

An issue has come to our attention of late regarding integration of the elements of a plan, which needs some clarification. Please note, this is not a new rule/guideline but a reminder of something that we have said for many years.

The OSQR Handbook and our online briefings all make reference to the need for the elements of a plan to be integrated *if they are in fact intended to be*. That last part is an important distinction. Often there are pieces of work within a plan (or even each individual objective) that function independent of the other parts. In such cases the reason that they are together may be more driven by budget than science. That is why we also strongly urge that if there is not an intended integration of the parts of a plan (or a given piece of it) that researchers DO NOT try to manufacture integration where it does not exist.

An example:

If a plan has four objectives but each defines work by different researchers that, while all around a central subject, proceeds independently. Don't try to tell the reviewers how well integrated such a project is. Instead, on the Objective page it is better to note that these four objectives proceed as independent projects that are linked through their common focus on XXXX.

Similarly, if you have an "outlier" piece in a plan (e.g., your plan is on poultry and one small piece deals with applying a technology you have in your lab to sheep), don't try to force an integration where it does not exist and (equally problematic), don't put the work in with no explanation. In the former panelists are likely to complain about an artificial connection and in the latter, question why the piece is there. Note in the objectives section and, perhaps at the top of the Approach section for this why the piece is there and note that (for example), "while it is unrelated to the focus of the project it is included because..." ...or as we have seen in some Plant Disease work, "This portion of the plan is in response to a specific request from APHIS..." or "This portion of this plan is mandated by Public Law..."

The point of all this is to be clear about integration of a plan and to make every effort to illustrate that where it exists, but to not try to convince reviewers that outlier pieces are somehow integrated pieces of a whole plan (They'll not likely buy it and recommend that the piece be deleted).

As with so many things the essence of this is clear communication. There is no "hard and fast rule" about dealing with this. This is not permission to avoid saying anything about integration (silence can be as bad as drawing artificial connections). Reviewers do not always understand the nature of a Project document and assume that, like most grants, it is a clearly developed, integrated whole. If there are pieces that are not and you explain why they are there you avoid reviewer confusion and improve your likely outcome.

There is always the potential for a reviewer to divert to questioning why ARS constructs projects the way it does, but in such cases the SQRO and/or Program Coordinator are there to direct them back on track.