


MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

October 18, 2011

TO: Kim A. Wilcox, Provost

FROM: Douglas D. Buhler, Interim Dean 

SUBJECT: Proposal to Combine the Departments of Crop and Soil Sciences and Plant Pathology into a New Department

Attached please find a document requesting the creation of a new department in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. This new academic unit will be created from the combination Departments of Crop and Soil Sciences and Plant Pathology. This document was prepared by James Kells and Ray Hammerschmidt, the Chairs of the two departments.



I believe that the document presents a strong case of the creation of the new department and thoroughly explains the rationale for the merger and its benefits to the College and MSU. I fully endorse the conclusions.

Thank you for considering this request and please contact me if you have questions or need additional information.

Best wishes.

cc: June Youatt
James Kells
Ray Hammerschmidt
Frank Fear
Rick Brandenburg
Steve Pueppke
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Request for the Creation of a New Department from the Current Department of Crop and Soil Sciences and Department of Plant Pathology

The disbanding of the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences and the Department of Plant Pathology and creation of a new Department represents a significant and important change in the structure of plant, soil plant-pathogen, and microbial sciences at Michigan State University. This change will lead to several significant benefits that would not be realized under the current structure. These include better focus on the Strategic Objectives of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources and a stronger alignment with major priorities of MSU such as Plant Science, Food Safety and Security, and Environmental Science. This proposed integration will strengthen the strategic platforms of the College and enhance productivity and efficiency metrics.

The new Department will support and maintain vertical disciplinary organization while promoting horizontal integration across major issues facing plant, soil, plant disease and microbial sciences. This will position the department to provide continued excellence in teaching, research and extension.

Advantages of creating the new department:

The faculty of the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences and the Department of Plant Pathology currently work closely with numerous collaborations in research, teaching and outreach. This integration of departments will build on the current collaborations. Examples of disciplinary alignments among faculty in the two current departments are microbiology and microbial ecology, plant-microbe interactions and disease resistance, pest management, and plant breeding and genetics. The Task Force Report to the Provost identified three strategic platforms for CANR: 1) Food and Agricultural Systems, 2) Natural Resource and Ecological Systems, and 3) Bioenergy and Bioproduct Systems. The Task Force Report indicated that the voluntary integration of these two departments would increase the focus on and alignment with these strategic platforms.

Possible disadvantages of disbanding the two current departments:

One possible risk of this integration is the potential loss of identity of smaller programs. This risk can be managed with leadership and planning. Given that the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences consists of several diverse programs of varying size, the risk of loss of identity of any program within the new Department should be minimal. A second possible challenge is the physical separation of faculty in the new Department. The faculty will be located in six buildings, with the majority in three (PSS, PBL and CIPS). This challenge can be

managed with electronic communication, faculty meetings, and other events that encourage faculty interaction. The Plant Science Addition will connect the Plant and Soil Science Building with the Plant Biology Building, which will minimize the issue of separation to some degree. Both current Departments have jointly appointed faculty located in separate buildings, and therefore have experience with this issue. Given the close proximity of the three primary buildings, this should not pose any serious issues.

Issues to be worked through:

Creation of a vision and strategic plan for the new integrated Department

Ensure that all faculty continue to have full support of the new Department and no program is marginalized

Department name

Development of bylaws

Appointment of a new Department Chairperson

Assurances:

No students will be disadvantaged by the creation of the new department.

The students currently enrolled in the graduate and undergraduate programs in the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences and students currently enrolled in graduate programs in the Department of Plant Pathology will not be disadvantaged in any way. They will complete their degree program under the conditions under which they enrolled. The undergraduate students will also benefit as the entire undergraduate curriculum in CANR will be examined and re-vitalized as part of a major curricular review planned for the College. The already strong graduate majors will remain and, through the new structure, continue to grow. The creation of the new Department will also provide an opportunity to evaluate the curricula of all graduate majors.

No faculty will be disadvantaged.

Faculty evaluations will be conducted with the principle that faculty will be evaluated relative to their professional assignment.

By-Laws of the new department will ensure that no current faculty will be disadvantaged by this process regardless of previous home department. The By-Laws will describe a mentoring system for junior faculty and will describe the process by which faculty evaluations and promotion and tenure recommendations are developed and communicated.

Consultations:

Interim Dean Buhler met with the faculty of the Crop and Soil Sciences Department on February 16, 2011 and the faculty of the Department of Plant Pathology on February 21, 2011. In these meetings, the potential integration of these two units was discussed. Faculty of each department have considered the implications of this merger and voted with very strong support for the merger. The Department Advisory Committees have met jointly to discuss several aspects of the merger. In addition, a joint faculty meeting was held in May, which was very useful in helping faculty identify colleagues with similar and complementary research interests.

Vision for the New Department

We envision a new department that is a world leader in plant science, soil science, and plant pathology. We expect that the integration of these two strong departments will lead to even greater productivity in all three missions of research, teaching, and outreach and an increased national reputation for the new Department, CANR, and MSU. To strengthen the focus on plant/soil-microbe interactions, we request a cluster hire consisting of three tenure-system faculty positions; 1) soil biology, 2) soil microbiology, and 3) fungal biology. These three positions would complement existing faculty positions, creating a nationally competitive research team in this important scientific area. This investment in key faculty positions would be consistent with the strategic platforms identified for CANR.