

>> "Please stand by for real-time captions." >> Thank you for joining our call. We will get started in a few minutes as we let other participants join -- connect to the line. >> Thank you for joining our call. We will get started in a few minutes as we let other participants connect to the line. >> Okay, I think we will get started.

Okay, great. Give me a moment to connect the line.

Great. >> Thank you. We are ready to begin. Please hold while I connect the lines. >> Thank you for joining today's NIFA presentation of our centers of excellence stakeholder feedback conference call. At this time our members are in listen only mode. There will be an opportunity to provide feedback at the end of this call. I would now like to introduce Erin Daly, Senior Policy Advisor. >> Good afternoon and welcome to NIFA's stakeholder feedback session. We want to take this opportunity to check in with our stakeholders and the public in general -- to talk a little bit about how we implemented the farm bill provision on centers of excellence, and also to encourage you all to give us your best ideas and your suggestions related to this year's process. I want to thank you for joining us. And to tell you a little bit about the format. What I would like to do is walk through some slides that will be viewable by you on the Adobe connection. You will notice there is a chat area. If you have questions as I am talking, feel free to type those in and we will queue those up and address them at the end of the presentation. So my plan is to give you a little bit of background on the decisions we have made as an agency in terms of implementing the centers. And then I have a few questions towards the end of the presentation to focus our discussion. But again, it's fine if you have some free-form feedback you want to give us. We will have an opportunity for that at the end. And again, there is also the chat box where you can type questions in. If you type questions, than it would be helpful for us if you mark them with your name and an affiliation if you have one, whether it is an institution or organization.

I will get started with the slides now. These are the topics we plan on talking about today. The requirements and the purpose of Centers of Excellence, and some of you may already be familiar with this background material. Which grant programs are offering Center of Excellence opportunities. Both this past fiscal year and also in fiscal year 2016. What our current processes are for identifying centers of excellence. As well as what the current processes are for providing them priority in funding. And at that point, once we have given you enough background to understand the current process -- and the reasoning behind it, we will open it up to your suggestions and any feedback you have for us. So let's get started. >> The center of excellence provision came out of the 2014 Farm Bill. It hasn't been around all that long. It requires that NIFA identify centers of excellence for food and agricultural research, extension and education activities. It's really important that you notice the word is identify centers of excellence rather than establish them. We are charged with recognizing or identifying existing centers of excellence. There is a purpose behind this. That is to provide the centers of excellence with priority consideration when selecting recipients of grants. That is from any of our agency's research or extension grant programs. And that is only on the competitive side. So this is what we really had to work with. I oftentimes

have to focus people back on the origin of the centers of excellence, so they can understand how much flexibility the agency does and does not have related to these. >> The second slide I am showing is one that I have shown before. It contains a list of all of the competitive grant programs offering centers of excellence opportunities either in the past fiscal year or in the coming fiscal year. You will note that they are all competitive. They are a mixed bag, that is -- research, extension, some that are fairly small maybe \$1 million or so at the program level. There are other programs like our AFRI program that are much larger and more diverse. What we were looking for is a diverse group of research and extension programs as a first opportunity for folks to apply for this COE designation. These slides will be made available on the website and this is the list of programs currently offering Centers of excellence opportunities. >> So, what is NIFA's current process for selecting centers of excellence? Remember, the Farm Bill told us to identify these but it did not tell us how. We had several rounds of discussions with the stakeholders, much of which is available on our website, where we talked about the best way to identify a center of excellence. The process we are using right now is built into the grant application process. So, for programs that are offering these opportunities in 2015 and 2016, the request for applications for those programs will describe which types of applications allow for it, and they also give the applicant the criteria. I will talk some more about the criteria for becoming a center of excellence, but remember these are given to the agency by the Farm Bill.

So we decided to use the existing grant process, here we talk about how an applicant asks for consideration. Right now, if an applicant wants to respond to a request for application, and ask to be considered, they have to justify how their proposed research or extension activities meet the criteria. So, it's important that you understand that the current process has us looking only at a particular grant application, and that the determination is based entirely on what the applicant has included in their grant application. The current instructions given to grantees are to include within their project narrative, and again you will see it underlined on this slide, it is subject to the same page limitation that they would normally have, an applicant can choose to write a justification that addresses the center of excellence criteria and again we will talk about those in just a moment. You will see the last bullet emphasizes the center of excellence status is specific to a grant application. >> What are the criteria for being recognized as a center of excellence? Remember, the applicant is writing a justification and that justification is based on the specific activities so those criteria apply to the proposed activities. These are the kinds of things that need to be addressed: the ability to ensure coordination and cost-effectiveness, and I am not going to read you every bullet here, but that is the first one. In addition to matching requirements, the ability of the center to leverage funds. And there is some specific language that Congress gave us about what types of funds should be leveraged. So, these are the first two criteria and I will flip to the next slide where you can see the other two required criteria. One is the planned scope and capability of the center to implement teaching initiatives, extension is specifically mentioned in the third criteria, which I know some folks have focused in on. And the last required criteria is the ability or capacity of a center to increase economic returns to rural communities. So these four have to be addressed by the applicant in their project narrative if they want to be

considered for a center for excellence designation. It is important you understand it's a black or white, yes or no, kind of system. You either meet all four criteria or you don't. I will show you one additional criteria that appeared in the legislation but you will notice this one is not required. Where practicable, centers applicants should describe proposed efforts to improve teaching capacity and infrastructure. There are specific types of institutions mentioned. And again, that came straight from the legislation. You do get credit for that kind of work if you address it in your project narrative. I have gone over the legislative criteria. Again, we might need to come back to the criteria once we start discussing folks' feelings and feedback, but I will move on to talk a little bit about providing priority in funding.

Now remember, NIFA was given this job of identifying centers of excellence. But it was for a purpose. The purpose was to provide those centers with priority in funding. NIFA wrestled with this idea of how to provide priority in funding. We had many conversations with stakeholders about the optimal way to get that done. I will talk about the process we settled on. We will invite your feedback on that process. >> So the first point on this slide, eligible applications are competitively peer reviewed and ranked using a program's standard evaluation criteria. This is important. These points are supposed to be in chronological order. When your application comes in, if you are requesting center of excellence designation, and you are eligible to receive that, you're still going to be competitively reviewed by a peer review and ranked using the standard criteria.

However, where an application is ranked highly meritorious by the peer review group, and a request for consideration as a center of excellence is included, the peer panelists are the ones reviewing that justification to determine yes or no, as to whether the centers criteria we just discussed were met. >> Number three, where centers and non-centers are found equally meritorious, selection for funding is weighted in favor of a center of excellence. We discussed this in the past as being essentially a tiebreaker. If we have two applications, they are found equally meritorious, they are sitting at our funding line -- in other words, we're trying to determine if we have enough money to fund both. If we determine we do not have enough money to fund both, the tie is given or weighs in favor of the applicant who met the center of excellence criteria. I will mention to you, that there are folks who were very dubious as to whether this would really happen, and it has happened, it has already happened this fiscal year. To the extent that this has some value, you should be aware that we do have ties during peer panel, and it has happened that the center of excellence designation has broken a tie in favor of that applicant.

I will move on to the next slide and again these are in chronological order, describing how a center of excellence request is handled. There are a couple of important notes on this slide. If an application is ranked highly meritorious, again that is by the peer panel, but they did not request Centers of Excellence consideration, or they were found not to have met one of the criteria we discussed, it still can be funded. In other words, requesting center of excellence designation is not a requirement for funding, it is an option. The second bullet talks about if an applicant meets the center of

excellence standard, and they are selected for an award, how they would know. Their notice of award would reflect that distinction for that particular grant. >> There is a sub bullet that talks about the length of time you are a center of excellence. Because it's connected to the grant, it will be identified in the terms and conditions, but generally it will be for however long the grant is good, the duration of the award. >> Okay, that actually is all for the prepared remarks. I wanted to give you a little bit of context on what the process currently is, and why we have made some of the decisions we have. I have prepared a couple of suggestions for feedback, but before we launch into these questions I would like to see whether our operator has anyone queued up with a question or feedback -- whether it's related to these particular questions or not.

Thank you. At this time if you would like to provide feedback please press star one on your phone to be placed in the queue. Please state your name and affiliation. First caller go ahead. >> Okay. I think this is me, Jody with Virginia Tech. I have some things I wanted to clarify. One is what criteria is NIFA using to determine which programs will be linked to the COE, and which ones will not be linked to the COE?

I would be happy to address that. The legislative language mentioned our extension and research grant programs. You will note that we have not offered the opportunity in the education program. That was one of the easy decisions to make. We also took a very close look at our research and extension programs, trying to identify the ones where the most value would be gained. For instance, we have some programs where fellowship opportunities or conferences are being offered. We did not think a center of excellence was appropriate in that area, so we have tried to offer across a host of programs. The ones that were taken off the table were either education programs, or they were deemed not to be appropriate for other reasons, such as offering fellowships and conferences. Does that answer the question?

Yes. If I can follow up with a quick additional question. It appears that folks who decide to try for the COE designation have to do so and provide the justification within the page limit of the particular grant. Is there any concern that this will at least potentially work against some of those individuals, because they won't have the ability to elaborate as much on their core vision for the research and extension?

We did hear a lot of those concerns, Jody. That is the type of feedback that I think will help us reconsider some of the decisions that were made. There was a decision that those who were going to address the center of excellence criteria needed to do so within the existing limitations on the narrative. I think there were two things that were used in that decision. The pure length that these applications are getting -- narratives of 18+ pages are frequently coming into the agency as part of larger packages for review. So I think, one, we were trying to fit this into some of the existing peer processes, but I would also add that if you got additional pages to address the center of excellence, there was a concern that perhaps everyone would address the centers of excellence criteria, whether in fact they were a good candidate or not. It would be just one more box to check. So I hear what you are saying and some folks may not want to give up the real estate within the project narrative that could otherwise be used

for something else. I think we left that decision to applicants because otherwise every application could have this additional piece to it, and every peer review panel would be asked to read extended versions of applications.

Thank you.

Sure.

At this time there are no more questions in the queue.

I do see one in the chat box. I will kind of jump around to be interactive. Anita Klein from the New Hampshire Ag Experiment Station is asking if we're talking about applying the COE to competitive or capacity funds. There was language in the original legislation that had the word competitive in it. As an agency, we were somewhat relieved to be looking at that subset of the overall program, so we are only, at this point, talking about offering centers of excellence opportunities on the competitive grant side.

If we do not have any other questions coming in on the phone line, maybe I can just focus the discussion a little bit. I'm getting some feedback on tying the center of excellence designation to an award. If anyone has specific comments related to that piece of our implementation. >> That must mean everybody loves it.

We do have some feedback, caller go ahead.

I apologize, Jody again. I see why you have chosen to do that and that it may contribute to a more workable system, but I am concerned because I have always thought of centers of excellence as being more of a commitment by an institution, and something that would probably continue to be in existence beyond say the 2 to 3 years that many of the individually driven grant proposals are. I would just throw out the use of the term "centers of excellence" is a little different, versus the centers of excellence often having significant institutional backing that are considered to provide a service, not just for an individual professor or group of professors and their projects. But actually to be servicing the institution in a more holistic manner. >> Jody, I appreciate your comment. I can certainly understand how what we are doing differs from what some other agencies are, and I think we have struggled with using this term, "centers of excellence", in part because it is such a loaded term. So many folks are using it in different ways. We appreciate that comment. Does anyone else want to weigh in on the NIFA implementation that ties the centers designation to a particular award?

Feel free to type into the chat box, if that is your preference. >>

A reminder if you want to queue up on the line, press star one on your phone. >> Okay. Hearing no further comments on that topic -- do we have more comments? We do have a comment from Veronica. It's difficult to find the existing centers of excellence on our website. We are just getting to the point in the FY 15 awards

process where we are making the first awards that actually have in them a designation of center of excellence. So that information will be made available, but we're just not far enough down the road yet.

I do have a comment from Sanjaya from West Virginia State. It would be great if NIFA considers to provide some sort of priority to the 1890 universities. I appreciate that comment. One of the things we heard loud and clear in the earlier stakeholder feedback webinars was a concern from mid-size and minority institutions that the way we implement the centers of excellence could impact their ability for funding from larger programs. It could in fact disadvantage them. I am curious if there are further ideas on how NIFA could do that. Remember, we do not have anything in the legislation that would direct us to set aside funds for the 1890s, or any other particular types of institutions. I think we did make an effort to do it in such a way that there would not be damage to midsize or smaller institutions, in terms of how they do in science review.

Okay. I will move on to the second question. If there's any feedback on competitive programs where we did not offer centers of excellence opportunities, or other award types where you notice centers of excellence opportunities are not available that you think could add value, that is something we would like to consider. Again, the FY 16 opportunities will be the same as the ones we offered in FY 15. We're just getting the centers of excellence designation process off the ground. While we try to air on the side of offering a very large and diverse set of programs, if there's something we overlooked that you think would add value, we would really like to hear about that. >> Do we have any comments about particular programs or award types where you think NIFA could have offered centers opportunities, or consider them in the future? >> Okay, that is something I will need you to think about. We are going to continue to allow written stakeholder input on the implementation. When I get to the last slide, which is coming up shortly, you will notice there is an address to send that in. >> Okay, before I start on the next question that I have queued up, I did notice that Sanjaya is talking about the 1890 Centers of Excellence initiative and I want to draw the distinction as to what we are talking about on this call versus the 1890s center of excellence initiative, which I believe is part of the 125th anniversary. That initiative is completely separate from the farm bill requirement to recognize centers of excellence. Again, it is complex that the same terminology is being used in several different areas, but that's an unrelated initiative. >> I have more questions coming in. Okay. One of the questions I see is about the upcoming webinar. I plan on presenting the same slides and information. We intended to give two different dates, to make sure folks got an opportunity to join us on the webinars. So, this first piece will be very repetitive, however if there are institutions who have feedback for us, please encourage them to join us. Again, the end of the call will be left open for stakeholders to tell us what we could do better or differently. Again, the opportunity will be offered again on September 3 at 1:00 PM Eastern Time. >> So, I actually have a total of two more questions I would like to walk us through, in case there is feedback specific to these questions. Number four on my slides: one of the things I think we have wondered as an agency is whether the center of excellence criteria from the legislation that we are using in the

RFAs and during the review process, whether they could be made clearer or we could offer more guidance that could be helpful to applicants related to these criteria. I will back this up so we can look at the criteria again, and I will ask. If you have any feedback about the criteria, this might be a good time to pipe up. >> Okay. These are the criteria that we discussed earlier on this call. Again, I wonder if there's anyone who would like to share any insight related to the criteria. >> One of the areas we have received a lot of questions on is criteria number two. Criteria number two focuses on leveraging resources. So, we've had folks call in and say, "how much do I have to leverage?" And, we have insisted there is no number, there is no bar that we are setting or a benchmark for the leveraging. The peer panel will be considering folks' justification, and it will also consider how large an award the folks are looking to receive. So, we have not specified as part of this criteria a specific amount of resources or funds that have to be leveraged. I know that has been a source of quite a few questions from the applicants.

Do we have any questions on the phone, Daniel?

At this time there are no questions.

Okay. It looks like we have one coming into the chat pod. Victoria Maritza is saying these criteria are an administrative benefits of working for a large established institution. And, that they bias the centers of excellence competition. >> Veronica, I hear what you are saying, and I think that would be directed toward the congressional intent that came to us in the centers of excellence provision. We chose not to use a dollar figure, but I hear what you are saying. Leveraging funds is sometimes easier to do by larger institutions. I think that is something that is embedded in the legislative language that we don't have a choice about.

Okay. I will return us to the last question I have. Then, I will share some contact information with you. Food for thought in case you come up with some feedback you would like to provide outside of the context of this webinar. >> Okay. One of the last things that I talked about as I was going through the prepared material was the fact that the Centers of Excellence distinction can serve as a tiebreaker. I wonder if we have any additional thoughts from those folks who joined us about our use of the center of excellence distinction in that way. So again, if two applications are found equally meritorious, and one requested and received center of excellence designation, ties would be weighed in favor of the application that received the center of excellence distinction. >> Does anybody have anything they want to offer related to that? If you think it's a fabulous idea, we would love to hear that as well.

We do have somebody, caller go ahead. >> Hi, this is Jody. Just a clarification, how does this relate to other aspects that are sometimes considered to give maybe not tiebreaker status, but maybe an advantage to a proposal that is equally meritorious? For example, EPSCOR state status or some other parameters that are considered?

Okay. I'm not the expert on that area but I think I have one in the room. My understanding is, from programs like AFRI, for instance, the applications that qualify for new investigator or EPSCOR consideration, that would happen prior to our trying to apply the center of excellence as a tiebreaker. Dr. Chitnis, are you in agreement with that?

Yes, I think with two projects which are from two new investigators equally meritorious, then the centers of excellence would be used for the tiebreaker.

So it's later in the process. Does that help you?

Yes, to make sure I have this clear, if you have two co-ranked proposals, you will first give priority to new investigators and to proposals from an EPSCOR state. And, only after that prioritization has been done, would you look into which one was or was not a center of excellence.

Because of the requirement in AFRI that we are required to have 15 percent for the FASE grants, that includes the EPSCOR states and some of the strengthening awards and equipment awards. Those are considered separately. Within that group, if they are equally meritorious, then the centers of excellence plays an important role.

And I think that is an important distinction that Dr. Chitnis is drawing for us. The particular example you are giving only relates to the AFRI program. New investigators don't, in all of these programs, have a priority. That happens within AFRI, on certain types of funds. The same would be true of EPSCOR -- EPSCOR is not a distinction that the agency has for every competitive grant program, and it's specific to the AFRI authority. Hopefully, the description of how that works within AFRI makes sense to you.

Thank you.

Sure. And now we have Roxanne Clemmons talking about whether the distinction, the Centers of Excellence distinction, has been used as a tiebreaker yet. It has. I cannot give the details of that example, but that we had a nice discussion internally about the fact that while we knew ties occur in panels, we were not sure how many request for center of excellence designation we would receive. We were not sure whether we would have all of these things aligned for the center of excellence distinction to be used in that way. And it has, in fact, already happened this first fiscal year of implementation.

Okay, more comments from Veronica. The tiebreaker criteria should be a scientific one. Or that the funds should go to a team with less current federal grants in their portfolio. I think what Veronica is getting at is may be similar to what Jody was talking about, that there are within specific competitive grant programs -- there are funds that are available where there's an advantage to folks who have not been as successful at receiving federal grant funding. So AFRI would be an example. The center of

excellence criteria – remember, the criteria are taken directly from the legislation. So we have limited flexibility in how we implement this provision. It's not that we're not listening to you and looking for ways to improve the process, but they would have to be within the original intent. >> Okay. That is all of the questions I had prepared. What I would like to do now is move you to the last slide. I think I've mentioned earlier, but I will reiterate, we are having a second web-based feedback section on September 3 at 1 PM Eastern Time especially for folks that were unable to join us. Please encourage them to join us for that session. The same material will be presented, but it's another opportunity for us to respond to questions. Also, the main goal here at this stage is for us to look at how we have implemented it, with a critical eye, and take your feedback in case there are changes to make in the future. So, again, written comments are invited. I have an address on the screen, [Centers@nifa.usda.gov](mailto:Centers@nifa.usda.gov) and we are setting a deadline of September 30<sup>th</sup> to consider all of the feedback coming in on the email address. We also made a special effort to reach out to our peer panelists to get their feedback on how the process is working. It's fairly early to be able to get everyone's reaction. It is the first opportunity, I think, to have this type of discussion about the decisions we have made and things we might improve on. I will give one last opportunity for anybody who has a burning question or thought to share with us. Either type it into the chat box or queue up to ask a question on the phone. >> Okay, I can see Veronica is asking why we are not allowing extra pages in the center of excellence justification. I think I addressed this. That's not to say you can't differ on opinion with me. In our pilot year, we did not add additional pages primarily because, for one, it increases the burden on the peer panelists and two, we wanted people to weigh the cost and benefit of addressing these additional criteria, giving up real estate in their project narrative to do so. It sounds like Veronica, you think it would've been a better idea for us to add pages for the center of excellence justification. Certainly, that is something we can think about doing in the future.

Okay. Sanjaya is asking us whether matching funds from the state/federal governments is a must for Centers of Excellence. I will take us back because there really is no hidden agenda. I will take us back to the criteria. I will take us back to the exact phase in the RFA and focus on number two. Number two talks about the leveraging of funds and it mentions specific groups. Public, private partnerships among agricultural industry groups, institutions of higher education and the federal government. So the state/federal government, it looks like what we're looking for is public/private partnerships that involve these three groups. That's not to say these are completely exclusive. But when the peer panelist is determining if you met the criteria. They will be looking for a justification that addresses partnerships with industry, partnerships with higher education and partnerships with the federal government. Again, maybe that is helpful. They are looking for those three types of partnerships. I would also say, that leveraging available resources may not be cash match. You can look at that from a number of different perspectives. While I do not want to get ahead of the peer panelists, I would argue that there are probably other ways than cash match to show the partnerships.

Okay. You are quite welcome Sanjaya. We are coming up on 1:45 PM. I think this has been a really productive discussion. I don't see any new questions. Do we have new questions on the phone line?

Not at this time there are no more questions. >> Okay, I will leave you with the last slide showing here. Again, I invite participation on September 3, and also written comments that can be sent to [centers@nifa.usda.gov](mailto:centers@nifa.usda.gov) before September 30th. Thank you so much for your time. This has been a very helpful discussion for me. >> Thank you to the speakers and you and the audience for joining us today. The call has concluded and you may disconnect. >>