

An Introduction to the New Organization

The National Institute for Agro-Environmental Sciences (NIAES) has come to an important juncture this year because five years have passed since it changed from a national research institute to an independent administrative institution in April 2001. Under the law, independent administrative institutions are required to develop medium-term plans to achieve the medium-term targets assigned to them and to review those plans every five years. In March 2006 NIAES's first medium-term target period (phase I) ended, and we began phase II research to achieve our new five-year medium-term plan (April 2006 – March 2011). For that purpose NIAES decided to review its research organization of the first five years in order to pursue its mission in a prioritized and efficient manner.

The hierarchically structured research organization of departments, groups, and units that was used prior to phase I has a long history not only here but also at many research institutes of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. In these days when research was conducted on the individual and unit level, this multi-hierarchy research organization or small research subdivisions, such as the unit, functioned effectively. But with the great changes in the circumstances surrounding science and technology at present, as well as the increasing trend toward the fusion and strategic orientation of research, and in conjunction with the collaboration of researchers in many fields and the increase in research activities such as project research with clearly defined objectives, the down side of “compartmentalized organizations” and “inter-unit barriers” has become pronounced and hampered the building of research systems which transcend disciplines.

In 2004–2005, NIAES launched the “Research System Discussion Committee” to consider the phase II system for conducting research. After thoroughgoing discussions on the phase II organization, the committee decided that phase II would conduct research under the

organization as diagrammed in the figure. The basic subdivisions of the research organization were enlarged into research divisions and a center that bring together researchers in the same area of specialization, thereby resulting in a non-hierarchical organizational structure. Independent of the research organization, we also established a “research project” (RP) for each research task for the purpose of carrying out the research tasks under the phase II medium-term plan. For each RP we bring together the personnel needed for accomplishing the task from the multiple research divisions and the center, and those personnel then partner on the research to achieve their common goal. The research divisions and the center are to support RP activities as they carry out cutting-edge seed research that anticipates future developments and work toward nurturing the capabilities that a group of experts should have. In other words, in phase II NIAES will operate as a matrix whose rows are the research organization of research divisions and the center, and whose columns are the RPs, or groups of researchers with common purposes. NIAES also created the positions of principal research director and principal research coordinator to coordinate each research area and to take charge of tasks including strategy development, efficiency improvement, international relations, running RPs, and public communication, while the institute is operated flexibly under the leadership of the president. In phase I research, support involved a number of assistant managers dividing up minutely categorized duties under a group system, while the new system makes it possible to speed up the performance of administrative duties and to even out such duties between busy and inactive periods by flexibly performing these tasks with the cooperation of the entire group under the group leader. We have also created an Audit office to enhance the internal auditing system including accounting auditing and operational auditing, and to provide for the institute's overall legal compliance.