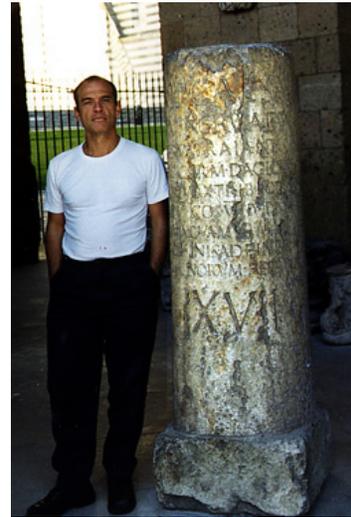


What is a milestone?

By Dave Rust and Mike Strauss

In ancient Rome the Emperor Augustus placed a gilded pillar at the center of the Forum, the Millarium Aureum. This marked the starting point for a system of roads, all of which led to Rome. The roads were marked every mile (mille – Latin for 1,000 – the distance a Roman Legion covered in 1,000 paces) with a stone “millarium” or milestone. The milestones had several purposes. By them travelers knew that they were on a Roman road, had a standardized sense of the distance between two points, and these markers showed them just where in their travels they were in relation to the Eternal City. Reminiscent of that is the Zero Milestone near the White House in Washington, D.C. from which all distances from the Nation’s Capital are to be measured.



A research milestone is the measure that tells you, as a researcher, that your work is progressing. It is not a goal or a research accomplishment (that’s the city the millarium leads to), nor is it a specific action (such as the purchase of a piece of equipment). Rather, it is how you can tell that things are being accomplished. It can be in terms of numbers of samples processed, specific experiments begun or completed, or any other measure you might use to gauge that work is progressing.



Milestones are measures of progress (to the Romans, distance), thus, it may be that you, as a research scientist, do not always estimate them accurately at the outset. Hence, as you arrive at one it may be necessary to revise future milestones to more accurately capture and track your work. Thus, the milestone table of OSQR Research Plans is intended to be dynamic and allows for the adjustment of milestones into the future to meet the realities of research while enabling you, as the researcher to assess your progress. (Having said that, the Agency does not want its scientists casually changing prior project milestones to match what was actually achieved during a given year. That would defeat the purpose of having milestones. Headquarters is working on guidance to help the Research Leaders know when and how to appropriately revise their project milestones.)

So when you construct your research milestones, think in terms of those steps along the path (indicators of progress) rather than the goal at the end of your journey.

(photos © Bill Thayer...that’s him in the photo)