s) directly contribute to the research mission of the center in a manner that avoids conflicts of interest in prioritizing and selecting research projects for funding.

Background

The position of MAISRC Director is held by a PhD scientist with nationally recognized expertise in aquatic invasive species (AIS) so they can provide the leadership needed to advance the center's mission, which is fundamentally research-based. The duties of the director are 50% administrative (i.e., leadership and organization of the center) and 50% research. For the MAISRC Director to be successful as a university faculty member in this position, they must have a highly productive, externally funded AIS research program. The director is unlikely to be able to work on the highest priority AIS research needs if they cannot rely on MAISRC funding and the center then loses critical capacity if the director cannot perform needed research.

Research funding for the director from MAISRC has varied over time. Research funds for the founding director were appropriated as part of the center's founding grant. For succeeding directors, research funding from MAISRC has needed to be secured through its competitive grant process. This creates a potential conflict of interest because the director is responsible for final decisions on project selection and funding.

For purposes of this policy, a "Director Project" is defined as a project in which the director serves as PI or Co-PI.

Conflict Management Protocol

1. Director Projects are submitted, reviewed, and funded separately from the MAISRC Request for Proposals (RFP) competition

Director projects will be submitted to the Associate Director on the same timeline as the MAISRC RFP, but the Director Project will undergo a separate review process (outlined below) from pre-proposals received through the RFP. Funding for the Director Project will be provided from MAISRC funds that are independent from funding available for the RFP competition. This allows the director to be appropriately involved in evaluating and selecting future MAISRC research, a core function of the MAISRC Director and removes any perceived conflict of interest of a director, their staff, or a review committee favoring a Director Project and thus putting other proposals at a disadvantage for reasons other than merit.

2. Director Projects are eligible for MAISRC discretionary funds

MAISRC has established a set of discretionary funding opportunities for MAISRC Fellows in good standing. These opportunities include, but are not limited to publication funding, special request funding for unanticipated project expenses, and rapid response or pilot project mini grants. Director Projects are

eligible to receive these funds within limits and according to specified procedures and oversight for each funding opportunity.

3. Funding limits for Director Projects

A director, as PI or co-PI, is eligible to receive up to one award per RFP that is similar in funding amount and duration to other awards being granted in that competition. A director should not designate a proposal as one of their projects unless they will be an essential and substantial contributor to the effort.

4. Pre-proposal review process for Director Project review

The RFP pre-proposal review process will determine if the Director Project should be funded. The RFP Review Committee, which reviews pre-proposals received as a part of a MAISRC RFP, also anonymously scores and votes on the proposed Director Project using the same process and criteria used to evaluate proposals received through the RFP. There is full transparency with the review team in advance of this process and the director will abstain from evaluation of his or her own proposal. A majority vote from the RFP Review Committee, collected anonymously, will determine if the proposal should be funded, subject to the development of a full research proposal and undergoing external peer review.

5. Anonymous peer review of Director Project to evaluate scientific merit, appropriateness of budget for work proposed, DNR support for the project, etc.

A committee of three Center Fellows Group members serve as peer review committee for the Director Project, as a part of the Director Project Review Committee. The Associate Director coordinates the external peer review process for the Director Project according to the same procedures and criteria used for RFP proposals, except that the Director Project Review Committee selects appropriate external peer reviewers, receives peer review feedback, and requests revisions from the director as necessary. Committee members will receive credit for this work in fulfillment of their MAISRC service obligation. Upon approval by the majority of the Director Project Review Committee, the Director Project will be approved for funding and the director will develop a work plan and budget.

6. Use the funding entity's workplan and budget approval process to ensure external accountability

The Director will develop a workplan and budget for their project and submit to LCCMR or other respective funding entity for approval along with the research addendum. Upon approval by the funding entity, a UMN account will be established, and funds may be spent. Workplan updates and amendments will be handled by the funding entity according to their usual non-MAISRC practice.

7. Additional accountability provided by the CFANS Dean

The MAISRC Director reports to the Dean of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Natural Resource Sciences (CFANS), which has oversight of MAISRC. Therefore, if there are any concerns during any part of the process described above, they may be submitted to the Dean of CFANS for mediation.