LANL Fellows’ Perspective in Time of COVID-19

The Laboratory Fellows are relatively fortunate during this difficult time for our national community. We have not lost our jobs, and hopefully no loved ones. Although the impacts on our lives due to COVID-19 are not as painful as what many are experiencing, we are contending with many personal and professional challenges as a result of this pandemic. In the past, we at LANL weathered the Cerro Grande and Las Conchas fires (2000 and 2011) and the security and safety stand-downs in 2000 and 2004. These crises caused major disruption and anxiety for weeks to months, involving threats to life and loss of property, evacuations, and times when we could not do the work we needed to do. There are similarities and differences between these past trials and our current shelter-in-place situation designed to contain the global pandemic that has taken many lives world-wide and severely stressed national healthcare and economies.

In the case of COVID-19, information is flowing openly, communications are better, teleworking is possible, we all have homes in which to safely work and to take care of our families. Fortunately, a calm and rational response including social distancing, school and business closures have been effective in slowing the spread. Many of us have learned to balance family life and work and reprioritize tasks as we work remotely. However, threats to our health are potentially grave, and it is unclear when and how this will end. We are thankful to have our jobs as we all ponder what life will be like after we contain COVID-19.

About twenty-five LANL Fellows met on April 14, 2020 over Webex to share personal experiences dealing with the pandemic. John Sarrao, a Fellow and DDSTE, gave an update on how LANL is staying on top of this rapidly evolving challenge. He underscored the need to stay calm, disciplined, and be supportive as LANL ensures worker safety and national security. While the majority of the staff are working remotely, critical staff are on site. Pat Fitch, ALDCELS, provided an update on COVID-19 support and research activities within LANL as part of the coordinated DOE/US Government response. We discussed the need to flatten the curve in the coming weeks via social distancing and to prepare for seasonal cycles while the medical community develops effective therapies and vaccine. We learned that LANL scientists are forecasting the COVID-19 cases in real time, and participating in new programs such as COVID-19 detection, medical therapeutics and respiratory aids. We encourage you to explore these activities as well as a Director’s talk on our rich history.

The Fellows also discussed how we are dealing with the social isolation and issues related to teleworking. We identified several challenges as well as a few unintended benefits in the context of our experience in past crises. Safety for our community and families was clearly common and at the forefront of everyone’s thoughts. The Fellows appeal is to prioritize your health and safety and support you community that is in need. Some of us may have additional free time because of the cancellation of many activities. Give yourself permission to be ‘unproductive’ for some of your time. Use your time to get enough sleep, to do some (day) dreaming, pay attention to your thoughts – steer them to gain creative insights into your career with a collaborative spirit.
Fellows have established careers and some felt that they were being more productive. They have uninterrupted blocks of time to focus and are spending less time commuting. They are writing up their research results, individually and collectively, with some predicting that short-term scientific output may break records. Clearly this is not sustainable in the long term. Fellows noted that early career staff, postdocs and students, who are in the process of building their careers, are much more concerned about the negative impacts of stalled research. Support staff, who are central to our mission, also face many professional challenges brought on by the social isolation and teleworking situation. Fellows who are unable to do classified or experimental work are also concerned about reduced productivity. Fellows, staff, and technologists with primarily classified projects or experimental tasks cannot use their classified network computers or labs. They are engaged in background reading, training, designing experiments, learning unclassified software, or writing papers where possible. While LANL has been flexible, taking a graded approach across programs to support these activities, there is concern that this is not sustainable. LANL management should provide some clarity on safely easing back to work in a phased approach in the coming weeks. The Fellows believe that effective collaboration, supportive mentoring and teaming will help us manage the negative impacts as a community.

Fellows are struggling to find ways to best mentor students and postdocs. There is concern especially about new students, postdocs and hires in all job classes as they are missing the critical face-to-face time needed to effectively start their new positions at LANL. Some students and postdocs are nearing the end of their terms. LANL is helping to extend postdoc and student appointments, including those of international students, to deal with current issues. Many employees are struggling with inadequate internet bandwidth and speed within Northern New Mexico to enable work from home efficiently. Although the Lab’s computer support staff are working hard to improve connections, we still have internet bandwidth problems. Here again, communication with supervisors can help and allay fears of missing milestones.

Many of us have young children and/or older parents whose mental and physical health is a cause of concern. We are reaching out more to relatives and friends than in recent years. Cooking, hikes, games, movies, music, pets and books are keeping families together. Synchronizing kids’ school lessons with work should make time management easier. We have had to learn on-line collaboration tools and have participated in conferences remotely. DOE, NSF and NASA review panels are proceeding remotely and providing a sense of continuity and community. LDRD issued a rapid-response COVID-19 call that resulted in forty-nine proposals, reviewed in record time (five days), with sixteen funded ones, expected to deliver findings this year. The reduced pollution, greenhouse emissions and traffic offer us new data to evaluate some societal benefits. Finally, the teleconferences have opened up access to otherwise closed meetings and allowed us to be part of new international collaborations, a silver lining that we can build on.

In summary, while this challenge is global and long term, we have learned how to be resilient from past local crises. We are cohesive in our community spirit, have formal response teams and work protocols in place, and have established communications methods in place that have
enhanced dramatically with technology. We are in our homes bonding with our families and working remotely. We are staying more connected with family and friends and becoming savvy teleworking. We are practicing telemedicine, good hygiene and taking precautions to curtail the virus spread. Scientific results are being written, experiments are being planned, proposals are being reviewed and funded, and international collaborations are being seeded in new areas. While this gives us a sense of normalcy in the near term it is important to take time to reflect on our community spirit and collaboration efforts. This is particularly true for our younger colleagues or those unable to work from home who are concerned about their careers. Our past experience and the recent progress in containing COVID-19 gives us confidence that this crisis will pass. The Fellows’ advice to staff is to reach out to your colleagues, mentees, supervisors and leaders with issues you may be facing. We should continue to emphasize safety, including mental health, and managers have been supportive of this priority. In addition, it is important to balance your life and work at home - spend quality time with family, be active, eat healthily, establish a routine, help the community, and call friends and family far away. Our community is strong, resilient, creative, and supportive. Together, we have faced the hardest first phase of containing the global pandemic, and are ready to tackle the next phase with enhanced monitoring, controls and good hygiene, and to eventually develop vaccines and therapies.

1. https://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/04/14/science.abb5793