

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program

National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Stakeholder Input Received in 2013 and 2014

The following is a summary of stakeholder input received by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program on or before July 3, 2014, in response to a widely-circulated invitation to provide input to inform the 2015 cycle of grants. Input was invited in person at the June 24, 2014, meeting of the USDA Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers, by email to bfrdp@nifa.usda.gov or to program leaders, and via a stakeholder conference call held on June 26, 2014. Also included in the summary are stakeholder comments that were received between the 2012 and 2014 RFAs and which appear to be relevant to the 2015 RFA.

The summary that follows retains the wording of the original stakeholders, but it has been edited to reduce overall length, group the input by topics, and remove personal information.

Timing:

RFA out in October would be good timing.

Writing (and reviewing) when the days are already full of chores on the farm are a killer! I think this process would fit perfectly in the dead of winter, so that grantees can hit the ground running in Spring.

Plan the release of future Requests for Applications to coordinate with the end of the busy growing season either in the late fall or early winter.: releasing the RFA in the late fall or early winter, allowing a 60 day minimum application period, coordinating the peer review panel for late winter or early spring, and obligating the funding by the end of each Fiscal Year or earlier.

Program Requirements:

Coming up with the match is a big challenge; match requirement should be reduced for organizations working with the under-served.

Discontinue the portion of funding that provides hotel accommodations and transportation for attendees.

What I would like to see is for those states such as [my state] with no solid nonprofit not be penalized for not being able to work with nonprofits. If we had one or any in [my state] believe me, we with Extension would be so willing to have others help share the load in education beginning farmers. I would like to ask that there be some verbiage in next year's call for states such as [my state] with very few nonprofits working in this area. I wouldn't mind providing some sort of "proof" or justification for [my state] showing the few nonprofits we do have.

Expand the Outcome Based Reporting criteria to encompass the broad range of actual outcomes for all program priorities listed in the RFA.

Increased consistency in the RFAs has continued to provide for a more clear and effective delivery and focus of the program. In general terms, we urge NIFA to use the 2012 BFRDP Request for Applications (RFA) as the starting point for future RFA's.

Ensure the PRIORITY in grant making continues to be recognized and emphasized ... important to note that the PRIORITY is directed to those “nongovernmental, community-based organizations and school-based agricultural educational organizations with expertise in new agricultural producer training and outreach.”

While only required to obligate at a minimum 5 percent of total program funds for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers/limited resource farmers and ranchers and farm workers desiring to become farmers and ranchers, we urge that the focus exceeds the prescribed level so it more closely reflects past RFA results; or is at least, in aggregate with the veteran set-aside, closer to 25 percent of yearly funds ... To legitimately be assisting those populations and eligible for either of the 5 percent funding pools, applicants should be required to verify that at least 75 percent of the project’s work is deliberately focused on those population(s).

Communicate with applicants and review panel members so they give a fair assessment of both established approaches (which typically have a notable track record) and new methods for supporting beginning farmers and ranchers. Oftentimes competitive grant programs trend towards funding the newest and sometimes unproven tactics to the relevant subject matter. While BFRDP should support those new and innovative tactics, it should not supersede the demand from existing projects which might have a multi-year track record and are seeking to grow and maintain efforts.

When incorporating “school-based agricultural educational organizations” into future BFRDP RFA’s: focus on moving persons into farming or ranching, not preparing middle or high schoolers to pursue ag-related careers besides farming; refrain from supporting general undergraduate courses or graduate courses at universities and colleges as well as any secondary classes or course work (instead, fund new farmer training at technical schools and colleges).

Use the Standard BFRDP Projects grant category as the central means to award projects:

- Maintain the statutory maximum annual award amount of \$250,000 per year and \$750,000 over three years.
- Prioritize multi-year grants to allow groups to focus on producing measurable results and accomplishing longer-term objectives.
- Continue the current distribution of grants across the range of funding which groups have been awarded. This typically has been between \$200,000 and \$750,000.
- Reinforce the program’s current orientation that awards the majority of grants and funding to community-based organizations or nongovernmental organizations.

Continue the practice of awarding a selection of Development Grants to organizations that have not previously been successful in obtaining competitive Standard grants.

Educational Enhancement Team Projects grant category should be discontinued; instead rely on Clearinghouse.

Apply the 10% limitation on indirect costs to all awards (not just standard grants) and allow applicants to forgo the requirement to establish an indirect cost rate (just use 10%) to save applicants and NIFA time and effort.

For Renewal Applications, accept renewals that may span more than a year between the final year of funding and when an applicant reapplies.

Application Process:

Verify letters of support.

My main frustration with the program is the way it works through grants.gov. ... Given the work taken to do these proposals, it would be very helpful to have a system where the applicant could ensure that things came across correctly. USDA SARE, RMA - all have online systems for proposals - but have means within those systems to review what will be submitted, and then confirm that it has been submitted.

Application instructions should be condensed in a single location and clarified.

Templates for the final application should be provided.

Required application materials should be shortened and simplified.

Establish review panels that include a strong representation from family farm and sustainable agriculture, including but not limited to:

- non-profit community-based organizations serving beginning farmers;
- beginning, existing, and socially disadvantaged and veteran farmers and ranchers;
- representatives familiar with organic farming, farming for local and regional agriculture markets, and producers growing for new and expanding niche markets;
- educators with experience providing direct training and technical assistance services to new farmers;
- representatives engaged in sustainable agriculture work that are familiar with credit, marketing, conservation, food safety, risk management, farm safety, and other similar issues; and representatives engaged and familiar with serving immigrant and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Audiences:

Include urban farmers.

Include training of young people from the tropical islands of the Pacific into entrepreneurial activities in Agriculture. If the grant call for proposal is written in such a way that the island territory situations are recognized that would help.

There should be limited funding for 'hobby' farming, where the production activity may result in a sideline income but does not significantly address food access or production issues.

Capacity building in areas where there is a positive potential correlation between an available workforce and available land for production agriculture.

A concentration of funding on geographies where local food production can positively impact nutrition issues, through an increased availability of healthier foods in the market, and with community engagement with food production with correlated health and fitness interventions.

Maintain priority and historical percentage of funding to projects that serve socially disadvantaged, limited resource, and immigrant farmers and farmworkers.

Topics:

RE: veterans, include a component to help the grantees understand military culture and transition, including understanding and addressing mental issues.

Any and all funding through this program should REQUIRE Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) training for all those who receive federal assistance under Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program.

Make sure that you include training on pesticides, pesticide safety and pesticide risks and benefits to all types of growers, including organic.

Renew emphasis on financial training for new and beginning farmers and ranchers.

All BFRDP grantees should be required to incorporate business and financial literacy programming into their beginning farmer training programs.

Collaborations to address barriers in farm and ranch transitions—skills of new producers in production and management, transition plans for retirees, including some financial partners to allow for a retirement income for current owners while ‘bridging’ the capital access gap to credit for younger buyers.

Addressing the necessities of beginning farmers and ranchers needs to continue to include safety awareness and training. “Safety” by itself can be a reasonable draw, but experience shows integrating safety training with other topics of interest such as equipment maintenance and equipment selection and sizing both increases the audience number and incorporates safety themes into these other activities. Experience also confirms that the beginning producer audience requires a hands-on training approach.

We recommended applications that address a range of priority topics or subtopics should be found more meritorious than those applications only addressing one topic, given they can demonstrate expertise in the subject matter and provided that they measure/track results.

[The new topic of] farm financial benchmarking... is more research orientated and by itself would not be sufficient for awarding unless coupled with other priority topics or subtopics and unless accomplished as part of a working partnership or collaboration with on the ground training programs.

Consider under “other topics” category:

- Asset-based farming opportunity strategies such as beginning farmer and rancher individual development accounts and micro loans;
- Identifying and using available federal and state program resources to create more sustainable farm enterprises;

- Food safety requirements and protocols;
- Understanding the impact of concentration and globalization that minimizes farming opportunities; and,
- Organic and sustainable agriculture practices

Approaches:

One-Stop-Shop workshop and training centers for socially disadvantaged small farmers and ranchers in rural communities. This include the application process from start to finish.

Consider sub-contracting socially disadvantaged community based organizations to enter into partnerships to reach goals and objectives set out by the USDA.

Consider assisting socially disadvantaged community based organization(s) to participate in the "Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Individual Development Account (BFRIDA) Pilot Program in the State of Texas and other parts of the country.

Provide assistance for non-profit community based socially disadvantaged organizations to become a "Standard Eligible Lender" with FSA.

Please organize and fund a Pacific Basin region wide project /conference/training: Galvanizing Family Farms through Development of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Skills.

-Scholarships/stipends for young individuals to live/work on a farm with a farmer - Let the individual gain experience at their convenience (many can't quit jobs, drop everything, and go work for free on a farm) OR - Provide living wage/stipend to the individual so farmer doesn't have to pay them, and the individual can pay for living expenses if they are on the farm full time

-Farm transition program: - Farmer trains individual how to operate farm, or part of farm, with the intention of letting them take it over/lease it (or part of it) so they can retire, still own land if they want, and keep the land in agricultural production

-Funds to attend workshops, conferences, and to complete certifications (compost operator, home processing, etc.)

-Funds for a beginning farmer to partner with a current farmer on starting a new enterprise, which they can eventually run themselves (decreases risk since experienced farmer will help them, but they still get help starting their own operation/enterprise)

I am a small sustainable farmer in WV who currently runs an apprentice program to help educate young farmers. In looking at the eligibility requirements for your program, however, it looks like individual farms cannot apply. I disagree with this because one of the best ways that newer farmers can gain expertise and the desire to go ahead with their own farms is to complete an apprenticeship program.

Assist potential on-farm mentors in planning a high-quality and legal apprenticeships.

Yesterday there were quite a few comments that there needs to be more resource sharing, communication, and networking between projects. I think that it would be good for BFRDP to foster a greater culture of organizations actually setting aside funding in their budgets for this purpose.

Train a group of liaisons to help small farmers or emerging farmers have one person they can go to that is familiar with grants and look at the [beginning/aspiring farmer's] business model and needs, and advise on relevant programs.

Programs that address different groups (women, youth, veterans, Hispanic, African-American) may group some together but address veterans separately. Some people are new to agriculture and need basic production, GAP/GHP, marketing, risk management, federal programs for loans, conservation, rural development. May have to back up training with strong technical assistance, link them into physical market space, help getting resources under the various federal programs.

Other:

Include better on the ground "outreach" efforts made to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers by NIFA and other agriculture agencies.

There are many programs out there for new/beginning farmers that require the applicant to have already had experience in farming. Some new/beginning farmer loans even require historical farm data.

-Certification of sort that qualifies the individual for access to USDA funds/programs to start their own operation

-Allow for experience in the industry other than actually running a farm to qualify an individual for funds, grants, loans

Assist with 'true' market surveys of opportunities in food production. Too much rhetoric is involved with the current conversation on food; with terms such as 'organic' and 'more nutritious' confusing the realities of food use and food production.

Seems to me, and yes we have tried for several years to get funds to help, but never happens. Seems like all this money goes to these supposed companies and never goes any further.

Please stop subsidizing [Company]'s poisonous food-like substances and help organic farmers. They are the future of the planet and they really care about the people and the world. All the climate problems, like: bees dying, ice melting, fish dying, hurricanes, floods, etc. will be resolved.