

Letter from the U.S. Advisory Committee for Scientific Ocean Drilling (USAC)

18 February 2021

Dear Colleagues,

As we all know, these times are characterized by uncertainty and disruptions, and the state of scientific ocean drilling going forward is no exception. Some of you may have attended the AGU Town Hall and/or seen various recent community messages, including the [Letter from the JRFB Chair](#), the [JRFB Request for Information \(RFI\)](#), and the [NSF Dear Colleague Letter \(DCL\)](#). I urge you to take the time to review and, where appropriate, respond to these messages.

In an effort to address questions you may have, and with the caveat that some answers may not yet be available at the time, USAC and USSSP plan to organize two **Community Town Hall meetings in the next several months**. Community Town Halls will be conducted via Zoom and their goals are to provide attendees with information on the latest developments and offer an opportunity to ask questions. The first of these meetings, planned for April 2021, will focus on the status of the current IODP program and JR scheduling through 2023-2024. The second Town Hall, planned for May, will deal with scientific ocean drilling post-2024. Stay tuned for details on these Town Halls and any other developments that may arise.

In addition, below we summarize some of the current efforts by various groups engaged in moving scientific ocean drilling forward, as well as the challenges we face:

IODP operations through 2024

NSF has agreed to apply unspent funds from FY20 & FY21 to future operations through FY23, within the terms of NSF's current memoranda with its IODP partners. Operations in FY24 will depend on contributions from these IODP partners. Expedition scheduling will remain responsive to developments imposed by COVID-19 challenges. However, please note that the lack of drilling in 2020 also means that there is an overabundance of proposals at the JRFB and SEP to carry the current program through 2023. As a result, the **JRFB has announced that it will not accept new proposals to use the JR** within the current IODP Science Plan, with [a few exceptions](#).

In addition, the pause in JR operations due to COVID-19 has allowed for extensive investment in the JR, potentially lengthening its operational life. However, **IODP as we know it will end in 2023 or 2024, depending on financial contributions**.

Scientific Ocean Drilling past 2024

As we move forward, we once again thank everyone involved in developing the [2050](#)

[Science Framework](#), which received an extremely positive response from NSF, [as stated by Ocean Sciences Division Director Terry Quinn](#) at the AGU IODP Town Hall meeting. This document holds tremendous promise for our community and is the first critical piece in the foundation for scientific ocean drilling after 2024.

However, note that Terry's remarks also indicated the need for a ***viable funding model for the new program***. In his words, "the current business model for IODP is not financially sustainable; the program is over-capitalized and under-funded ... NSF needs to be confident that a post 2024 drilling program has a sustainable business model with partners who have the ability and demonstrated interest to provide substantial and equitable funding streams to a future program."

Based on the responses to the recent [DCL](#), NSF will determine whether funding for a new vessel to support future international scientific ocean discovery will be pursued. This decision will also establish whether NSF will engage in substantive discussion with partners regarding a post-2024 scientific ocean drilling program or programs.

To summarize, the 2050 Science Framework holds tremendous promise, but it is only the first step for our community. For scientific ocean drilling beyond 2024 to become a reality, ***we must develop new, creative, and innovative approaches***. As noted in the recent [Letter from the JRFB Chair](#), a working group has been established to address some of these challenges. Thinking outside the box will be required of our entire community. For now, please complete the [RFI online form](#) that asks about science goals that you may be planning to address through a future drilling proposal. Also, in addition to the JRFB Working Group, other [working groups](#) are being formed to develop implementation strategies that address various aspects of the Science Framework, as well as financial approaches to support scientific ocean drilling beyond 2024. USAC and USSSP will keep you informed of these developments.

As Terry Quinn stated in his AGU Town Hall presentation, ***uncertainty and disruption can generate creativity as we look for new opportunities***. We are undoubtedly looking at uncertainties and disruptions on many fronts, but we have a solid science foundation and a large, vibrant, and enthusiastic scientific ocean drilling community. We must rise to the challenge and realize the promise of the 2050 Science Framework.

On behalf of the US Advisory Committee for Scientific Ocean Drilling,

Marta Torres
Chair