

FY 2019 Sustainable Agricultural Systems

May 2019 Webinar Question and Answer Session Transcript

Note: Questions and answers below have been edited for clarity and accuracy. The FY 2019 Sustainable Agricultural Systems Request for Applications and the NIFA Grants.gov Application Guide supersede any answers contain in this document.

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I'm asking about evaluation and your expectations for evaluation for this project.

Yes, the evaluation component is a requirement for the project. The Management Plan section of the RFA provides some guidelines for the external evaluator. The external evaluator required for the AFRI SAS program refers to an evaluator who is external to the membership of the team listed on the proposal. Someone who is listed as a co-PD or investigator on the grant is not appropriate to serve as the external evaluator of the project. The external evaluator should have no role in the project, other than as the external evaluator. The external evaluator can be employed by a university participating in the proposal. The evaluation should measure progress towards the program goals and objectives, and provide feedback to further develop the project.

And is the PI responsible for submitting the annual evaluation report?

Yes, the PI (Principal Investigator) or PD (Project Director) is responsible for submitting the annual evaluation report.

I want to know if government agencies can apply for this program.

No, only colleges and universities are eligible to apply, but federal agencies or federal labs can be a partner on the project.

Would a DoD Sentinel site be a great example for a holistic approach to SAS?

Projects with holistic systems approach are fit to the program. Please note that the DoD cannot submit a proposal as the lead applicant, since they are not eligible. What we would recommend is that you send your project description for your intended project to afri-sas@nifa.usda.gov and we can discuss the fit to program that way.

Is aquaculture a SAS eligible subject?

Aquaculture is absolutely an appropriate basis for a system to explore under the SAS program.

When will proposals for projects funded in the last cycle be available for review?

We're currently working on the award process. You will be able to see that summaries when the awards have been made in the next couple of months.

How do I get a copy of the slide presentation?

The webinar recording is available on the AFRI SAS program webpages. You can always email us to afri-sas@info.usda.gov and we can provide you a copy of the slides.

Can you give an example of what you mean by a high degree of engagement for integration for integrating extension and education component?

Non-competitive proposals treat extension as an add-on to a project where they simply deliver research findings to extension. What we really want to see is that research, extension, and education are integrated from the beginning. Extension should be part of the problem definition of how to carry out the research program and think about the end user from the beginning. It makes for a strong project when all these components are working together simultaneously and not in only a linear fashion.

Are projects on industrial hemp eligible for the AFRI SAS program?

Yes. The 2018 Farm bill lifted some of the restrictions on industrial hemp research, however at this moment we are still waiting for guidelines from USDA and therefore we are operating under the 2014 Farm bill. If you are in a state that is one of those with a pilot program, you will be eligible to submit under this program.

How are minority serving and small to mid-sized University considered to be not among more successful?

The minority serving institution and small to mid-sized institution are based upon the Department of Education rules. If you're looking at determining whether you are amongst the most successful then there is a link right in the RFA to those universities.

Should resubmissions include response to review in the letter of intent?

No, response to review should not be included in the Letter of intent for resubmissions.

For resubmissions, can one assume that they will be encouraged to submit a full proposal after they submit their Letter of Intent?

No. Your letter of intent will be evaluated for fit to program and the response will either be encouraged to submit a full proposal or discouraged from submitting a full proposal. There are revised priorities for the program for fiscal year 2019 and if your proposal and your general concept and experimental plan still all fit the priorities for this year then it would be a resubmission. If there is a significant mismatch between what you proposed last year and the revised priorities for this year's program then your proposal might not be considered a resubmission, as you would need to submit a new concept and project. We suggest that if you have a question regarding whether your proposal from last year is a resubmission or new proposal that you submit questions to AFRI-sas@nifa.usda.gov.

We would note that even though we are not asking you to respond to previous review in your letter of intent you can still mention that the team submitted a full proposal last year without getting into the details of responding to previous review.

Do international partners need to contribute their own funding?

No, that is not a requirement. International partners can receive a subaward from the AFRI SAS project funding. For additional information, please see the [AFRI page on international partnerships](#).

Where can we find the summary information of funded projects from the 2018 SAS program?

These summaries will be available on the AFRI SAS program page and in the USDA CRIS system once the awards have been made.

Can international partners receive a subcontract?

That is allowable. Please note that projects must clearly benefit U.S. agriculture. For additional information, please see the [AFRI page on international partnerships](#).

What is the requirement to matching funds if you're working with a commodity that is not national in scope?

If a project is commodity-specific and not of national scope, the grant recipient is required to match the USDA funds awarded on a dollar-for-dollar basis from non-federal sources with cash and/or in-kind contributions. NIFA may waive the matching funds requirement based on

submitted document if: a.) The results of the project, while of particular benefit to a specific agricultural commodity, are likely to be applicable to agricultural commodities generally; or b.) The project involves a minor commodity,

Does having matching funds improve your chances for success?

No, it doesn't improve your odds of success. Proposal review is based on scientific merits and other review criteria listed in the RFA.

Of the three goals, the RFA states that projects could address one goal or more than one goal. Should projects address more than one goal? If they address more than one goal, is there an expected proportion of the projects dedicated to each goal?

For each goal there are certain requirements that need to be addressed by the project as stated in the RFA. There is no requirement that projects must address more than one goal but a project can address more than one goal if they choose. There is no requirement for the proportion of a project dedicated to a specific goal. It is important to ensure that the components of the proposal are well integrated.

Does the AFRI SAS program encourage multi-university projects?

We encourage teams to have the necessary expertise to complete the goals and objectives of the project. The number of team members and universities involved depends on the scope of the issue that you are trying to address and where you have the appropriate expertise to carry out the proposed work.

Does a proposal allow for infrastructure, such as a building, to be built?

No, according to 2 CFR 200 that is an unallowable expense.

What are some major mistakes people made in their proposals last year that might be prevented this year?

One key mistake was not defining the problem in a systems approach. Projects that were narrow in their scope, and perspective was not a clear fit to the program. Another key item to remember is integration of all three components: research, extension, and education. Some LOIs/projects were missing one of those three components. In some cases, there was also a confusion between what education was and what extension was. For example, counting educating farmers on new practices as education, when it is extension. Education should have a focus on curriculum development and activities, and should be beneficial to students education within a formal setting.

What was the funding rate from last year?

12 percent.

How did the new Farm Bill change the Indirect Cost Rate?

The Indirect Cost Rate limit for this program is 30% of the total federal award. The lead institution will need to negotiate with the subawardees to ensure that the total indirect cost rate for the projects does not exceed 30% of the total federal award.

If the maximum you can request is \$10 M, is there an ideal appropriate budget?

An appropriate budget is the correct amount of funding needed to get the job done. Projects are not required to be \$10M. I think one of the questions of the proposals from last year's panel was a concern for padding the budget to make it to \$10M.

Can a non-profit foundation be a lead on a proposal submitted to the AFRI SAS program?

No. Non-profits are not eligible to be a lead, but can be a subawardee on a proposal submitted by an eligible institution.

What is the expectation of early and exit technology readiness level and expectation regarding industry involvement?

Industry is not required to be involved on these proposals. You can choose to include an industry partner if it is going to strengthen your project. As we do not require an industry partner, we do not have any expectations of the technical readiness level. We remind everyone that the goal of this program is to have research, education and extension that advance the goals as stated in the RFA, opposed to funding commercialization. We have a USDA small business innovation research program that focuses on commercialization.

Can a university partner with U.S federal agency or national lab?

Yes.

Should applicants include supply chains and markets, can you give examples of what you mean by these?

The market is the coincidence of suppliers and demands. Just reaching an agreed price for the exchange of some commodity, how that functions what that commodity is the nature that are those large producers and small consumers or the other way around, so understanding how the product is for commodities that you're working on, fits in this market effectively is important. The supply chain as specific as the question how all the various components of this markets links that is from the inputs used in the production process, the transportation, storage, the wholesale, retail, arrangement, all the various links in the chain that go from the research and development idea towards the ultimate consumption of it. I do want to just make distinction we're not talking about commercialization of a little commodity but the understanding of all retail component going to the development of other product.

The RFA states that no more than 2/3 of the budget can be allotted to any one function so the other 2/3 combined can equal the remaining 1/3 of the budget?

Yes.

Given the expectation of research, education and extension, what would be the acceptable range funding division between the components?

There is no specific division except for no more than 2/3rds going one component. For example: 75 research, 10 extension, and 15 education would not be allowable. How you choose to divide the components is at the discretion of the project.

Should undergraduate education be the focus of the education component of the project?

The focus could be undergraduate education, but the educational component can be curriculum development and other activities at any level.

Can K-12 learning, such as writing standard aligned curriculum for K-12 learners be included as the education component of the project?

Yes, that can be included in the education component.

What was the total number of proposals submitted last year?

We received 60 proposals and there were 373 LOIs.

What is the review process and the timeline for that for this year?

We will have two step panel to review proposals. We would estimate that the process would take at least 6 months from application until award.

Does the AFRI SAS program fund Centers of Excellence?

There is a Centers of Excellence provision in this RFA, but this provision does not provide funding beyond the \$10M for the project. For additional information, please read the Centers of Excellence section of the RFA.

Do you have any suggestions of other grants I can apply to, that would support non-profit as the lead institution with subawards to a university and a for-profit company?

If the company is the in United States, the company might be eligible for the USDA Small Business Innovation Research program. If you are conducting research, you can look at AFRI Foundational and Applied Science Request for Application.

If the project is funded, what should be the starting date and the second is whether the low-cost identification of foodborne bacteria is relevant here?

You can estimate a start date roughly 6-8 months after proposal submission. We can always work with awardees to set the start date. The potential topic of low-cost identification of foodborne bacteria could fit the AFRI SAS program, but you would need to ensure that the project fits the long-term goals of the programs as well as fits into a system type of research. If you would like to determine fit to program for a specific project, please sent that request to AFRI-SAS@nifa.usda.gov

Would the program support working with urban food systems through involving urban farms, local producers, and improving access to low-income urban communities?

This is a fit to the program and we would encourage this, as long as the project fit within the broader context of one of program's long-term goals. Project looking to try and address food security and nutrition in low-income areas could be a fit to the program, as long as they address the program goals.

Would the program support a project on intensively managed pine production towards food, fiber, wood and biofuels as a big industry?

Yes, as long as the project addresses the program goals.

Are proposals for strengthening CAPs from small and medium-sized or minority serving institutions evaluated in the same panel as those submitted by larger schools?

Yes, they are. All proposals are evaluated with the same criteria listed in the RFA. What we have is 11.25% of program funds set aside to fund the strengthening grant institutions. These proposals are evaluated in the same time as all other proposals. The intent of these funds is to provide funding to strengthening eligible institutions that are below the funding line. For additional information on FASE funding, please see the [AFRI Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement \(FASE\) & EPSCoR page](#).

What are the minimum number of institutions that should be on a proposal?

One would be the minimum. The program is encouraging collaboration but does not have a required number of institutions involved.

What is the timeline from notifying successful grantees to the first disbursement of funds?

That is difficult to estimate at this point in time. Due to the complexity of the program, the review process takes approximately 9 months for awards to be made.

How innovative should the proposed research element be compared to extension and education components?

For all projects, the research component should be innovative and compelling. Proposals not only have a research component that is innovative and compelling, but also extension, and education should be innovative and compelling.

Can we make modifications to the team proposed in the LOI when we submit the full proposal?

Modifications can be requested and made. It is understood that the team who wrote the LOI might still be looking for a team member. It would be fine to add people on to the full proposal. We ask if you're going to change the title of proposal from what was submitted in the letter of intent please email us at afri-sas@nifa.usda.gov so that we are able to track that.

A lot of crops are regional in nature like peanuts, cotton or other crops, what is the view of your review panel on the row crops, like corn and soybeans versus specialty crops?

Projects should address the program goals, and we ask for applicants to choose the best systems for their project. For projects addressing regional commodities, you want to ensure that you put the project into a broader context so that it includes the entire system surrounding it. This is the people that design it and people follow this production and so on, so it's so broaden out of the scope as you address that commodity.

Can a new facility that is planned to be counted toward the matching funds provided that there is no given federal funds for that facility and that the building is going to be dedicated to the research that will support that project?

No, the costs for matching have to be normally allowable under the Federal funds in order to be allowable as matching. We don't allow the planning or construction of buildings on our grants, making it an unallowable cost for matching. Additionally, building usage is normally an overhead (indirect cost charge), not a direct cost to the award.

Could you please give an example of a project in which match was required?

We do not have any examples from the AFRI SAS program.

Does the proposed research have to be mature to have a successful application or can some components of the project be exploratory research?

For the research component we do not expect the solutions to be known close to application. A component of exploratory research is allowable, but because research is such a major component of this program we certainly expect preliminary data and some evidence that the research component is feasible and is going to contribute to one of the three goals of the program. There should also be evidence that it will integrate well with the extension and education components. If your proposal is a high-risk high-reward, type project, the panel does look at the proposal and assesses the probability of success. It should be noted that we still have AFRI Foundational and Applied Science Program where applicants can take more risk.

Is a faculty in a land-grant university with a joint appointment with a National Lab eligible for to be a PI?

Yes, as long as your primary appointment is with the university. It should be noted that the university is the institution that receives the award not you as the individual.

How would you handle program income from revenues derived from biochemical products generated by an AFRI SAS project?

It would go back to the program funds. We would stress that fundamental research is the focus of the program and that this program is not intended to support business development and commercialization of a product.

I'm at West Texas A&M University which is non land-grant university in the Texas Panhandle but we're partnering with three land grants in Colorado, Kansas and Texas plus some extension agencies. Is there a downside to the having us lead a proposal as the primary contribution, as we have a good school of agriculture here?

There's absolutely no disadvantage to West Texas A&M not being the land-grant University. Land-grant universities do not receive any kind of priority in this program. The eligibility is open to all universities not limited to land-grants

Is it appropriate for small or mid-sized university to partner with large universities and/or USDA to lead a project, but only take 10% of the budget mainly to administer the grant?

The proposed relationship between the institutions is

Fine. Being at a small or mid-sized school has some advantage because you're eligible for strengthening consideration. However, taking only a 10% as administrative component is not a good idea, as the lead institution should be leading the project. This sort of arrangement could be seen as negative by the review panel, who might perceive this as actually a proposal lead by the larger land-grant institution that is trying to take advantage of the FASE program.

Could you clarify this information regarding involvement of graduate students and postdocs as education or research?

Graduate students and postdocs can be involved in the project. If you are going to use them in terms of funding, funding a graduate research assistantship does not count as education in your budget. That counts as research. It is the same for postdoc funding. Hiring a postdoc to do research does not count as education in the budget and that counts as research. The real clarity you need with education is that it should be curriculum development, internships, and formal education, so that is what we're looking at in terms of our education.

Is submission of a LOI required for submission of a full proposal?

Submission of the letter of intent is absolutely required for submission of a full proposal.

Is urban agriculture a priority of the program?

The AFRI SAS program encourages proposals from a variety of agricultural systems. We would welcome a project on urban agriculture as long as it can address the goals of the program.

Will there be a response or a review summary issued in response to the LOI?

No. If you submit an LOI it will be evaluated for fit to program and what you will receive back is one of two answers. You will either be encouraged to submit a full proposal or discouraged from submitting a full proposal. If you receive a discouraged message, it does not prohibit you from submitting a full proposal.

Can a project addressing forestry be submitted to the AFRI SAS program?

Yes, we encourage projects focused on managed forests and forestry related research to submit to the AFRI SAS program. If you have a very specific question about fit of your project, please email the questions to afri-sas@nifa.usda.gov and we will set up a time to have a discussion with you.

Can a postdoc be a PI on a proposal?

The awards go to the institution, not to the applicant. Some institutions only allow permanent employees of that institution to be PIs on an application. The question as to whether a postdoc can be the lead in one of these \$10M projects would be at the discretion of the institution, as the award goes to the institution.

Should you address comments from reviewers in the resubmission?

Yes, comments from reviewers should be addressed in your full proposal, if you are resubmitting but you should not address them in your letter of intent. You get an additional page in your full proposal narrative to provide your comments.

Can you please clarify center of excellence request?

In the 2014 farm bill Congress required us to implement the new center of excellence which is different from what a lot of people are thinking about. Center of Excellence is only associated with the specific proposal. If you are submitting a proposal you can request for that specific application be considered as a center of excellence. It does not mean that your university or laboratory is a center of excellence. It only has to do with that specific application. This should only be requested in the full proposal and not in the LOI. The benefits that applicants have for this request is that, if there are two applications that are tied and the one requested center of excellence consideration, that proposal would take priority. That is the only way we use the center of excellence request. There is no additional money attached to it.

Can a new faculty lead an AFRI SAS proposal and do you need to be a U.S. citizen?

Anyone who is eligible to work at one of the U.S. eligible institutions, is eligible to be the lead. The project director (PD) on the proposal would be at the discretion of your institution. You do not need to be a U.S. citizen, you just need to be legally employed by your university in order to be eligible to be PD. Applicants should consider that the panel evaluates these proposals and an important criterion that they use is the capacity of the team to get the work done. Leadership of these large Coordinated Agricultural Projects is very important; the capacity to lead a \$10 Million project is important. The panel will look for evidence for that in the team when they evaluate the proposal.