

## **Guidelines for *Vadose Zone Journal* Associate Editors**

Associate Editors have an extremely important function with VZJ, as they are the primary point-of-contact for authors submitting manuscripts. AEs are responsible for monitoring the status of manuscripts during review and revision, ensuring that the journal's standards for scientific uniqueness and quality are met for each manuscript, and for maintaining the professional integrity of the review process. Guidelines available for Associate Editors describe responsibilities, but they do not provide guidelines for how to effectively implement the review process, including identifying and tracking reviewers, and knowing when/how to facilitate reviews. This short note provides suggestions for managing a more effective review, thus avoiding pitfalls that are commonly encountered. The goal is to unify the approaches used by the AE team, and to make the review process more understandable to Editors and authors.

### **Responsibility, Authority, and Timelines**

The Associate Editors at VZJ have been chosen because of their scientific expertise and experience in publishing research. As such, AEs have the responsibility and authority to make decisions, contact authors, and to assist authors in improving manuscripts. In general, here are goals for the Editors as manuscripts are routed from stop to stop:

- Editor assigns co-Editors within 24 hours
- Co-Editors assign Associate Editors with 72 hours
- AEs initiate the search for reviewers within 72 hours, following guidelines shown below
- AEs receive confirmation from all reviewers with 1 week of assignment
- Reviewers complete their reviews within the time period specified (30 days?)
- AEs move the decision within 72 hours of completion of all reviews, either to the authors in terms of revision, or the co-Editor in terms of release or acceptance.
- Co-Editor makes decision within 72 hours of notification of decision by AE.

It is vital that the steps be maintained as closely as possible to avoid lengthy delays in the review. In cases of extended travel or time away from VZJ, AEs should notify the Editor accordingly, so that alternative plans can be made.

### **Determining Manuscript Readiness and Appropriateness**

Manuscripts submitted to VZJ undergo different levels of review before reaching the Associate Editor. SSSA Editors assess whether the manuscript has followed the specified format (line numbers, pdf versus MS Word, etc.), and Editors and co-Editors assess topic relevancy for VZJ. To the extent possible, Editors and co-Editors should also review the manuscript for grammar (i.e., English proficiency). Associate Editors should also review the manuscript for scientific content to identify appropriate reviewers. If anybody in the Editorial chain (Editors, Co-Eds, AEs) feels that the manuscript is not ready for external review, the manuscript should be returned to the authors. VZJ does not want poorly written manuscripts to be sent to reviewers, as this will waste precious time and frustrate the reviewer. AEs should contact the assigning co-Editor with any questions regarding appropriateness of the manuscript, with respect to either formatting or scientific content; AEs have the authority to contact authors (or Editor) to request or require additional preparation before the manuscript is sent for external review. In the case where

manuscripts are outside of VZJ's scientific area, they should be released as soon as possible so the authors can resubmit the manuscript elsewhere. This determination should be done throughout the Editorial team, as soon as possible after the manuscript is submitted.

## Identifying Reviewers

Common practice with many journals, including VZJ, is to receive three reviews for each manuscript. Reviewers can be found in many ways, including:

- the SSSA reviewer database using keywords as search criteria
- within the ManuscriptCentral program, which now taps into the Thomson-Reuters database
- other databases that would point to suitable reviewers (e.g., Web of Science or Google Scholar, again using keywords)
- the AE's own network of colleagues.

Once identified, reviewers can be contacted either through the ManuscriptCentral program, where the reviewer is assigned upfront without first checking on availability, or by contacting the reviewer outside of ManuscriptCentral using email or phone calls (the old fashioned approach!) to see if the reviewer has the time to review the manuscript. Different approaches yield different results—the personal touch can be quite effective.

## Tracking the Review Process

In the case where reviewers are assigned without upfront confirmation of availability, it is vital that AEs check the management software frequently to see if the reviewer:

- has looked at the m/s but hasn't accepted/rejected the assignment;
- has accepted or rejected the assignment;
- has not responded to the request

*A lack of response (yes or no) puts your review timeframe at risk.* Reviewers often do not indicate acceptance until weeks into the review process. If they then decide to reject the review request, or ignore the request altogether, the AE must then find new reviewer(s), delaying the decision point. This is perhaps the most common cause for late decisions. The management software will spawn an email to the reviewer, but reviewers often ignore these emails or are otherwise on travel, in the field, tied up with class, etc. AEs should contact the reviewers about their status and gently nudge them to finish the review. Do not assume the reviewer has automatically added your request to his/her queue.

In the latter case, when AEs contact reviewers outside of the manuscript management software, note that you will likely be contacted by the co-Editor (through an automatic email spawned by the management software) that reviewers haven't been assigned in a timely fashion. In this case, you should let your co-Editor know what is happening, so that they understand the correct status. Once you receive confirmation that reviewers are available, you assign them accordingly and the review clock begins. As above, check the manuscript status frequently enough to ensure progress; reviewers frequently wait until the deadline looms and then finish up manuscripts accordingly. Staying in touch with reviewers will ensure a timely review. Do not assume the reviewer has automatically added your request to his/her work queue. AEs should be responsive to the status of the review and help unstick processes.

Associate Editors can also do the review, but this should be done rarely. Choosing to review a manuscript can be done in two ways:

- To maintain anonymity, AEs can assign themselves as reviewers and then provide feedback on the article as would any other reviewer (e.g., uploading comments or annotated manuscripts to the online system)
- To waive anonymity, AEs can provide their comments, and any other documents, to the authors as part of their decision on the manuscript.

### **Officiating Reviews without Consensus**

SSSA policies state “that no scientific paper may be published in any of their journals, books, or other scholarly publications unless two unbiased professional scientists agree the paper is acceptable. Similarly, no scientific paper submitted for review may be rejected by one of the scholarly publications unless two unbiased professional scientists agree to that rejection.” This means that a third reviewer will often be needed to obtain consensus to either accept or release a manuscript. If a manuscript is short of the typical three reviewers or does not have agreement between two reviewers, for any reason, the AE must identify a third, unbiased reviewer. Only after two reviewers agree on the merits (or not) of the manuscript can the AE decide how the manuscript should proceed (accept, revise or release). AEs should review all comments and the manuscript itself, and then use best judgment on the decision. In any case, AEs should explain the decision, so the authors understand why the decision was made and how the manuscript can be improved so that the research becomes publishable. **We want to help the authors, many of whom are young scientists trying to establish themselves professionally.** The co-Editors should also weigh in accordingly, and assist in the decision making.

### **Handling Resubmitted Manuscripts**

The revision of manuscripts by authors should be completed in approximately 30 days, with AEs providing an additional ~15 days, if needed. For manuscripts recommended for major revisions, which require additional experiments, analyses or conceptual changes, AEs should determine whether to release the manuscript, thus giving the authors the necessary time to organize the changes and to thoroughly revise the manuscript. AEs and co-Editors can and do recommend release of the manuscript and resubmittal of the revision. For these cases, and in absence of the authors’ specific request for a new AE and reviewers, the Editor and co-Editor will try to maintain consistency in the review process by selecting the same AE who handled the earlier version, and the same reviewers (if they are available). In these cases, the revised manuscript and ‘response to comments’ document should be made available to the reviewer. If new reviewers are chosen, the AE should ask the new reviewer if s/he wants the first round of comments and responses, and then provide the appropriate material.

### **Communicating with Authors**

AEs have the responsibility and authority to communicate with authors, providing them with updates and explanations. In these cases, please cc your co-Editor as appropriate, so that they can understand and track the status of the manuscript.