

CHARGE: REVIEW OF THE AGRICULTURE AND FOOD RESEARCH INITIATIVE (AFRI)

To: Robin Schoen, Director - Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources, The National Academies (National Research Council)

From: Bart Hewitt, Director – Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff, NIFA

Subject: Request for Application for AFRI Review

Attached is the Request for Application for the Review of the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) by The National Academies, National Research Council, Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources (NRC-BANR).

The charge to the NRC-BANR for the assessment is to examine:

1. The relevance, quality and performance of AFRI.
2. The NIFA funding mechanisms
3. The process of setting annual funding priorities, including the shift to the five NIFA Challenge areas.
4. The balance of Challenge Area program grants vs. Foundational program grants.
5. The scale of the grants. Are AFRI's funding of larger grants the appropriate scale? Compare AFRI's larger scale grants to the former National Research Initiative (NRI) approach of funding smaller scale grants, in terms of their effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes.
6. Indications of whether AFRI is achieving its stated goals and outcomes.
7. Measures of the effectiveness and efficiency of AFRI's operation: From RFA development to Award.
8. The diversity of grant recipients and the techniques NIFA uses to ensure diversity.
9. An assessment of the different panel processes that occur at NIFA depending on the need. This is especially important due to the new travel restrictions we are mandated with because of budget constraints. Some of our panels have been and may be virtual panels as well as face-to-face panels. So NIFA is really interested in the NRC perspective on the effectiveness of the different panel processes that occur.
10. The relationship between effectiveness and length of Grants. Currently, grants are awarded from 1 to 5 years.
11. AFRI's role in advancing science in relation to other research and grant programs inside of USDA as well as how complementary it is to other federal R&D programs, such as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Energy.

Some important questions to consider include:

1. Is funding appropriated to AFRI competitive grants commensurate with the needs?
2. How well does AFRI competitive grants program complement the non-competitive, capacity and formula programs?
3. How does AFRI perform in facilitating integration of research, Extension, and education programs?
4. How does AFRI support food production efforts?
5. Does AFRI have a sustainable and representative balance between fundamental and applied investments?

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6. How are the programs affecting fundamental knowledge and helping provide the foundation for translational research?
7. What measurable impacts are there on addressing these challenges?
8. What can be learned from examining EPSCoR/AREA/Strengthening programs?
9. How well is AFRI doing in ensuring/helping minority serving, non-land grants, and private institutions participate in the receiving AFRI grants?
10. What is AFRI's track record in creating the pipeline, i.e., pre- and postdoctoral programs; how we are doing in support of STEM endeavors for our nation;
11. How is AFRI doing in terms of leveraging resources—monetary and intellectual from federal agencies, i.e., the reimbursable portfolio? What suggestions might there be to increase such collaborative efforts?
12. How is AFRI performing in bringing the private sector in, i.e., leveraging monetary and intellectual resources?
13. Is the overhead rate – currently at 30 percent commensurate and acceptable or does it create a constraint to bringing in the larger community of institutions to compete for AFRI grants?