

**DESERT SOUTHWEST COOPERATIVE ECOSYSTEM STUDIES UNIT
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
ON THE 10 STEP PAPER PROCESS
FY10**

Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units (CESUs) are partnerships between various federal agencies, universities, and non-government organizations (NGOs). They are structured along broad geographical regions forming a network of CESUs across the country and are **designed specifically to provide federal land managers with research, technical assistance, and education projects in a collaborative relationship with their partners.** Their broad scope includes biological, physical, social, and cultural science disciplines needed to address resource management issues at multiple scales and in an ecosystem context. The National Park Service (NPS) has placed a full-time research coordinator (RC) at each CESU, and the Intermountain Region (IMR) has placed a Cultural Resource Specialist (CRS) at each of its three CESUs.

As a federal agency participating in the CESU Network, the NPS is able to establish collaborative projects with the host universities or with any of their academic and NGO partners under very favorable negotiated terms. **Projects are implemented through the issuance of task agreements against the CESU cooperative agreements.** One of the great features about CESUs is the ability to link graduate students and university researchers directly with park resource professionals. Parks are able to use any CESU in the Network, not just the CESU representing their biogeographic region.

Research within the Department of the Interior is also provided to NPS by the various divisions of the US Geological Survey (USGS). The NPS continues to access the professional expertise of USGS scientists through its internal NRPP-Research Program as well as requesting technical assistance directly from the USGS. These research projects, however, are generally selected through a competitive process as outlined in the annual consolidated call. Some research projects identified by parks are best suited for USGS expertise. The CESU research coordinators can assist a park in identifying the types of research projects well suited for collaborative efforts through a CESU and those research projects that should be channeled through the USGS. Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units are not a substitute or a replacement for research conducted by the USGS on the behalf of NPS, but rather, are an additional tool to expedite collaborative research and technical assistance in parks.

If a park would like to utilize any of the CESUs, it must keep in mind the following:

- The CESU universities and other partners are linked to the NPS and the other participating federal agencies through cooperative agreements. The NPS uses task agreements to establish specific projects to receive assistance from partners. An organization must be a member (partner) of the CESU in order to use the CESU cooperative agreement.
- Participating federal agencies can initiate task agreements directly with the host universities or any of the other partners.
- Project approval is noncompetitive and is approved directly by the RC or CRS.

- The 17.5% overhead charge (a.k.a. indirect costs), paid to the partner institution, needs to be incorporated in the total cost of the project and is not negotiable. This rate was established as an amendment to the national CESU agreement and is applicable to any CESU project.
- Under the CESU cooperative agreements, project funds may only be transferred from agencies to institutions, and not between agencies.
- **Substantial federal involvement is required in these projects. Projects are collaborative, they are not contractual, nor are they grants.** A special template is required to be filled out that demonstrates substantial federal involvement. Cooperative agreements are not to be used to circumvent applicable Federal acquisition laws and regulations. See the current version of the NPS Agreements Handbook at <http://www.nps.gov/hfc/acquisition/agreements.htm>

STEPS IN ESTABLISHING PROJECTS IN THE DESERT SOUTHWEST CESU (DSCESU)

The process is not complicated, but multiple steps are involved in the establishment of DSCESU projects. Problems arise when inadequate time is allowed for processing the paperwork before the project is to begin in the park, or when required procedures are not followed. Talk with the RC or CRS early. It is unlikely that they can find appropriate researchers for imminent projects without some lead-time. Waiting until the last quarter of the fiscal year to consider using a CESU places stress on the system to process large numbers of task agreements in the closing weeks of the fiscal year.

Step 1: Call or e-mail the DSCESU Research Coordinator or Cultural Resource Specialist for a preliminary discussion about the proposed project. They can provide feedback as to whether the proposed project is appropriate for the DSCESU and how to proceed. Some project proponents may have experience with cooperative agreements and are confident that their projects are well suited for this purpose. Nonetheless, the first thing to do is to contact the RC or CRS, as appropriate, for a preliminary conversation. Approval through the DSCESU will be required for a task agreement to be processed. Below are some questions to think about early in the project planning process.

- *Do you have a well-defined project?* The DSCESU will not be used by parks to avoid fiscal-year spending requirements, nor will it entertain vague project proposals as place keepers for future projects. The proposed project must be feasible and have a Principal Investigator (PI) from a partner institution identified.
- *Does your project have clear objectives?* Sometimes managers know they need information, but are not able to specifically describe their needs well enough to write a project proposal and to prepare a budget. The RC or CRS may be able to help or to identify partners within the CESU Network who can assist in developing adequate project proposals.
- *Who will be your Principal Investigator?* You may have identified a PI with whom you want to work by having had some preliminary conversations about the project with this person. If you have not identified a PI, the RC or CRS can help you locate an appropriate PI within the DSCESU partner institutions, and can assist you in linking with experts for preliminary advice in developing a project.

- *Do you require research or technical assistance?* Sometimes the park may think it needs a small research project, but in reality what the park really needs is some technical assistance from experts to resolve a resource issue. The DSCESU can link NPS managers with professionals who can provide such technical assistance.
- *Do the nature of your project and the resources of NPS combine to make a feasible collaborative project? Who will provide substantial federal involvement during the project? Why is a level of substantial federal involvement considered necessary?* If the product(s) derived from a project “will be delivered to the NPS, without substantial involvement by the NPS during performance, then a simplified purchase or a formal contract is the appropriate course of action,” not use of a cooperative agreement (Director’s Order #20). See NPS Agreement Handbook for guidance in defining substantial involvement. Examples of substantial involvement include NPS participation in project management decisions, NPS collaboration in the accomplishment of the project, and NPS operational involvement during the project (Directors Order #20). CESU cooperative agreements can be used for a variety of research, technical assistance, and education projects, but there are many situations where a contract or outright purchase is more appropriate.
- *Would your project benefit from partnership with other federal DSCESU participants and host university partners?* An inherent strength of the DSCESU agreement is that it provides a convenient vehicle and forum for organizing multi-agency research, technical assistance and education efforts. The RC or CRS maintain communication with other DSCESU partners informing them of NPS activities and keeping abreast of related activities outside NPS boundaries. CESU websites are important sources of information regarding activities of federal agencies, the host universities, and partners.
- *What level of peer-review is appropriate for your project?* Not all DSCESU projects require peer-review. However, for most research projects, peer-review is essential in maximizing the success of the project. Consider carefully whether the project proposal should be peer-reviewed. Who will conduct the peer-review and how many reviewers will be required? What is the time frame for the peer-review? The RC or CRS can assist in identifying reviewers and can assist in coordination of such reviews. Generally, however, the NPS Key Official is responsible for conducting peer-review of draft products. The RC or CRS role is not, in most cases, to provide professional review of the substance of the project. Rather, they will coordinate and facilitate NPS access to the DSCESU partners and ensure the text of project proposals accurately reflects the required collaborative dimensions. The RC or CRS may request that your project proposal receive expert review before it is processed.
- *Is your budget congruent with your project objectives and the schedule you have for developing products? Are proposed costs accurate and appropriate?* Sometimes not enough is known about an aspect of a project to answer these questions until you talk to experts. Linking with these experts early in the development of a project is part of what the cooperative nature of CESUs is about. In any case, no one wants to invest in developing a project proposal, if the cost and time requirements are infeasible from the beginning. Limited project funds must be spent wisely and appropriately.
- *Are there special circumstances associated with your project proposal?* There may be special circumstances surrounding your project proposal of which you need to be aware. For example, if you are involved with human subjects, universities already have oversight processes to ensure that policies protecting people participating in research projects are observed; if you are conducting social surveys, OMB approval may be required; if your research involves animals,

universities already have oversight procedures to ensure their humane treatment; if your research involves Native American tribes or communities, your proposal may legally or ethically require the concurrence of those communities to proceed, and, at the park level, research and collecting permits may be required.

Step 2: Prepare the Project Documents. When the above preliminary questions have been answered, it is time to prepare the project documents. The project proposal should be written by the NPS Key Official and the PI and be done in Microsoft Word in the specified format outlined below and submitted to the Research Coordinator or Cultural Resource Specialist as appropriate. Four documents are required in the DSCESU process: Project Proposal (a.k.a. Scope of Work), Cover Sheet, Substantial Involvement Form (a.k.a. Attachment 4.9) and a Purchase Request in IDEAS software.

COVER SHEET

The Research Coordinator or Cultural Resource Specialist will provide an electronic template of the project cover sheet for the KO to use in drafting a project proposal. This form is used by IMR or WASO Budget & Finance, as appropriate, to develop the project task agreement with the DSCESU partner. You may make the cover sheet the first page of your proposal if you want to simplify the process by merging the documents.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

The following outline is required for DSCESU project proposals. Use the underlined titles.

Title of project, park and partner

Background and Need

This is a short problem statement and justification of the need for the project. Here you would identify the category of the project: research, technical assistance, or education in the disciplines of natural resources, cultural resources, social science, or inventory & monitoring.

Project Objectives

State the objectives of the study. What do you hope to accomplish to solve your need? How does this project contribute to the objectives of the park or program office and its strategic goals?

Statement of Work

This section details what activities would take place and which partners are responsible for what work. Multi-year projects can be presented as Phases or Parts with distinct activities occurring during certain fiscal years. The Schedule and Budget Section would reflect such partitioning.

Substantial Involvement

The project proposal must demonstrate that substantial involvement is provided by each partner. And the benefits of participation for each partner should be described. The RC or CRS will not sign off on the project until he/she is confident this requirement is satisfied. Explain why this cooperators was selected and the nature of the anticipated substantial involvement. Why is substantial involvement considered to be necessary in this project? And why does this project require a collaborative relationship rather than a contractual one?

Key Official, Principal Investigator, Investigator

One person at the park or program office must be designated as the NPS Key Official. This person will be responsible to approve or deny payment of invoices from the partner when requested by the IMR or WASO Budget & Finance representative. The NPS KO must sign a letter from contracting recognizing their responsibilities as the Agency Technical Representative (ATR). ATR training will someday become a prerequisite to managing a collaborative project.

Obviously a project can have only one Principal Investigator. However, sometimes a partner institution requests that Co-PIs be assigned. The DSCESU is reluctant to allow this arrangement, but in some cases the need had been demonstrated, mostly concerning a PI's schedule, or sabbatical, or long absences when it is reasonable to have another colleague familiar with the project take the lead in the interim.

The investigator is the person who is actually doing the fieldwork in the park. Often this person is the lead technician who is managing a team of students or interns, sometimes it is the PI. Contact information for all three is necessary: name, title, affiliation, telephone number, email address.

Project Funding

The amount of funding per the fiscal year of obligation (e.g. FY10) and the source(s) of funding is all that is needed here. If you have a multi-year project, show the projected funding in future fiscal years. Try to avoid obligation amounts that are not in whole dollars. **When figuring your budget, please round estimated expenses to the nearest dollar; no pennies please.**

Budget

Show both cash and in-kind contributions from all partners in the budget table.

Special attention should be given to unique expectations of the various institutions in terms of the budget categories, employee benefit rates, graduate student tuition etc. Budgets require special care in preparation. Consider the following: (1) all university employees receive some type of fringe benefit package (employee related expenses = ERE) that must be included. This is different than the 17.5% indirect cost; (2) universities vary in the extent to which they will allow PIs to formulate direct costs in specified budget categories. Make sure you and the PI know about this when you prepare a budget; (3) if you are hiring graduate research assistants, find out how to budget for tuition payment (if appropriate); and (4) if your cooperator is buying equipment it should be specifically listed in the budget. Equipment purchases require special consideration, including understandings about disposition and ownership of the property after the conclusion of the project. Discuss these issues ahead of time with your PI.

Schedule of Reports and Products

A time frame for activities, reports, and products must be specified in the project proposal and cover sheet. Close coordination between the NPS KO and the PI should be maintained to ensure milestones are met. If the project will not be finished at the time specified in the project schedule, then a "no-cost" extension (known as a NCE) can be granted **Allow at least six months between the final report submission date and the project completion date so final invoicing and payment can happen before the project account is closed at the university.**

If data are being collected, the project proposal should specify whether NPS is to receive a copy of the data files and/or databases and in what form. When research products are in the form of reports or graphics that will be reviewed before acceptance, make sure the project schedule allows time for that review and for subsequent revision by the PI.

Progress reports may be sent by e-mail to the NPS Key Official and the DSCESU Research Coordinator. For cultural resource projects, progress reports should also be sent to the CRS.

With certain exceptions, all information produced by the project must be available to the public and be properly archived. Therefore **two CDs or DVDs, as appropriate, of each final report must be sent to the DSCESU Research Coordinator for distribution to appropriate NPS archives.**

Step 3: The DSCESU Research Coordinator must approve the project. When all parties involved agree on the project proposal, the RC (or CRS as appropriate) will approve and forward the project proposal and cover sheet as electronic files to IMR Budget & Finance.

Step 4: The park or program office creates a purchase request in IDEAS software. Once the project has been approved, the park prepares a purchase request in IDEAS. The park then sends the purchase request with supervisory and budget approval (fund certification) to IMR or WASO Budget & Finance, as appropriate, through IDEAS.

Step 5: Meanwhile, at the university or NGO: The PI initiates appropriate project proposal paperwork documenting approval to receive the project. If they do not complete this action, the agreement will probably not be processed in a timely manner by the receiving institution.

Step 6: IMR (or WASO) Budget & Finance develops the project task agreement. Project information is used from the cover sheet to develop the project task agreement and purchase request. Budget & Finance then reviews the task agreement and purchase request for completeness and forwards the task agreement to the contracting officer.

Step 7: The Contracting Officer reviews the entire package for completeness and submits the task agreement for signature to the appropriate university/NGO grants and contracting office (a.k.a. Office of Sponsored Projects).

Step 8: The university/NGO grants and contracting office matches up the task agreement with the PI's internal application for approval of the agreement. The appropriate university/NGO official signs the task agreement and it is returned to NPS.

Step 9: The NPS Contracting Officer and Budget Analyst receive the signed task agreement and sign as the authorized NPS officials. The budget analyst then obligates the agreement through IDEAS. The completed document with all the signatures is returned to the university/NGO.

Step 10: The university/NGO receives the signed task agreement and establishes an account so that the project can begin. Costs incurred by the partner, prior to the date that expenditures are authorized in the task agreement, may be rejected by the NPS. The university/NGO may invoice the NPS on a cost reimbursable basis up to the amount approved in the task agreement, or invoice on a quarterly basis. The IMR or WASO Budget & Finance representative, as appropriate, receives invoices from the partner institution and requests approval for payment by the NPS Key Official. If the project is off schedule or late in reporting, the Key Official will deny payment and contact the RC or CRS for assistance in resolving the problem if needed.