Working Group on
Agricultural Information Management (AIM)
Purpose, functions, structure and 2007 plan

1. Background/Rationale

Over the past year, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has been refining the roles and responsibilities of the agencies under it. One of the key aspects of this is a renewed focus to support local level groups through the establishment of village development clusters. As part of this it has tasked both NAFRI and NAFES to improve collaboration in order to provide greater information support to the District Agriculture and Forestry Extension Offices (MAF August 2006).

There are two major factors driving the need for improved information: marketization and decentralization. Because of decentralization, decisions are increasingly being made by a range of actors at different levels and are much more interlinked. In regards to marketization, different actors need better information to be able to make decisions that anticipate, or are in response to, market signals. This calls for an effective and efficient information system (or set of inter-linked and connected systems) to support decision-making of different of actors at all levels.

Both NAFRI and NAFES have recognized the importance of information services as part of their overall responsibilities and have carried out a number of activities in their respective organizations to improve information and communication systems. In NAFRI, substantial work has been carried out to build the capacity of the Information Management Division. Similarly, NAFES has recently established the National Information Center for Extension.

In 2006, NAFRI and NAFES established a joint Working Group on Agriculture and Information Management (AIM). This was based on the recognition that there is a need to improve the flow of information between NAFRI and NAFES as well as ensure that information produced is reaching and meeting the needs of farmers and extension staff. This is the first inter-agency working group established between NAFRI and NAFES to promote improved coordination. A number of activities were carried out in the first year to clarify the scope and functions of AIM (see Annex 1 for list of activities and achievements for 2006).

This note provides the overall scope and focus of AIM as well as a workplan for 2007. Materials produced in preparation for this strategy paper are shown in Annex 1 and Box 1 shows some of the key issues challenges for AIM to address.

> **Box 1: Issues and opportunities to improve information and communication within the Lao AKIS**
> Studies carried out in 2006 by AIM concluded that
> - There is no central place (at different levels) to know what information exists, thus, there is a lot of overlapping information.
> - There are few mechanisms to disseminate technical information to provincial and district staff.
> - More information is produced based on the needs of projects, rather than based on the needs of users
> - Farmers have questions that extension staff cannot answer and there are no mechanisms in place to efficiently provide extension staff with answers to technical problems they encounter (pests, disease outbreaks, etc).
> - There are opportunities to use a range of communication mechanisms to disseminate information and knowledge, such as use of use mass communication (Radio and TV) and face-to-face mechanisms between and among district staff and farmers (study tours, training, learning from relatives, etc)

2. Framework for how AIM works within the Lao AKIS

The Lao Agriculture and Knowledge Information Systems (Lao AKIS, figure 1) was used to analyze the major challenges and opportunities (see box 1). An AKIS links people and institutions together to promote and enable mutual learning and generate, share and use agriculture-related technology, knowledge, skills and information. For the purposes of AIM, AKIS is an important concept as it not only works at the at the national level but most importantly supports information sharing, communication and knowledge building at the district and provincial levels.
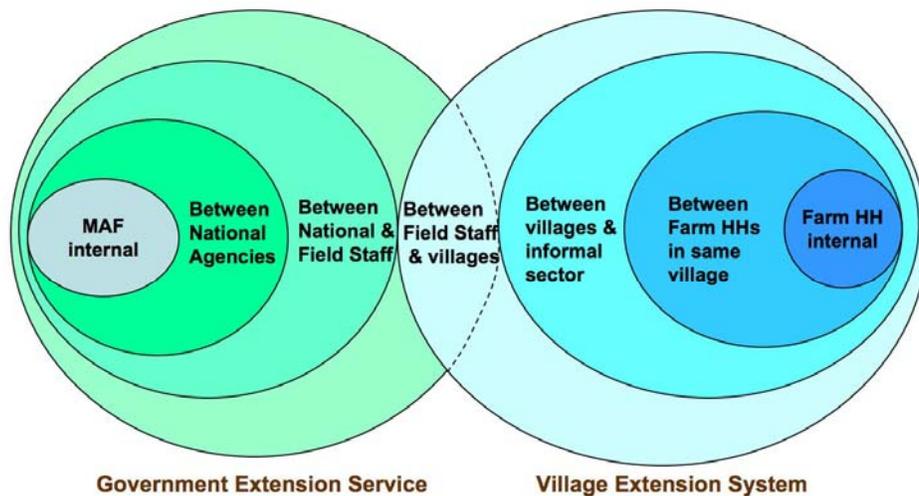

Figure 1: Lao Agriculture Knowledge Information System

Using the AKIS framework allows for analysis of the relationships between actors and how information flows or is communicated between different levels. This is important because 1) there is also a need to look at how we can more effectively connect different levels to one another and link different systems already in place and 2) explore and understand how decisions are made at different levels so as to provide the most relevant information in the most appropriate format.
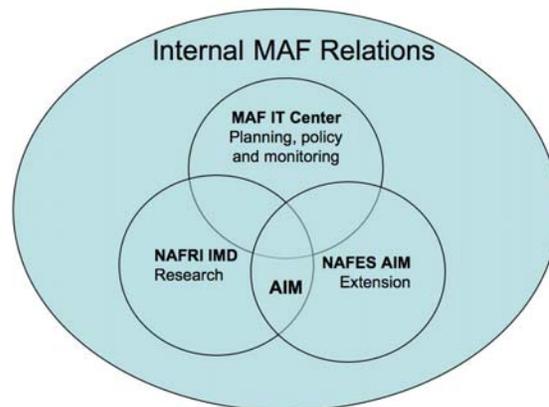

Figure 2: Internal MAF Relations

Figure 2 shows the internal relationships within MAF at the central level which need to be fostered. The purpose of AIM is thus two fold 1) foster improved collaboration between NAFRI and NAFES and 2) improve how both organizations communicate and deliver information to the district and provincial levels. It is expected that the MAF IT Center will play a central role to coordinate information and communication among planning and monitoring and research and extension.

3. Goal and Objectives of AIM

A key reason why the group has been formed is to better coordinate activities so as to 1) effectively harness limited human resources 2) avoid duplication. Thus, the scope of AIM activities is to complement and enhance work being carried out by NAFRI and NAFES rather than create new activities

It has been agreed that the goal of AIM is:
> ***To improve extension staff and farmers' access to agriculture and forestry related information and knowledge.***

Over the short-term the focus will be on enhancing cooperation between NAFRI and NAFES to improve production and dissemination of information to the local level. In the long-term the goal of the group is to develop working mechanisms, procedures and capacities of staff at different levels to manage, collect, produce and disseminate information (central, provincial, district and cluster levels). This will require the clarification of roles and responsibilities in regards to information of different levels as well as new mechanisms and procedures for working between levels.

The objectives of the AIM Working Group are to:
* Develop mechanisms to improve information sharing between NAFRI and NAFES
* Provide district and provincial level staff with better access to information and knowledge on a range of technical, social and market related issues
* Develop mechanisms to improve communication between different actors within the Lao AKIS
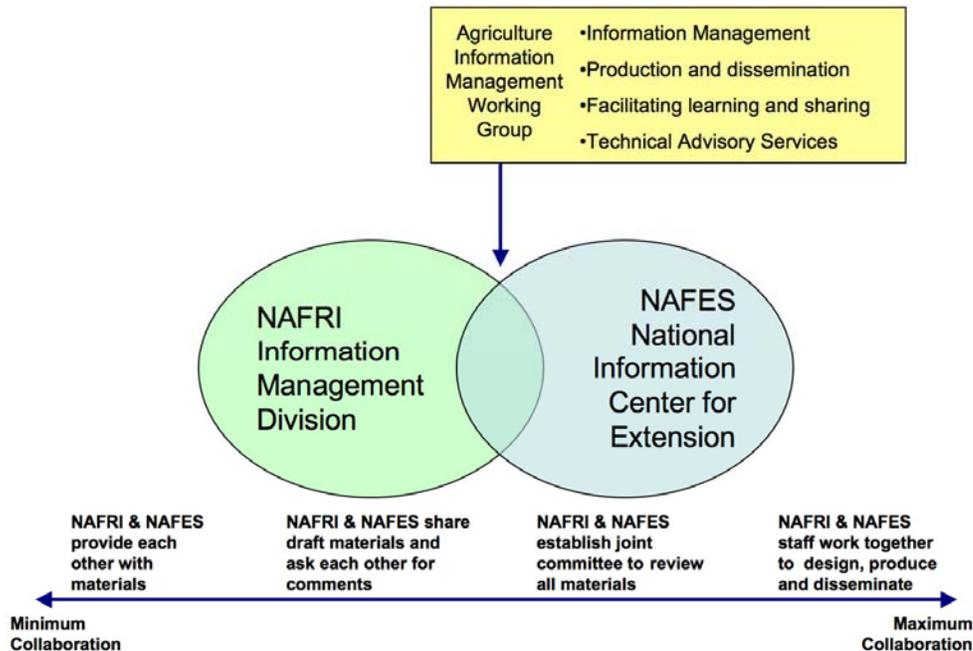* Build the capacity of staff to manage, produce and share information

Figure 3: AIM information activities and continuum of collaboration

4. Working principles and functional activity areas

AIM does not replace information services at NAFRI and NAFES but adds value to their work. The guiding principle is that activities contribute to improved information access of farmers and extension agents. Some of the main operational principles include:
- Activities enhance and add value to the plans and activities of NAFRI and NAFES,
- Activities avoid duplication and ensure effective use of limited human resources.
- Information, ideas and knowledge are shared openly.
- Based on the MAF strategy, in general, NAFRI will focus on linkages to PAFO subject matter specialists while NAFES will produce and disseminate information to DAFEO level (of course either can directly disseminate to any level).
- AIM acts as a conduit to share information between and among NAFRI and NAFES and not as a gatekeeper
- AIM will encourage other projects and divisions within NAFRI and NAFES to share and disseminate new research results, materials and methods.

As Figure 3 shows, activities are identified where there are synergies between NAFRI/IMD and NAFES/NICE. The formulation of activities is not fixed but needs to take into account the type of activity, the subject matter, the available expertise, and the priorities of MAF. The degree of collaboration can range from sharing new information and materials to a fully developed joint activity.

AIM will also seek to define better roles and responsibilities at province, district and village cluster level regarding knowledge management and information sharing. The table below shows an example:

	Information Management	Production and Dissemination	Facilitating learning & sharing	Technical Advisory Services
Central	30%	30%	30%	10%
Province	25%	25%	25%	25%
District	25%	10%	40%	25%
Village Cluster	10%	10%	40%	40%

Central Level
There are four main functional activity areas have been identified:
1. **Information Management**: including collecting existing materials and resources at NAFRI and NAFES to make them available (using LAD, NALiS, wisdom bag, repackaging of materials for extension and other mechanisms).
2. **Production and dissemination of information**: including activities from assisting to disseminate each organizations information to developing joint information materials (print, video, radio, etc) and repackaging information
3. **Facilitating learning and sharing**: including the organization of joint workshops or learning processes at different levels (national, provincial, district). At least one national joint workshop will be held on a key issues and topics arising in the agriculture and forestry sector
4. **Technical advisory services**: includiing developing mechanisms to ensure feedback from the field and the timely answer of problems faced by farmers and extension staff.

Provincial Level
In addition, it is recognized that AIM will need to work at all levels and thus it has been agreed to test out how AIM can work or support information flows in one province (most likely Oudomxay), activities at provincial will include:
- Carry out an information assessment at the province level
- Improve information flows between national and provincial levels
- Develop mechanisms to share best practices between districts in the province.
- Develop models for information management activities at the provincial level

District Level
NAFRI and NAFES have been tasked to provide coordinated support and technical information to DAFEO and Information Service Center at the Village Cluster Level. Thus, a key focus for AIM is to improve mechanisms to improve access to information and communication mechanisms to these levels. Some activities could include:

- Develop of models for establishing and running Information Service Centers at the Village Cluster Level.
- Support production and dissemination to district extension staff and farmers.
- Test mechanisms to improve information and communication mechanisms to farmers and production groups.
- Develop processes to document best practices, successful farming practices and problems at the district level

5. Working Processes and structure of AIM

AIM works through NAFRI and NAFES structures and the main units involved are the National Information Center for Agriculture Extension and the NAFRI Information Management Division. The AIM working group will be overseen by the Heads of the Information Management Division (NAFRI) and the CETDU (NAFES).

Processes for AIM include:
- At least 3-4 meetings will be held to review progress of joint activities, share new materials or invite new ideas from others to improve the working group
- Staff, projects and others from NAFRI, NAFES and other agencies will be encouraged to participate in the group and share results and information
- Working teams will be formed to carry out work consisting of NAFRI and NAFES staff as others as needed
- Initial budgets will be supported through LSUARFRP and LEAP. Other donors will be encouraged to contribute
- At the end of each of each year, there will be a review to check progress made, reflect on lessons, and plan for the next year.

Roles and responsibilities of staff at NAFRI and NAFES
Below is the list of staff responsible for key areas of work. Staff assigned will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of activities as well as reporting back to the working group achievements, lessons and ways forward.

Role/responsibility area	NAFRI	NAFES
Head of Working Group	Khamphay	Somxay
Coordinator and focal point	Bandith	Jitprasong/Phout
Development of LAD	Pasalath	Chaleun
Production & Dissemination systems	Khanhkham	Khampeuy/Leena
Help Desk/Call Center Functions	Phetsamone	Khampuey/Leena
Advisers	Michael, Joakim	Andrew, Andrea, Julienne

Khamphay Manivong,
Head of Information
Management Division
NAFRI

Date: _____

Somxay Sixanoh
Head of Central Extension and
Training Development Unit
NAFES

Date: _____

6. Workplan and budget for 2007

National Level

Activity Area	Types of Activities	Lead staff	
		NAFRI	**NAFES**
Coordination of AIM	• Hold three to four meetings to review progress of work teams and share/update each other on new activities	Khankham, Bandith	Chaleun Phout
Promote AIM	• Develop brochure • Update Lao links website	Khanhkham, ICT	Juliane, Chaluen, Phout
Collect materials at NAFRI and NAFES in order to contribute to LAD	• Collect materials from NAFRI and NAFES on regular basis • Train NAFES staff in using LAD and install LAD • Input materials and train staff at NAFRi & NAFES on LAD	Pasalath, Pome, ICT, Michael	Juliane, Chaluen, Thitphachan, Phout
Dissemination of Sourcebook	• Launching workshop and dissemination to key organizations • Provincial level workshops to train to use and get feedback	Bandith, Michael, Khankham	Citpasong and Thitphachan
Develop dissemination system to district and provincial level (wisdom bag, etc)	• Collect materials and select appropriate ones for repackaging or Direct dissemination to provincial and district level • Update Wisdom bag at least two times • Review/Assess how materials are currently disseminated • Develop strategies to improve dissemination • Develop joint contact list for dissemination	Khanhkham, Michael	Andrea, Khamphuey and Lena
Collaborate with public medias to disseminate information	• Work team established between NAFRI, NAFES, LNR • Concept for new shows developed	Khamouane, Bandith, Michael	Bounthan, Chaluen and Viengsak
Develop Technical help services at national level	• Create list of technical SMS at central level • Develop help center at NAFES (Staff appointed, guidelines developed, fist of questions asked (and response) developed.	Khanthamaly, Phetsamone	Phout, Khampuey and Lena
Hold 1 thematic workshop at central level	• Develop process for organizing workshop on contract farming	Bandith, Michael	Citpasong
Support to capacity building of staff	• Hold at least one joint training • Support the IT activities at NICE	Bandith ICT	Juliane, Chaluen, Thitphachan, Phout

Provincial/District Level

Activity Area	Types of Activities	Lead staff	
		NAFRI	**NAFES**
Carry out an assessment on information system and roles and responsibilities	• Develop concept note/proposal • Work with Oudomxay province to develop strategy and plan • Roles and responsibilities regarding knowledge management and information sharing is identified and staff assigned	Khamphay, Bandith, Michael	Somxay, Juliane, Jitprasong
Share lessons on establishing	• Workshop to exchange experiences and field visit to model sites	Khamphay,	Somxay, Juliane,

Information Service Centers at the Village Development Cluster		Bandith, Michael	Jitprasong

Annex 1: Achievements of AIM in 2006 and list of relevant materials

List of activities and achievements of LAD in 2006

Activity	Outputs
Regular meetings between NAFRI Information Services and NAFES/CETDU	• Three meetings held in 2006 • Establishment of the AIM Working Group • Initiation of information and communication survey

Information and Communication survey	• Student studies on varying topics:
	  o Inventory of information resources at NAFRI NAFES
	  o Impact of extension to local knowledge systems
	  o Information and communication study of local actors in Namo and Phonxay
	• Presentation of results to AIM group
	• Summary paper of challenges and opportunities produced

Production of Uplands Sourcebook	• Dissemination of English Language Sourcebook • Support to production of Lao Language sourcebook
NAFRI IT support to NICE	• Advice and feedback on how to install and design LAN system in NICE building

Materials and report produced from AIM in 2006

Minutes of AIM meetings
- Minute of 1st AIM meeting, January 10, 2006
- Minutes of 2nd AIM meeting, March 9, 2006
- Minutes of 3rd AIM Meeting, October 25, 2006
- Notes from Information and Communication survey results presentation, September 25, 2006

Concept notes, papers and materials developed from Information Survey
- Assessment of Agriculture and Forestry information resources within Lao PDR and survey questionnaire, a joint activity between NAFRI and NAFES, March 2006 (English and Lao)
- Overview of initial ideas and ways forward, For the NAFRI-NAFES Working Group on Agriculture Information Management (AIM), October 2006 (English and Lao)

Reports from Studies conducted by NAFRI and NAFES
- Communication study of local level actors in Phonxay District, Luang Prabang, December 2006 (Lao Language).
- Communication study of local level actors in Namo District, (Lao Language)
- Name of studies from NAFES
- Impact assessment of extension in local knowledge system of Khoun district, Xiengkouang province.
- Impact assessment of extension in local knowledge system of Nambak district, Luangprabang province.
- Impact assessment of extension in local knowledge system of Paknhuem district, Vientiane Capital.
- Impact assessment of extension in local knowledge system of Toumlan district, Saravane province.
- Agriculture and Forestry Information Management in Central level
- Options for extension to promote agro-forestry in Laos.
- Options for extension to promote integrated farming system for small households in Laos.
- Options for extension to promote alternatives to agro-chemical productions in Laos.

- Poster on Information and Communication needs in Phonxay and Namo Districts (English and Lao)

Related Information
- The Lao Extension Approach, Improving Extension Services at the Cluster level
- Brochure on the National Information Center for Extension (NICE)
- Roles and Responsibilities of Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Centers
- Roles and Responsibilites of District Agriculture and Forestry Extension Offices
- Concept Note To Develop a MAF Management Information System (MAFIS), Draft V1, June 12, 2006
- Concept and Process for a Proposed Sub-Working Group on Agriculture Information and Knowledge Management (AIKM), Draft V1, June 15, 2006
- Ideas for further developing the Lao Agriculture Database and National Library Information System at NAFRI and NAFES, November 2006