



HARMONIZING ANIMAL CARE AND COMPLIANCE IN A LARGE DECENTRALIZED FEDERAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

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OVERVIEW

The National Institutes of Health's (NIH's) Intramural Research Program (IRP) portfolio includes more than 2,100 active animal use protocols that are responsible for advancing prevention, early detection, and treatment of countless diseases. This work is performed by scientists at 24 Institutes and Centers (ICs) encompassing more than one million square feet of animal housing and procedure space in over 75 facilities in 3 states. Program management and oversight is the shared responsibility of 20 IC Animal Care and Use Committees (ACUCs), 18 Animal Program Directors (APDs), and an animal care support staff of over 1,000 skilled individuals.

The NIH IRP **Office of Animal Care and Use (OACU)**, in partnership with the NIH **Animal Research Advisory Committee (ARAC)**, contributes to the success of this decentralized organizational structure by advocating global strategies to ensure compliance with regulations and accreditation standards and enhancing the humane treatment of research animals across NIH, while respecting the unique geographic and programmatic needs of the ICs.

WHAT ARE OACU AND ARAC?

The **OACU**, through delegated authority from the Institutional Official (IO), ensures that NIH research programs and facilities for animal care and use are in compliance with federal regulatory requirements and standards, and maintain full accreditation with AAALAC International. The OACU is a team of 10 highly skilled individuals including veterinarians, program analysts, and trainers with a diverse range of education and experience.

The **ARAC** is comprised of each IC's ACUC Chairperson, individuals not affiliated with NIH, and representatives from the NIH legal, safety, communications, and security divisions. The ARAC advises the IO on all matters involving animal care and use and develops overarching animal program guidelines and policies which serve to unite the IC animal programs.

WHERE ARE NIH ICs?



HOW DOES OACU HARMONIZE?



OACU has several standing **communication initiatives** to facilitate the distribution of important and timely updates to the IC animal programs, including weekly emails and calls, as well as regular meetings of key advisory committees. Leveraging technology such as Microsoft SharePoint and Teams, box@NIH, and the public-facing website, OACU maintains a strong collaborative presence, functioning as the hub of an open, accessible, and transparent communication network.

In partnership with the ARAC, OACU develops and regularly updates overarching **institutional guidelines and policies** that provide foundational guidance and ensure regulatory standards are achieved. Template forms, documents, and standard procedures facilitate consistency amongst IC animal programs.

OACU offers a diverse portfolio of quality **training and educational opportunities** to NIH staff. This program includes both live and on-demand training courses for investigators, animal users, and ACUC members. Best practices and institutional expectations are highlighted and reinforced to help promote consistency throughout the IC animal programs.

In order to foster a collaborative research environment, OACU helps develop **agreements** describing the delineation of responsibilities for animal care and use with external collaborators as well as for collaborations between IC animal programs to ensure animal welfare and regulatory standards are achieved.

OACU compiles and submits collective reports to external oversight entities such as USDA, OLAW, and AAALAC International. This centralized mechanism is critically important to promote **regulatory compliance and continued accreditation**. Additionally, OACU observers regularly attend IC animal program activities such as ACUC meetings, semiannual program reviews, and facility inspections; and also administer **quality improvement programs** such as focus groups and trend analyses of program-wide metrics. This allows for a fully integrative approach and facilitates an open dialogue with each of the IC animal programs.

OACU coordinates frequent interactions with both the Division of Occupational Health and Safety and the Office of Research Facilities to provide ongoing support of compliance efforts and to assist with awareness of safety and facility-related initiatives, thereby promoting a **safe workplace** for all employees.

Coordinating the overarching animal program **disaster response** ensures the continuation of mission critical functions during an emergency event. OACU-led tabletop exercises and regular reviews of response plans are key to identifying and mitigating the impacts of potential hazards, threats, and adverse events on facility operations.

Through these harmonization efforts, OACU strives to unite the ICs into one animal program with a singular mission: **turning discovery into health**.

HOW MANY ANIMALS?

In 2021, just over **2 million animals** were used in the NIH IRP. Nearly three quarters of those animals were mice and rats, another quarter was fish, and all other species comprised the remaining one percent.

MICE & RATS •
FISH •
OTHER •

