United States Department of Agriculture

Research, Education, and Economics

National Institute of Food and Agriculture

1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

GUIDELINES FOR REVIEWING FY 2015 AGRICULTURE AND FOOD RESEARCH INITATIVE APPLICATIONS

Program Information: Learn more about available or anticipated National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) competitive grant programs at http://nifa.usda.gov. Select "Grants" from the upper navigation bar to find links to full announcements of various programs, including the current Agriculture and Food (AFRI) Request for Applications (RFA).

Conflict of Interest: You must disqualify yourself as a reviewer of an application if you have had one of the following relationships with the Project Director (PD) or other key personnel listed in the application: (1) have ever been a thesis or postdoctoral advisee/advisor; (2) have been a co-author on a publication within the past 3 years, including pending publications and submissions; (3) have been a collaborator on a project within the past 3 years, including current and planned collaborations; (4) for someone in your field, have had a consulting/financial arrangement or other conflict-of-interest in the past 3 years, including receiving compensation of any type (*e.g.*, money, goods, or services); (5) are from the same institution, had previous employment with the institution within the past 12 months, or are being considered for employment at the institution; and (6) have a known family relationship such as a spouse, child, sibling, or parent, or other relationship, such as a close personal friendship, that you think might tend to affect your judgment or be seen as doing so by a reasonable person familiar with the relationship. If you encounter a situation about which you are uncertain, please bring it to the attention of the NIFA National Program Leader for a decision.

Confidentiality: The U.S. Department of Agriculture receives applications in confidence and is responsible for protecting the confidentiality of their submission and contents. For this reason, confidentiality must be maintained; therefore, DO NOT copy, quote, or otherwise use material from this application. If you believe that a colleague can make a substantial contribution to the review, consult with the NIFA National Program Leader before disclosing either the contents of the application or the applicant's name. When you complete the review, please destroy all printed and electronic materials related to the application and maintain its confidentiality. If you are unable to review, please contact the respective NIFA National Program Leader, destroy all printed and electronic materials related to the application, and maintain its confidentiality.

Application Page Limit: For Standard Research, Standard Education, Standard Extension, Standard Integrated, Coordinated Agricultural Project (CAP), Planning/Coordination, Conference, New Investigator, and Strengthening Standard and Strengthening CAP Grant applications, the Project Narrative section may not exceed a total of 18 pages with 12-point font and line spacing not exceeding six lines of text per vertical inch. For Sabbatical, Equipment, and Seed Grant applications, the Project Narrative section may not exceed a total of 7 pages with 12-point font and line spacing not exceeding six lines of text per vertical inch. For applications to the Exploratory program within the Foundational Program RFA, the Project Narrative section may not exceed a total of 7 pages with 12-point font and line spacing not exceeding six lines of text per vertical inch. These page limitations apply regardless of whether figures or tables are included. Additions to the Project Narrative (appendices) are allowed if they are directly germane to the proposed research and are strictly limited to a total of two preprints. Reviewers are advised that, should these limits be exceeded, only text within the requirements need be read.

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Evaluation Criteria: Your review comments will be a critical component of the panel's evaluation and ranking of the application(s). The review panel will consider the details of all comments received for each application. All reviews must be submitted electronically through the Peer Review System (PRS), which can be accessed through the following web site: https://prs.nifa.usda.gov. More information related to review submission via PRS is provided in an email sent to you by the National Program Leader. The evaluation criteria are listed beginning on the next page for various types of applications.

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Evaluation Criteria

Projects supported under this program shall be designed, among other things, to accomplish one or more of the purposes of agriculture research, education, and extension, subject to the varying conditions and needs of States. Therefore, in carrying out its review, the peer review panel will take into account the following factors.

1. **Research Project Applications**
   These evaluation criteria will be used for the review of all single-function Research Project applications.

   a. Scientific Merit of the Application for Research
   1) Novelty, innovation, uniqueness, and originality;
   2) Where model systems are used, ability to transfer knowledge gained from these systems to organisms of importance to U.S. agriculture;
   3) Conceptual adequacy of the research and suitability of the hypothesis, as applicable;
   4) Clarity and delineation of objectives;
   5) Adequacy of the description of the undertaking and suitability and feasibility of methodology;
   6) Demonstration of feasibility through preliminary data; and
   7) Probability of success of the project is appropriate given the level of scientific originality, and risk-reward balance.

   b. Qualifications of Project Personnel, Adequacy of Facilities, and Project Management
   1) Qualifications of applicant (individual or team) to conduct the proposed project, including performance record and potential for future accomplishments;
   2) Demonstrated awareness of previous and alternative approaches to the problem identified in the application;
   3) Institutional experience and competence in subject area;
   4) Adequacy of available or obtainable support personnel, facilities, and instrumentation; and
   5) Planning and administration of the proposed project, including: time allocated for systematic attainment of objectives; and planned administration of the proposed project and its maintenance, partnerships, collaborative efforts, and the planned dissemination of information for multi-institutional projects over the duration of the project.

   c. Project Relevance
   1) Documentation that the research is directed toward specific Program Area Priority identified in this RFA and is designed to accelerate progress toward the productivity and economic, environmental, and social sustainability of

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U.S. agriculture with respect to natural resources and the environment, human health and well-being, and communities.

2. **Integrated Project Applications**
   These evaluation criteria will be used for the review of all multi-function Integrated Project applications.

   a. Merit of the Application for Science Research, Education, and/or Extension
   1) Project objectives and outcomes are clearly described, adequate, and appropriate. All project components (i.e., research, education, extension) – at least two are required – are reflected in one or more project objectives;
   2) Proposed approach, procedures, or methodologies are innovative, original, clearly described, suitable, and feasible;
   3) Expected results or outcomes are clearly stated, measurable, and achievable within the allotted time frame;
   4) Proposed research fills knowledge gaps that are critical to the development of practices and programs to address the stated problem or issue;
   5) Proposed extension leads to measurable, documented changes in learning, actions, or conditions in an identified audience or stakeholder group; and
   6) Proposed education (teaching) has an impact upon and advances the quality of food and agricultural sciences by strengthening institutional capacities and curricula to meet clearly delineated needs and train the next generation of scientists and educators.

   b. Qualifications of Project Personnel, Adequacy of Facilities, and Project Management
   1) Roles of key personnel are clearly defined;
   2) Key personnel have sufficient expertise to complete the proposed project, and where appropriate, partnerships with other disciplines (e.g., social science or economics) and institutions are established;
   3) Evidence of institutional capacity and competence in the proposed area of work is provided;
   4) Support personnel, facilities, and instrumentation are sufficient;
   5) A clear plan is articulated for project management, including time allocated for attainment of objectives and delivery of products, maintenance of partnerships and collaborations, and a strategy to enhance communication, data sharing, and reporting among members of the project team; and
   6) The budget clearly allocates sufficient resources to carry out a set of research, education (teaching), and/or extension activities that will lead to desired outcomes, with no more than two-thirds of the budget focused on a single project component. Supporting funds for Community of Practice core functions and project-specific activities are included for partnerships with eXtension.

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c. **Project Relevance**
   1) Documentation that the project is directed toward specific Program Area Priority identified in this RFA and is designed to accelerate progress toward the productivity and economic, environmental, and social sustainability of U.S. agriculture with respect to natural resources and the environment, human health and well-being, and communities;
   2) Project components (research, education, and/or extension) – at least two are required – are fully integrated and necessary to address the problem or issue;
   3) The proposed work addresses identified stakeholder needs;
   4) Stakeholder involvement in project development, implementation, and evaluation is demonstrated, where appropriate;
   5) Plan and methods for evaluating success of project activities and documenting potential impact against measurable short and mid-term outcomes are suitable and feasible;
   6) For extension or education (teaching) activities, curricula and related products will sustain education or extension functions beyond the life of the project; and
   7) For extension or education (teaching) activities, the resulting curricula or products share information and recommendations based on knowledge and conclusions from a broad range of research initiatives.

3. **Conference Grant Applications**
   a. Relevance of the proposed conference to agriculture and food systems in the U.S. and appropriateness of the conference in fostering scientific exchange;
   b. Qualifications of the organizing committee and appropriateness of invited speakers to topic areas being covered; and
   c. Uniqueness, timeliness of the conference, and appropriateness of budget requests.

4. **New Investigator and Strengthening Standard Grant Applications**
   Refer to the review criteria listed above for the applicable Project Type (Research or Integrated) to which the applicant is applying.

5. **Sabbatical Grant, Equipment Grant, and Seed Grant Applications**
   a. The merit of the proposed activities or equipment as a means of enhancing the capabilities and competitiveness of the applicant and/or institution;
   b. The applicant's previous experience and background along with the appropriateness of the proposed activities or equipment for the goals proposed; and
   c. Relevance of the project to long-range improvements in and sustainability of U.S. agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and rural communities.

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