

NIFA - FAQs for Distributed Peer Review (DPR)

What RFA will include the DPR pilot?

A: The distributed peer review pilot will be used for three program area priorities within the Foundational RFA of AFRI.

When will this RFA be released?

A: Information regarding this RFA can be found at <https://nifa.usda.gov/afri-request-applications>.

Why is NIFA piloting Distributed peer review?

A: Due to an increasing number of grant applications, the current panel-review system is strained (including the reviewer community). Therefore, we are exploring a new peer-review mechanism (distributed peer review) that can introduce some valuable efficiencies. The National Science Foundation successfully conducted a similar pilot study in 2014, in which NIFA staff participated. The DPR approach aims to:

- Minimize the time between RFA closing and applicant feedback
- Place the burden of peer review proportionally on those, who burden the review system
- Incentivize unbiased and timely reviews that strive for consensus
- Increase applicant feedback
- Reduce costs, facility resources, and staff time

Following the current NIFA pilot, we will summarize findings (including feedback) and formulate recommendations about when and how distributed peer review might be used for appropriate grant programs.

What is a distributed peer review?

A: Distributed peer review (DPR) relies on independent, written reviews wherein the pool of applicants is also the reviewer pool. Each applicant receives a small, randomly assigned subset of the applications to review, which takes into account any potential conflicts of interest. In addition to written comments for each application, each reviewer also provides an ordinal ranking for the set of applications assigned to him or her. The various individual rankings are mathematically combined into a global ranking. An incentive is provided reviewers to encourage consensus rankings that are fair and objective, but the incentive does not subvert, or interfere with, the scientific-merit basis of peer review. Just like with results from a peer-panel review, the DPR final global ranking forms the basis for NIFA to make funding recommendations.

How will DPR maintain confidentiality?

A: As with any of the several peer-review processes used by NIFA, confidentiality in DPR relies on the combination of NIFA policy, procedures, and guidance and on the integrity of the reviewers. NIFA will exercise due diligence to convey the importance of confidentiality to DPR applicants/reviewers. In our experience, reviewers take confidentiality seriously because they value the peer-review process. Finally, in DPR only seven reviewers have access to someone's application (about half the number of a typical panel review), so the opportunities for confidentiality breaches are significantly reduced.

How will DPR avoid conflicts of interest?

A: The conflicts of interest (COIs) of common concern are personal, professional, or institutional associations that might potentially create bias or limit impartiality. Just like with a panel-review process, the DPR process will identify and account for these COIs during the random assignment of applications to reviewers.

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Can an applicant “game the system” to elevate their own application in the global ranking?

A: No, applicants cannot directly influence the outcome of their own applications. Any *indirect* influence that an applicant could have is mitigated by the incentive bonus (see the DPR description), the contributions of the other six reviewers of each application, and the relatively small subset of applications reviewed by each applicant. Finally, just as with a traditional panel review process, there is an implied code of professional conduct to advance the broader goals of the science community.

Will DPR increase the time for review?

A: No. Because DPR doesn't depend on people and facilities scheduling, NIFA expects that DPR can result in funding recommendations in much less than half the average time for panel review, so about two months. We feel that this is a significant advantage to DPR and one that is responsive to the applicant community's desire for timely feedback.

What type of feedback will be obtained by applicants?

A: In the case where each applicant reviews seven other proposals in their group, each applicant will also receive seven reviews of their proposal. This results in much greater feedback than other forms of peer review (typically 3-4 reviews). Because no panel is convened in DPR, there will be no panel summary provided as feedback.

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