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11-1-2006

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Pluhacek, Zach, "University Research Program Sees Drop in Funding" (2006). *INTSORMIL Impacts and Bulletins*. 28.
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University research program sees drop in funding

Zach Pluhacek | Posted: Wednesday, November 1, 2006 12:00 am

A program headquartered at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that uses science to assist economically stressed nations will receive \$9 million throughout five years through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The agreement, announced Friday morning by the UNL Office of Research and Graduate Studies, will significantly decrease the annual funding the International Sorghum and Millet Collaborative Research Support Program, or INTSORMIL, has received in recent years.

"We have normally received \$2.9 million a year for five years, and we are down to about \$1.9 million," said Joan Frederick, a financial officer for INTSORMIL. "The university suffers because they don't get the overhead from it."

This could negatively impact the amount of research INTSORMIL is able to do, she said.

Press officials from USAID, the primary source of funding for INTSORMIL, could not be reached for comment.

Prem Paul, the vice chancellor for research at UNL, said he was happy to hear the university was chosen to continue hosting the organization, and he sees the changes as nothing more than a "shifting of priorities" on the federal level.

"Money is not really the focus," he said. "The focus is really on the idea and the impact it's going to have ... Certainly the number of activities it supports will be less, but it will be more focused."

The organization's goal is to assist the U.S., as well as financially stressed nations in Africa, Central America and Eurasia, by improving the production and use of sorghum and pearl millet - crops that more than 500 million people worldwide depend on.

This year, for the first time, universities across the country with collaborative research support programs similar to INTSORMIL were required to bid with the risk of being discontinued.

"So, of course, they ask you to do more with less," Frederick said.

In addition to reducing the traditional funding amount, USAID officials have asked that INTSORMIL shift its focus to the international health aspect of its research, she said.

In order to attain extra government support for the program, the university submitted proposals to U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel, who serves on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Paul said.

"It was a significant amount of work on the part of Dr. (John) Yohe and his staff," he said.

Yohe, director of INSTORMIL at UNL, could not be reached for comment.

Paul was optimistic about the future of the organization. He said INTSORMIL could likely receive another five-year agreement with USAID.

"As long as this is a high priority for our nation ... I hope the program continues," he said.

To Frederick, that recent decrease in funding is a clear indication that money might be tight in the future.

"I think it makes it more important that we get more outside funds," she said.