2025 W6 Regional Technical Advisory Committee (RTAC) Annual Hybrid Meeting

Chair – Amjad Ahmad; **Vice Chair** – Donna Harris; **Secretary** – Jakir Hasan
WRPIS/PGITRU Station Coordinator/Research Leader – Marilyn Warburton
Local Hosts – Marilyn Warburton and Steven Lee, USDA ARS Plant Materials Center

Day 1, June 17th: Reports

8:00 am: The meeting started with the introduction of meeting attendees. The attendees were asked about any issues with the current proposed agenda for the meeting. The meeting attendees raised no problems.

08:05 – Steven Lee – Introduction to USDA NRCS PMC and collaborations with WRPIS
08:20 – Jessica Shade – USDA-NIFA National Program Leader
08:35 – Neha Kothari – ARS National Program 301 Leader
08:50 – Scot Hulbert, WSU Administrative Advisor remarks

09:05 – Tara McHugh – ARS PWA Area Director
9:20 am – 10:00 am 2024 RTAC meeting minutes, proposed budget (2026 and projected out to 2028), discussion and approval, initial discussion of potential or published funding cuts

Summary
Dr. Tara McHugh, Area Director for the Pacific West Area of the Agricultural Research Service, highlights the critical role of germplasm repositories in conserving and distributing genetic diversity for agricultural research and breeding. Recent leadership changes and progress on a new collaborative building in Pullman were noted. Budget discussions revealed that most funding comes from federal appropriations (~$3.3 million in FY24) and Hatch funds (~20%), with concerns about funding freezes and the need for flexibility provided by university funds. The importance of state support and the challenge of demonstrating impact to secure funding were discussed, with suggestions to communicate state-specific benefits of the germplasm system better.

Key points
- The new acting administrator for ARS is Mr. Joon Park.
- The ARS PWA mission is to acquire, conserve, evaluate, document, and distribute the genetic diversity of agriculturally important plants while facilitating the use of germplasm for research, breeding, and education purposes.
- There are six germplasm units located in the Pacific West Area.
- The two primary sources of funding are federal appropriations (~$3.3 million in FY24) and Hatch funds (~20%) appropriated by USDA to state universities.
- Hatch funding provides flexibility that federal funds do not, allowing the program to buy equipment, contract services, hire university employees, and support student workers, especially when federal funds are frozen.

- The federal budget has not yet been appropriated for the current year, spending is assumed to be the same as the previous year, and there is uncertainty about future funding levels, which may lead to loss of buying power and positions.
- W6 curates collections of important crops that are used by researchers and companies in other states, indirectly benefiting those states by providing genetic resources for breeding and research.
- It was suggested that state coordinators work with curators to create bullet point lists showing important crops and uses for their states, and to communicate the impact of the germplasm program to state agriculture experiment station directors.
- Users include universities, commercial companies, federal and state agencies, private individuals, and citizen scientists.
- Some users reported low germination or seed viability in certain accessions, which is attributed to funding limitations rather than curator negligence.
- Users generally recognize it as an invaluable resource critical for research, breeding, education, and food security, and they appreciate the service provided by the germplasm curators.
- The new building will co-locate ARS and WSU scientists to facilitate stronger collaborations in support of stakeholder needs, with construction progressing smoothly and an anticipated move-in next spring.

10:00 to 12:30 pm – Business meeting, State reports (10 minutes each)

Session Summary:
The session included state reports, detailed germplasm usage, and research outcomes:

- Hawaii reported orders mainly for variety evaluation and breeding, with good germination and some new varieties developed.
- Idaho highlighted commercial company use and genetic research.
- Arizona showed diverse uses, including variety development, genetic studies, and ethnobotanical research, with some orders denied due to personal use.
- New Mexico focused on ecological research and public education, with some germination issues noted.
- Nevada had limited orders focused on taxonomy and rangeland species genetics.
- Utah reported use in drought and insect impact studies, with some seed germination issues.
- Washington had extensive use across government and commercial sectors, with ongoing publications and data sharing challenges.
- Alaska had few orders, mainly from citizen scientists evaluating winter hardiness.
- Wyoming emphasized restoration and reclamation research, including genetic diversity studies and breeding for drought tolerance and pest resistance.
- Oregon showed extensive use in breeding, genetics, and education, with user feedback requesting improved data quality and website usability.

12:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m. – Lunch Break onsite, paid by participants

2:00 p.m. – 3:45 p.m. – ARS site highlights (15 minutes each)
2:00 – NSGC, Aberdeen, ID, Harold Bockelman
2:15 – NCGR, Corvallis, OR, Carolyn Scagel
2:30 – NCGR/NALPGR, Davis/Parlier, CA, Claire Heinitz
2:45 – NLGRP, Ft. Collins, CO, Hannah Tetrault
3:00 – TPGRD, Hilo, HI, Ryan Domingo
3:15 – NCGRCD, Riverside, CA, Robert Krueger
3:30 – NGRL, Beltsville, MD, Gary Kinard

3:45 – 4:00 - Break

4:00 **-** Introduction of the stakeholders present, discussion on how the NPGS can gather input from the stakeholder liaison council on meeting their needs and possibly on in-kind support for maintaining genebank activities.

5:00 pm: Day 1 Meeting adjourned

Day 2: June 18, 2025

8:00 a.m. – Research Presentations
8:00 – Popping Beans, David Gang, Washington State University: Title TBA.
8:30 – Grasses, Michael Neff, Washington State University: Title TBA.

9:00 am – 10:25 am
Session Summary
The W6 gene bank system faces a critical funding threat due to the president's budget proposal to eliminate the Hatch Fund, risking significant loss of germplasm resources. Participants, including executive members and technical advisors, discuss the importance of coordinated advocacy efforts targeting Congress, experiment station directors, and commodity groups to maintain funding. They highlight the need to compile and disseminate success stories demonstrating the economic and environmental benefits of the gene bank, emphasizing the value of data linking germplasm traits to agricultural improvements and cost savings. Challenges such as spending restrictions and limited administrative resources are acknowledged. Strategies include leveraging stakeholder support, engaging popular press and science communication specialists to increase public and policymaker awareness, and using presentations and reports to reinforce the gene bank's importance. The group plans to assign members to gather impactful stories, seek guidance on outreach permissions, and continue discussions in future meetings to develop concrete action plans.

Key points:

- The W6 gene bank system is under threat due to the potential zeroing out of the Hatch Fund in the president's budget, which would result in significant loss of support and resources for the gene bank.
- Why is it important to have specific asks when lobbying for Hatch funds? Specific asks are significant because general support without clear targets is less effective. Coordinated efforts with defined budget lines and justifications help make a real impact at the congressional level.
- Key stakeholders that should be involved in advocating for the Hatch funds include the National Organization of State Agriculture Experiment Stations, commodity groups, experiment station directors, and germplasm requesters who benefit from the gene bank.
- Success stories that highlight economic benefits, such as cost-benefit analyses demonstrating how traits from the gene bank have saved farmers money or prevented crop losses, are crucial for effective funding advocacy.
- What kind of success stories are needed to support the gene bank funding?
    - The gene bank may participate in popular press, media coverage, and science communication initiatives, including messages in professional society presentations and stakeholder meetings, to emphasize the significance and influence of the gene bank, thereby enhancing the visibility and acknowledgment of their contributions.
- What role do popular press and science communication specialists play in supporting the gene bank?
    - They help translate scientific achievements into accessible stories for growers and the public, increasing awareness and support for the gene bank's work through articles and media coverage.
- What challenges besides funding does the gene bank face currently?
    - The gene bank faces challenges, including restrictions on hiring, travel, and contracts, as well as limited access to purchase cards, all of which hinder operational efficiency and the spending of allocated funds.
- Is it appropriate for RTAC members to reach out to germplasm users to encourage advocacy?
    - This is a question to be clarified with advisors like Scot Hulbert, but there is interest in whether RTAC members can encourage germplasm users to advocate for funding by sharing success stories and making specific asks.
- What actions were agreed upon to support the gene bank funding?
    - Actions include collecting success stories with economic and environmental impact, reaching out to experiment station directors, engaging media and commodity groups, and clarifying communication protocols with advisors.
- How can success stories be effectively used to influence decision makers?
    - Success stories should be compiled with economic data, shared with experiment station directors, commodity groups, and stakeholders who can then advocate to Congress and USDA officials to maintain or increase funding.

10:25 – 10:45 a.m. - break

10:45 am
Topics: (1) RTAC Nominations for Vice-Chair and Secretary, (2) 2025 meeting date/site, and (3) resolutions.

Session summary
The meeting confirmed satisfaction with current leadership and discussed plans for next year's meeting, proposing a virtual format due to funding uncertainties, with potential in-person meetings in Wyoming or nearby locations if travel restrictions ease. The group emphasized restructuring future meetings to focus more on curator reports and germplasm system challenges, reducing the emphasis on state reports. They highlighted the upcoming need to draft a five-year project proposal due in 2026 and discussed improving user feedback mechanisms. Concerns were expressed about the suspension of the National Genetic Resources Advisory Council, with suggestions to draft a collective letter advocating for its reinstatement. Administrative tasks included approval of previous meeting minutes and arrangements for site visits.

Key points:

- Donna Harris (Vice-Chair) and Jakir Hasan (Secretary) are content with their current roles and are open to continuing for another year.
- The upcoming year's meeting is proposed to be held virtually due to uncertainties regarding funding and travel restrictions, with the possibility of deciding on an in-person meeting the following year based on the situation. Locations discussed for future in-person meetings include Pullman, Prosser, Alaska, Hawaii (Hilo), Wyoming (Sheridan), and nearby gene banks like Corvallis. The default plan is to hold the meeting in Pullman or Prosser, with virtual meetings as a backup if in-person meetings are not possible.
- Pros and cons of hybrid meetings and meeting structures were also discussed. Notably, Hybrid meetings were noted to cause technical issues and reduce interaction compared to fully virtual or entirely in-person meetings. Meeting minutes will be approved via email, rather than in a separate meeting. Charles Brummer proposed to change the future meeting structure, focusing on curator reports and germplasm systems on the first day, while moving the state reports to the second day and shortening them to highlights and lowlights.

Project Planning and Responsibilities

- The multi-state regional hatch project (W6) requires a five-year plan to be written and submitted every five years. The current cycle will conclude in 2026. A discussion was held to determine who is responsible for drafting the plan, and the conclusion was that the station coordinator is responsible for developing it, with assistance from the RTAC chair and administrative advisors for editing and review. The station coordinator will submit the next five-year plan via the NIMS system.

Role of RTAC and External Councils:
A discussion on the role of the RTAC in relation to the germplasm system took place.

- The RTAC's role is to provide feedback on the W6 collection's effectiveness and to advocate for resources and support.
- State reports are viewed as helpful in securing funding for individual states, but may not be as relevant for the RTAC's advisory role.
- Concerns were raised because the National Genetic Resources Advisory Council (NGRAC) was suspended in April by the current administration and is not providing advice or meeting.
- The committee is considering writing a collective letter to the Secretary of Agriculture and ASTA to express their concerns and to seek reinstatement or support for the NGRAC.

12:30 pm: Adjourn business meeting.

“Field Tours” – for those on site