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AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE July 12, 2011**

**Prairie Research Institute scientists receive NSF grants  
to advance digitization of biological collections**

**CHAMPAIGN, Ill.** Scientists at the Prairie Research Institute, formerly the Institute of Natural Resource Sustainability, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign will share \$2.6 million of \$10 million in grants this fiscal year from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to help create a national resource of digital data documenting existing biological collections. Greater accessibility to records of the biodiversity of life on Earth is critical to the future of the planet as the need to assess status and changes in biodiversity increases with climate change.

(NSF release [http://www.nsf.gov/news/news\\_summ.jsp?cntn\\_id=121015&org=NSF&from=news](http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=121015&org=NSF&from=news))

The scientists, with the Institute's Natural History Survey, will work on three of the four projects funded during the first year of NSF's new Advancing Digitization of Biological Collections (ADBC) program. Entomologist Christopher Dietrich is the principle investigator on "InvertNet—An Integrative Platform for Research on Environmental Change, Species Discovery and Identification," which received \$5 million of which \$2.3 million goes to the University of Illinois. Scientists from thirteen other universities are collaborators on this effort to create an online virtual museum comprising 56 million specimens of insects and related invertebrates.

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Andrew Miller, mycologist, is co-principle investigator on “North American Lichens and Bryophytes: Sensitive Indicators of Environmental Quality and Change,” which received \$4,200,000 with \$105,000 for Illinois. Sixteen other institutions are collaborators. This project will image over 2.3 million North American lichen and bryophyte specimens from more than 60 collections to address how species distributions change after major environmental events, both in the past and projected into the future.

Entomologist Dmitry Dmitriev and botanists Mary Ann Feist and Rick Phillippe received contracts of \$100,000 and \$55,000, respectively, for a third collection digitization project led by the American Museum of Natural History entitled “Plants, Herbivores and Parasitoids: A Model System for the Study of Tri-Trophic Associations.” All the awards and projects are for a four-year period.

“These grants really put the Prairie Research Institute and the University of Illinois on the map for biological informatics,” Dietrich said. “Working with our colleagues in computer science and engineering we now have the opportunity to transform the way researchers and the general public gain access to information on biodiversity”

“The InvertNet project alone will provide access to and aggregate data from 22 Midwestern institutional collections with holdings ranging up to 10 million specimens each.” Dietrich added. “All of these data will facilitate our primary research on the effects of land use changes on the biota of the Great Lakes and upper Mississippi River drainage basins.”

“The NSF grants provide for extensive training of graduate and undergraduate students in cutting-edge, digitally-assisted curatorial workflows, biodiversity informatics, and basic morphological taxonomy,” said Miller. “And in keeping with the Institute’s and the Illinois Natural History Survey’s missions, the ADBC program provides unprecedented access to collections by the general public, facilitating outreach, elementary and secondary education, and a greater awareness and appreciation of the value of collections to science and society.”

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The Prairie Research Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is the home of the Illinois State Scientific Surveys: Illinois Natural History Survey, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Illinois State Geological Survey, Illinois State Water Survey, and Illinois Sustainable Technology Center. It was established by statute in 2008 and builds on the Surveys' reputations for basic and applied research and service. The Institute provides objective, cutting-edge research and solutions to allow citizens and decision-makers to make choices that ensure sustainable economic development, enduring environmental quality, and cultural resource preservation for Illinois and beyond.

[www.prairie.illinois.edu](http://www.prairie.illinois.edu)

Since 1858, the Illinois Natural History Survey has been the guardian and recorder of the biological resources of Illinois---the state's biological memory. With a staff of over 200 scientists and technicians, it is recognized as the premier natural history survey in the nation. The mission of the Illinois Natural History Survey is to investigate and document the biological resources of Illinois and other areas, and to acquire and provide natural history information that can be used to promote the common understanding, conservation, and management of these resources.

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