



10 Ideas for the ESA Branches

Presented to Entomological Society of America members by the ESA Governing Board, January 2022



Introduction

Over the past two years, we—the members of the 2021 ESA Governing Board—have been spending a lot of time considering the Society's Branches.

The [Branches](#) have been a core fixture of the organization since before there even was an Entomological Society of America. So why look at them?

We engaged in this consideration not because there is anything that is necessarily broken, but because we believe that, with some modest changes and improvements, we can evolve to an ESA that is better, stronger, and more financially viable, inclusive, and impactful. And while they are not truly broken, one could rightly say that today's Branches have become somewhat bent. Addressing any inefficiencies now will allow us to modernize our approach on ESA's regional structure while also addressing some very real financial considerations.

In 2019, as the Board approved the 2020 budget, we agreed to look at this because the Branch Meetings—looked at as a whole—were losing

money on a nearly yearly basis. The Branch financial reserves were declining and Branch Meeting attendance was shrinking. While some Branches performed better financially than others, the evidence was clear that something had to change.

However, the more that we reviewed the data, it became clear that the end goal should be more about organizational improvement than fixing a problem. Today's Branches are equivalent to the [Branch Meetings](#). For the majority of members, they serve essentially no other purpose.

We think that can be improved.

We see a vision where Branches in the future are thought of as more than just an annual regional meeting. Instead, they can be vibrant communities where members are connected with one another all year long, not just during the annual Branch Meeting. To get there, however, we need to think a little differently. In this report we present 10 ideas to get you thinking about how Branches could evolve to support the next generation of entomologists.

But first, some background:

A Foundational Question: What Parts of ESA Require a Local Presence?

To answer this question, we hired a consulting firm (Mariner Management) that led us through a series of brainstorming sessions, focus groups, and strategy discussions. After working with the staff and the Board for a year, the firm presented us with a report in September 2021. Portions of that report have been repurposed into this document. While we still don't have the answers, we can start to see some elements of a future state that may be a way to increase ESA's reach, breadth, and reputation as the preeminent entomological society in the world.

To get to that future state, we would like to start a conversation with the members so that we can learn what you want from ESA on a regional basis. Our goals are twofold:

- 1) Consider ways to improve Branch functions and operations so that they are revenue-neutral or better.
- 2) Consider ways to improve Branch functions and operations so that the needs of entomologists and other stakeholders in the entomological community are met and the strategic principles of the Society are fulfilled.

Branch functions. The Branches have evolved so that their primary purpose is to host annual meetings. In the minds of some members, they also serve other functions, such as providing awards and travel grants for students, early-

career presentation opportunities, leadership development, and so on. But the vast majority of members seem to feel that Branches are essentially the same as Branch Meetings.

The purpose and value of the Branches to members was discussed in various focus groups in early 2021, facilitated by Mariner Management. (See "Focus Group Feedback," below.) Participants included current and past Branch leaders, members who attend every Branch Meeting in their region, and members who never attend Branch Meetings.

Branches today. Branches were first introduced as a concept for the Society around 1915 when the Pacific Slope Association came under the umbrella of the American Association of Economic Entomologists—one of ESA's founding predecessor associations. Other Branches were added shortly thereafter until all five domestic Branches were formed. There were no significant changes until 2009, when ESA members voted overwhelmingly to create a new, sixth Branch, the International Branch.

Think about that for a moment. Our Branches were formed before modern transportation was a reality: Federal legislation launched the commercial air industry in 1926 and the federal highway system in 1956. Said another way, we built the founding of our Branch system at a time when members arrived at the meeting in a horse and buggy.

Clearly, the time for reconsideration has come to decide if we are utilizing an optimum structure to benefit the maximum number of members.

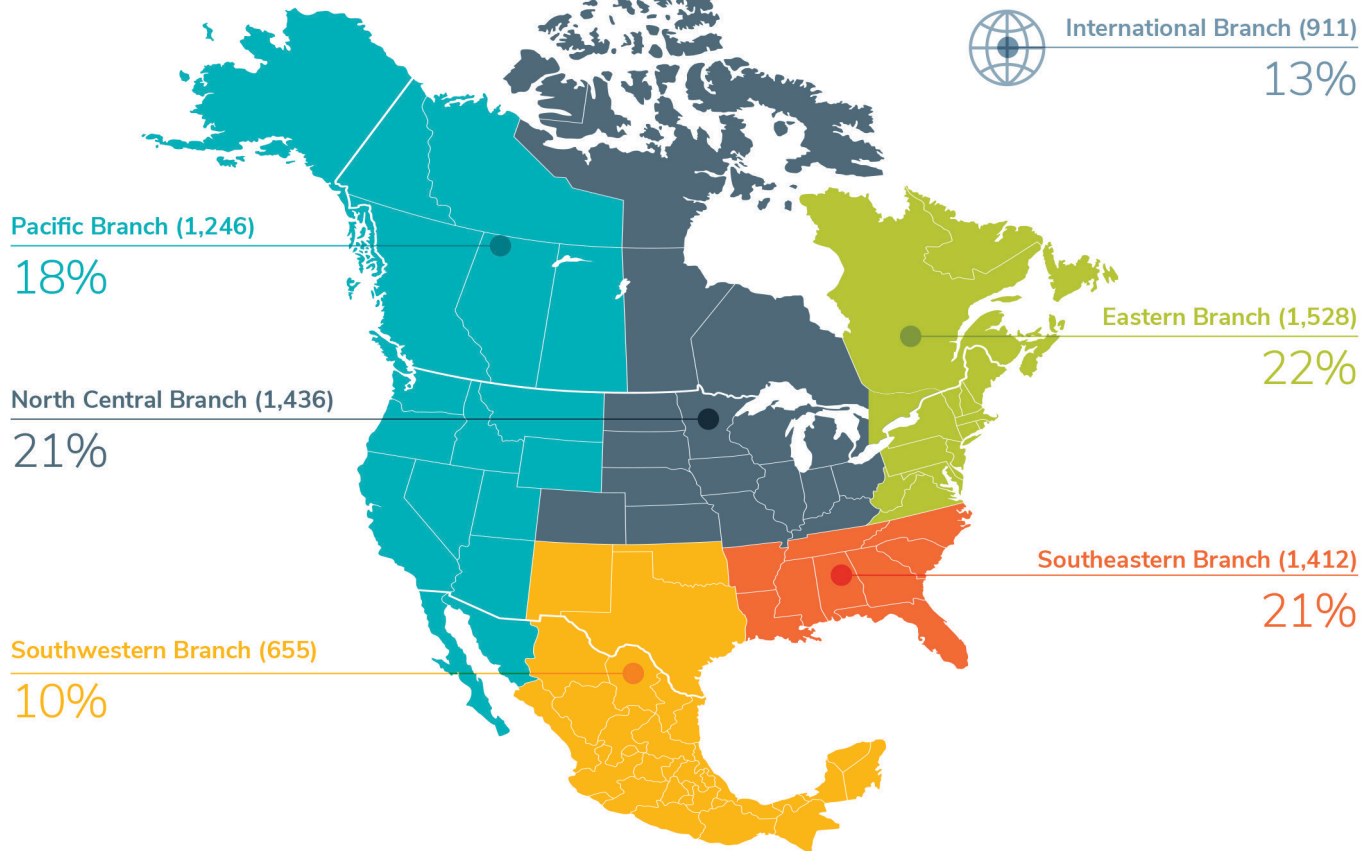
Focus Group Feedback

Themes common to participants' perceptions of the purpose and value of Branches fell into two broad categories—education/training and networking—and almost exclusively centered around Branch Meetings. These traits are typical of associations in general.

- Students/Early Careerists: For students and entomologists early in their career, Branches offer a relatively "safe" space in which they can begin their career. Branch elements of value to this cohort include:
 - A training ground where they can develop and test their professional skills among a smaller, perhaps less intimidating audience than on a national stage.
 - A more intimate networking environment where they can make friends, gain exposure to and be seen by seasoned professionals in their area, and potentially get hired.
 - An opportunity to develop leadership skills by serving in volunteer roles for Branch programs.
- Professionals: For more seasoned professionals, Branches tended to offer more on the networking and social side of the spectrum where they could:
 - Meet peers and establish local connections they could turn to with questions and ideas.
 - See and recruit the next generation of entomologists.
 - Spend time with friends who share the same passion for entomology.
 - In cases where Branch members share a common technical interest, gain a hyper focus on their specialty.

Membership by Branch, 2020

(members may join more than one Branch)



Today there is an inequity in the size of the Branches. There are only three of the 50 U.S. states in the Southwestern Branch, whereas the others have between nine and 14 states in each. Looking at square mileage within the U.S. states alone (since the majority of engagement comes within the U.S. borders), the Pacific Branch is more than six times larger than the Eastern Branch, more than three times larger than either the Southeastern or Southwestern Branches, and nearly twice as large as the North Central Branch. Of course, four of the Branches include Canada and Mexico, though engagement in each country is relatively low (ESA has only 40 members in Mexico and 212 in Canada). So, when looking at Branch engagement, it simplifies the discussion to think only in terms of U.S. membership.

There is also inequity in terms of Branch membership. Four of the five domestic ESA Branches each have between 18 percent and 21 percent of the membership, but the Southwestern Branch only has roughly 9 percent of total ESA members. Some members, of course, join more than one Branch, but relatively few do so.

Headquarters support of the Branches. Starting in about 2012, ESA headquarters began assuming an increasing amount of the work to run Branch Meetings. Starting with merely staffing a registration desk, today headquarters allocates the equivalent of one full-time position (FTE) to support the management of the Branches. There are also indirect costs that are allocated to the Branches that do not appear in the Branch financial statements. These expenses appear in the Membership budget of the ESA.

In addition, headquarters has assumed many aspects of running the Branches that used to be handled by volunteers, including accounting, registration, credit card fees, postage, marketing, site logistics, and more. Nevertheless, the annual Society budget still includes a total of \$20,000 in Program Enhancement Funding (PEF) that is distributed to support the Branch Meetings. These funds have not changed over the years even while ESA headquarters assumed an increasing share of the financial burden of running the Branches.

ESA Branch Net Profit/Loss (Without Program Enhancement Funding)								
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Eastern	(5,366)	(1,490)	5,938	(11,875)	(26,877)	(21,024)	9,419	(42,953)
Southeastern	(3,813)	13,584	(25,587)	(27,454)	(3,077)	(2,206)	77	(38,727)
North Central	(2,593)	2,121	(42,247)	(12,816)	(15,913)	(9,778)	3,724	(67,638)
Southwestern	(4,841)	4,449	280	(6,873)	(8,890)	5,452	5,355	938
Pacific	7,624	4,227	(1,341)	(9,612)	(24,258)	(5,668)	22,160	(831)
Total	(8,989)	22,891	(62,957)	(68,630)	(79,015)	(33,244)	40,735	(189,209)

Branch finances. The hard fact is that, taken as a whole, today's Branches lose money. This is true even before staffing and indirect costs at headquarters are factored in. From 2014 to 2020, the Branches lost nearly \$190,000. Other than 2020 (when most meeting-related expenses were avoided due to pandemic cancellations, but generous meeting sponsors allowed the Branches to keep the donations), there was only one year where the Branches were revenue-positive. (See table.)

Branch Meeting attendance averages about 250 people per meeting per year. Reviewing the last three years of in-person Branch Meetings (2017-2019), the largest number of attendees was 329 for the 2018 North Central Branch meeting. But, even then, that was only 20 percent of the Branch membership for 2018. On average, 18 percent of ESA members attend Branch Meetings, meaning more than 80 percent of the membership are not receiving the benefit of ESA's support of the Branches.

On average from 2017 to 2019, ESA lost just over \$32 per Branch Meeting attendee. If you add in the PEF funding, that number jumps to ESA losing just over \$48 per attendee. Neither of those figures includes staff time or other expenses. Headquarters allocates just over one FTE to Branch operations plus expenses. Factoring those expenses in means that on average, all costs included, ESA spends nearly \$83 per attendee at the Branch Meetings to support their operations.

It is important to consider these facts knowing that in 2025 ESA's overall revenue will drop by approximately \$200,000 per year as changes in the publishing program are realized through the expiration of the first-term contract with our publishing partner, Oxford University Press. These

changes are forcing a reconsideration of every business line in the Society with an eye toward expense reduction and income maximization.

The Branches must receive the same scrutiny that all other business lines in ESA are undergoing if ESA is to continue to thrive for the next generation of entomologists. It is in this light that we present some ideas to you to consider for reducing expenses and inefficiencies and maximizing engagement and revenue within the ESA Branches.

Ten Ideas for the ESA Branches

The ideas presented below are discussion starters. Any real plan for the future of ESA and the Branches will come after considerable discussion. Tell us what you think of these ideas. If you like them or if you don't, we want to know why.

Most of these ideas focus on the Branch Meetings because—as stated previously—that's how most people think of them. We'd like to think expansively about what else is possible for Branches.

#1: What if members could join multiple Branches—for free?

We listed this idea first because it is the only one that we have already implemented, as a way to pilot test some of the ideas in this report. Historically, membership in ESA came with membership in one Branch and one Section as a part of basic membership, but a member could add additional options for a fee. Starting with the 2022 membership season, members can join unlimited Branches and Sections for free.

Implementing this idea will allow members to freely associate with Branches and Sections and not incur an additional fee. This will provide us with data to assess the interest level for members to align

with a Branch where they do not currently reside but have other ties (such as research interest, a previous residence, or other factors).

#2: What if the governance of Branches was separated from the meetings?

Historically the role of the Branch Presidential line has largely been focused on preparing for and hosting the annual Branch Meeting. What if that “meeting planning” role transitioned to ESA’s professional staff at the headquarters office and the Branch leadership freed up their time to focus on other matters?

Freed from the burden of meeting planning, volunteer leaders could use their expertise and leadership talents in a variety of ways that can only be done regionally. Options could include hosting collecting trips, biological surveys, or field trips to areas in the region; advocating for the science at state and local political offices; providing “Explore Entomology” lectures at local colleges and universities that do not have entomology departments; or hosting “road shows” in area primary and high schools, utilizing the abundant extension and outreach talents that are in the Society’s membership.

The pandemic has proven that leadership can be done virtually. In 2020, Branch governance shifted nearly overnight from physical to virtual. The technology to support this exists today and will only improve over time. Branch leaders could host video chats with members, livestream nature walks, and transition from one year’s leaders to the next entirely over the internet.

#3: What if the Branches held more than one meeting?

As stated previously, most members equate their Branch experience to the Branch Meeting. This means that for 51 weeks of the year, most members get little benefit from the Branches that they are supporting financially with their membership dues.

Reasons that members today don’t participate in Branch activities are many, but some of the reasons expressed during the focus groups include timing and scheduling issues related to the meetings, the size of the Branch Meetings, leadership burnout,

and feelings that the meetings are not serving their professional and social needs.

In addition to (or instead of?) hosting a single meeting each year, the Branches could think more localized. Myriad online tools can facilitate regional “meet-ups,” which could be utilized to pull members together on a more “hyper-local” basis. Ideas could include book or discussion groups that meet monthly in a local coffee shop to discuss the latest issue of *Insect Systematics and Diversity*; groups that meet on an ad hoc basis to talk about the most impactful presentations that individuals saw online at the last ESA Annual Meeting; or even viewing parties where on-demand online presentations are watched and discussed.

ESA could help list, promote, and track these meet-ups through an online centralized system that would allow Branch members to add their own events when they decide to host them.

#4: What if there were more Branches?

Today we have five Branches to serve North America and one Branch to serve the rest of the world. Most of these are huge, spanning hundreds of thousands of square miles. Perhaps there should be more branches, both domestically and internationally. This would shrink the size of each Branch down to a more manageable size. Today it would take a full 24 hours to drive from the top to the bottom of the continental U.S. portion of the Pacific Branch. (If one were to include the Canadian and Mexican portions of the Branch, that number jumps to more than 70 hours.)

The most financially successful ESA Branch meeting today is the Southwestern Branch. It is possible that is due to its relatively small size, encompassing just three of the United States. Is there a strategic advantage to having smaller Branches where all members come from just a handful of states?

Of course, any change to the number of branches has implications for overall Society governance, because most leadership groups (from committees to the Governing Board) currently have Branch representation spelled out in the ESA governing rules, such as the Bylaws.

#5: Or, what if there were fewer Branches?

Along these same lines, another option would be to reduce the number of Branches. Today a person can fly from Baltimore to New Orleans (~800 miles) in roughly the same amount of time that they can drive from Baltimore to Charlottesville (~200 miles). Given that, perhaps smaller Branches are not a strategic advantage after all. A smaller number of Branches would consolidate the number of Branch Meetings, allowing each to be financially more successful.

Again, any change to the number of Branches would impact the Society's governance model.

#6: What if the Branch boundaries weren't fixed?

We've always looked at our Branch boundaries as fixed and pre-determined. But maybe they don't need to be. What if they could ebb and flow as members decided they wanted to align with a different Branch. For members who are on border states between Branch boundaries, depending on the research topics or other factors, one year they may align with Branch X and the next year they can align with Branch Y. The elimination of additional fees to support multiple Branch choices will help to determine how closely people feel aligned with the fixed Branch boundaries.

This change, if it resonates with the membership, will have policy implications. Our Society Policy and Procedures Manual lists Branch boundaries, and the Bylaws describe the process for changing the current structure.

#7: What if there were no Branches?

OK, this idea sounds a little radical, we know. But just consider the thought. Maybe Branches are the wrong way to think about meeting members' needs on a regional basis. What if, instead, ESA supported some of the other ideas discussed in this report regionally, but there was no formal structure. Regional meet-ups, partnering with other groups that meet regionally, and other ideas would all be compatible with a change to ESA that changed the structure of the Society so that, in addition to the national Society, only functional component groups were defined in the Bylaws. The Sections could

host several regional meetings during the year. An example would be the MUVE Section hosting a fire ant conference in Texas, an *Aedes aegypti* meeting in Florida, and an Asian longhorned tick symposium in Rhode Island—all in the same year. The other Sections could organize similarly.

#8: What if Branches partner with other groups, including other Branches?

Many states have entomological societies, and some have regional ones. Others have subject-specific groups (e.g., New England Pest Management Association, Caribbean Division of the American Phytopathological Society). Adding focus areas to the Branch Meetings strengthens the marketing potential. More topics equals more potential registrants.

Other collaborations could be arranged with smaller national groups that align with our interests such as the IPM Symposium, the Society of Vector Ecology, or the American Ornithological Society. (How great would it be to have a "The Birds and the Bees" conference?!)

There is evidence to support this idea, as some of the Branches have in the past held joint Branch Meetings. Some of the most financially successful meetings in recent years were when the Branches joined forces with each other and held joint meetings.

#9: What if the Branches don't meet in person every year?

If there is one thing that the pandemic has shown us it is that virtual meetings can be an effective way to convey information. They are certainly less fun; few would argue against that point. But other successful meetings exist that don't occur annually (for example, the International IPM Symposium, which meets every three years and is hosting its 10th meeting in Denver in 2022). One model to consider would be that Branches meet in person in even years but virtually in odd years. To be equitable to the Branch leadership, it may be important to separate the leadership from the hosting of the meeting or find other ways so that all Branch leaders have essentially the same governing experience (see idea #2).

This would also address the environmental concern of annual meetings, at least to a certain extent, as the carbon footprint of the Branches would effectively be halved.

#10: What if ... ?

What if you have the idea? What if there is something you've been considering in your head for a while but never thought to mention? Maybe it's a big, transformative idea. Maybe it's a more modest shift. Either way, we want to hear from you. That's why the 10th idea on this list is for you to pause, consider what you've read, and think about what would make your professional life better on a regional basis. ESA cannot solve every problem in entomology, but the goal of this exercise is to consider what our members' needs are—whether they are in Detroit, Dallas, or Dubai—and try to address them through responsible, professional services and programming.

Please submit your feedback, thoughts, and ideas online at www.entsoc.org/membership/branches/evolution.

Conclusion

Again, every one of these 10 ideas should be considered a piece of thought candy—something you chew on and consider but don't make a meal of. The Governing Board welcomes your input and feedback. Our plan is to spend the coming year discussing this with you and formulating a plan for a financially viable and member-impactful evolution for the Branches.

In 2022 we'll have a couple of Presidential Pop-In meetings on Zoom to hear your thoughts. We'll have listening sessions at each of the Branch Meetings. We'll continue soliciting input through our website, email, and social media. Your input from these efforts will provide substance to fuel our discussion at a Strategic Planning process this summer. We'll then discuss some more via another Presidential Pop-In meeting and at the 2022 Annual Meeting. By the time the 2023 Branch Meetings roll around, we hope to have a draft plan to circulate and discuss via a second round of listening sessions. And, by the end of 2023, we envision we'll have a final plan in mind. This could then result in a Bylaws vote in the summer of 2024 before the full plan is implemented in 2025. That might feel like a long time from now, but any potential change to the fundamental structure of our Society requires a deliberate, inclusive process.

This is your Society. Our success today is built upon the work of previous leaders and members, and tomorrow's success will only become a reality if we make the hard choices required to help our Society evolve and thrive. We ask you to fully engage with us in this discussion, as we all have the same goal in mind: a financially strong, thriving, and engaging regional structure that supports the membership and all who seek to align with the Society.

Please submit your feedback, thoughts, and ideas online at www.entsoc.org/membership/branches/evolution.

