USDA-AMS-TM

Moderator: Janise Zygmont
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1:03 pm CT

Janise Zygmont: Good afternoon everybody. And welcome to the teleconference. It's May 13, 2014 at 2:00 Eastern Time. And this is Janise Zygmont, the Staff Officer for the FSMIP program. Our purpose today is to review the guidance for preparing FSMIP proposals outlined in the Request for Applications I emailed to you earlier.

As you know, the program was announced on May 1st. And the application deadline is June 16 at 11:59 Eastern Time which gives you 45 days to develop and submit your proposals. Just a few housekeeping and ground rules for this session -- please put your phone on mute until we get to the question-and-answer period at the end of my remarks.

Don't put the teleconference on hold to answer a phone call as this can be disruptive to those that are on the line. You can email me questions during this session while I'm speaking or you can wait until the question-and-answer portion of the program to ask your questions live.

During the live Q & A session, to protect your confidentiality, please don't use your name or identify your organization. Finally, as I mentioned, this

session is being recorded and will be posted to the FSMIP website later today or tomorrow.

Earlier I emailed you the request for applications of the RFA and that's what we're going to review today. So let's begin on page five, Section 1.2 which is the starting point for everything -- the FSMIP purpose, and the program scope. As those of you who are familiar with FSMIP, as you read through this, it really hasn't changed.

This legislation has been on the books since 1946. But just to reiterate for those who are new -- FSMIP has a very broad umbrella to assist the states in the form of the state agencies, universities, state colleges, state ag. departments to explore new market opportunities for both food and agricultural products, and to encourage research and innovation, to improve the efficiency and performance of the US marketing system.

We fund a wide range of applied research projects that address barriers of challenges and opportunities in marketing, transporting, and distributing US food and ag. products domestically and internationally. These proposals that you send in must have a strong marketing focus. They must involve research and the primary beneficiaries must be agricultural producers in agribusiness.

The proposals can involve small-scale producers up to large-scale producers. And we will not accept, however, proposals that benefit just one business or individual. They have to support marketing research that will benefit multiple producers or an entire ag. sector. We look for projects that are at - have an impact on the state, multi-state or national level although - as we'll talk about later. We do accept proposals on smaller-scale projects.

The Eligible Agriculture Categories -- this is Section 1.21 -- is, you see, has a very wide umbrella, you know, unlike some of the other grant programs which specifically focus on a particular commodity group like the specialty called Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, for instance, focuses on a somewhat narrow range of commodities. FSMIP really covers the whole gamut. And this project - or rather, this program has changed over the years to reflect kind of changes in agriculture. So we do accept anything that is an agricultural product.

And if you have an idea and you're not really sure whether it fits FSMIP or not, you can go ahead and give me a call or send me an email. I'll be happy to respond to that. We also have projects that deal with marketing in areas such as farm-to-school, or farm-to-institutions, food hubs, etc. And, again, these deal with marketing transportation or distribution issues in those venues.

In Section 1.22, we talk about Collaboration. And we feel that with FSMIP collaboration is really a key issue. We like to see projects that come in that have input and perhaps even matching resources from stakeholders and other interested parties. So we like to see proposals that engage the state ag. departments and, perhaps, academia or nonprofits, or any other group that has an interest in the types of projects that FSMI covers.

As I mentioned before in Section 1.2.3 we do also accept smaller-scale projects, you know? That might be less at a state level. But in those types of projects we want to see something new. We wouldn't want to just fund another project, worthy as it may be, that just duplicates an idea that's been done somewhere else. If you have that kind of a small-scale project, we really want to see a justification. This is going to add something new to the literature, to the body of knowledge that would be useful to someone else out there in the country.

Now something new that we've added - or really more emphasized I think in this round is Section 1.2.4 which is on Economic Impact, you know? In the past we've mentioned that before. That it would be nice to know, say, how many producers are effected, what the possible impact would be. This time we're really looking for a little more thought given to that presentation of economic impact.

So I've put a few ideas down here. And, of course, we realize that they're just estimates and you can certainly express them in your proposal that way. But we want you to give some thought to -- really what's the potential impact going to be? If you can assign a dollar figure to it, fine. If you can make an estimate on what it - what would the impact be of your particular project. And then if it's expanded to the region or to the national level, see what you can do with that. But I would really like to see that addressed in a little bit of detail.

In Section 1.2.5 we talk about The Project Topics. And for those that are familiar with FSMI, these bullets are going to sound very familiar because these are pretty much extracted from the original legislation of FSMI. So I'm not going to go into those in detail. But read through those and see if and how your project idea fits into one of those categories, or maybe more than one of those categories.

As you see it is very broad. But, again, we're looking for those projects that have a marketing component and that have a research component. And that's what distinguishes FSMI in some ways from other grant programs is that we want a focus on something new exploring a new area, something that's going to have impact not only in your area, but that is of interest outside of your area in other states.

We've separated out in Section 1.2.6 -- Priority Topics. But let me just say before we talk about those that - don't let this discourage you from applying if your project fits any of the bullets under 1.2.5. These are just some emphasis areas this year that we want people to think about. But, again, don't let this discourage you if yours doesn't fit into one of these priority areas.

Last year - this first bullet about the Food Safety Modernization Act and how is this going to impact local and regional producers -- how they're going to - how this is going to impact them, what types of things are they going to need to be able to effectively market their products under these new rules and regulations? It's something that we had in there last year and we invite proposals again on this particular topic just because it's so important.

And it has wide effects. It has effects in every state. We also have included, again, the bullet about creating wealth, an economic opportunity in world communities, and issues relating to local and regional food systems and value-added agriculture. And this, again, is a broad umbrella. And a lot of your projects are going to fit into this. And that's what we want to see.

And new this year is the Promise Zones - the designated Promise Zones. And in your RSA, the Promise Zone is underlined. And that actually gives you a link to the press release from the White House that introduced this concept in January about the Promise Zones. And the current designed Promise Zones are listed here. I'll let you have time to read that.

If you have a project that deals with one of these areas, do pay attention in the rest of the RFA when we talk about this because we do need to see how your project meshes with the goals and strategies that these Promise Zones have in place now.

So moving onto 1.3 -- the Development of Proposals -- I won't spend too much time here. But I do want to emphasize in Section 1.3.1 -- the State Agency Responsibilities. This is the applicant -- the one that signs the papers that agrees with AMS to the proposal that we award.

And it really points out that as a state agency who gets the award, you have certain responsibilities not only to us but to your sub-grantees or subcontractors. And so you need to, when you go into application and you make the application that you're agreeing that you are going to take the lead in this project and you are going to assume all responsibilities associated with it.

In Section 1.3.2 on Outreach, I just wanted to point out that you do have a little more time this time than last year. You only had 30 days to put your applications together. This time we have 45 days. And we urge everyone to reach out to their potential partners and we've listed particular groups that you might keep in mind as you think about projects.

But that's important, again, because we look for collaboration with those stakeholders because we're looking for practical research projects. We do encourage multi-state proposals. And in that the - case we need to have a lead agency, a State Agriculture Department, a university that takes the lead and coordinates that project.

And in the next Section 1.3.4 -- Previous and Similar Projects -- I think it's important for the applicant to know that the reviewers are going to be coming to your proposal - I shouldn't say more or less - cold but they are subject matter specialists who have knowledge of the area. But it's important for you to be able to present your proposal in a way that they're going to understand the context of it.

And that's why it's good to mention if this particular proposal builds on a project that was funded elsewhere in AMS or another grant program because it helps the reviewer understand what's been done all ready. Is this the next step? Is this the right step? Is this logical?

And it builds on some work, some investment by federal dollars or state dollars. So that's why we ask it. It's not that we're trying to weed you out, although we are looking to avoid duplication. But that's really why it's in there.

And I do want to point out - this is something that we instituted last year and we've continued with it this year - but a follow-up proposal to a FSMIP project that's ongoing will not be considered. You have to finish that first proposal and submit the final report before you can apply for the next step.

Now let me give you an example. If you have a project where you're doing like a feasibility study in project one, we would not want to see a new idea or a follow-up idea that - we're assuming that the feasibility study is going to have this result. So we want to get money before the end of that project so we can continue it. We don't want to do that. We - I've done that in the past but we're not doing that anymore.

However, another example that it would be acceptable is if you have a project. Say you were investigating the export market in Asia for some commodity or product and you were going to do a similar project in another market, that's really not considered a continuation of that. It's really a new project and a new market with new ideas, perhaps new marketing methods that will have to be investigated.

So that's just an example really quickly to kind of make that distinction. And then if you are considering any proposals that involve foreign-market development that is in Section 1.3.5, do read that carefully.

In Section 2.0 on the Award Information, the only thing I really wanted to point out is that the FSMIP projects can be up to two years in duration. And, in the past, we've kind of let you decide what the ending date is. We've just decided this year they're all going to be two years. If you finish early, that's great. That's fine. But it just kind of avoids some things from an administrative standpoint for both sides if we have to give you more no-cost extensions.

And then the award size in recent years -- the average grant has been about $60,000. And we have had projects that are much smaller than that and much larger than that. So that kind of gives you your range. And that is the grant request, of course, you need to bring the dollar-for-dollar match which we'll get to in a second.

Under 3.0 Eligibility Information, I'm going to skip the eligible applicants. But if you're not sure, give me a call or send me an email after the teleconference. Get in touch and we can discuss. I've already covered 3.2 about that it would have to benefit more than one individual or one business.

And 3.3 covers the Cost Sharing or Matching. I think the important point here is that it is a one-for-one match and the match has to be either in cash and/or properly-valued-in-kind nonfederal resources. Another important point about this is that the matching contributions -- they have to be committed or they have to be in place when the proposal is submitted to FSMIP.

And let me give you an example. I've had proposals that come in and say, "We applied for a foundation grant and we should hear about that maybe in June or July, and we're bringing that as our match." Well that is not a legitimate match because it has not been awarded yet and it may not be awarded. So we have to go with committed resources at the time of application.

And I do want to point out that you must meet the one-to-one match requirement. But bringing more is really not going to convey any advantage to the application. And you're not going to get extra points during the scoring process in the review process.

Section 4.0 is about the application itself and the components of it. And I just want to point out that we have only two federal forms that are required for the application -- the 424, which is the standard application form that anyone applying for a federal grant or loan needs to submit. And I just want to point out one thing about that and that's at the top of page 11 under Item 14 -- Areas Affected by the Project.

That is something that we want you to complete and submit as an attachment to your proposal. And we'll get into that - well you'll see that in the checklist as we get further down. But that is something new that we've instituted this year that we want to see the areas affected by the project. We do require the 424B which just needs to be - it's assurances for non-construction programs and it just needs to be signed by the appropriate official at your organization.

And the application package itself has a number of components. And I think that I'll cover this really quickly. But it is important when you're preparing your proposal and putting it together that you really pay attention to what the

components are and that we want them presented in the order presented in the RFA.

The - for me, the cover page is pretty important and I'll tell you why. If you're proposal gets to the next step after the review process and is in consideration for funding, we may have to have some back-and-forth negotiating and talking about your proposal. And if I don't have good contact information, it's going to delay everything. So do put in all of those components for the cover page.

This year we've added a requirement that you have a Table of Contents. The Abstract - we're at the top of page 12 - the Abstract. That's another really important thing. Again think of this as a document that you're going to give to several reviewers. This is all they have to go on.

The Abstract is going to grab their attention. The Abstract is going to set the tone. It's going to demonstrate that you can articulate in a concise way the basic issue and how you're going to approach it. So do pay a little attention to that Abstract.

With the Narrative it's really important, I think, to - and we'll get into this in a little bit - how your application is going to be reviewed and evaluated. And in the Background and Justification, you'll see the elements that we want you to think about when you prepare it. We also ask if the proposal builds on another grant program, is part of a larger non-FSMIP project, is a follow-up project.

And, again, as I mentioned before, we need this information just to kind of put your project in context. It's not really a way to say, "Oh. They've gotten too much money for this already. We're not going to do it." That is not the purpose of it. And that we also want to know about other grand programs.

And for me that's important because if you're applying to another grant program with this project, before we go to award, we're going to check back with you and just see, "Have you gotten funded all ready?" We don't want to duplicate anything. If you are funded before we make our announcement of the awards or we contact you about it, please withdraw your proposal from us. And we really appreciate that.

With your Goals, Objectives, and Work Plan do be sure that you're concise, it's logical, it makes sense based on the amount of funds that you're requesting, the personnel that you're bringing in. This is something that the reviewers are really going to focus on - same with the Project Evaluation.

I'll put Expected Outcomes. This is important for the reviewers. They'll be looking at, "How much I'm going to learn from this? What kind of lessons are we going to learn? How are we going to know that this project was a success, or that really had impact?" This probably will be one of the tougher parts to prepare but be sure that you cover it. Don't just ignore it.

We're looking for - and this on top of page 14. We're looking for the Project Deliverables. We want to know what you're going to do with the findings of this research. What are you going to do with it? How are you going to get the word out? And that covers, also, in the Outreach Plan.

We're actually really lucky that we have all kinds of electronic media now that we can get the word out and reach a much broader audience. And we want to know what are you going to do? How are going to get this information out and to what audiences? And we're concerned not only with your specific target audience but, you know, the next level down or the stakeholders, or the public. Whoever would find this of interest, there might be a way to reach them. So we want to hear about that.

Under number seven on page 14, the References. This is in response to some confusion in previous years about -- how do we handle references? How do we handle our literature citations? Hopefully this will clarify that so we're all approaching it in the same way.

And I kept number eight in here about a Draft Survey. Many FSMIP projects do deal with surveys -- consumer surveys or producer surveys. And if you have a draft, you can include that as an attachment. It doesn't count against your narrative total page limit of 10 pages. And if you don't have a draft of a survey, if you could just describe a little bit of the types of information that you're going to collect.

I'm not going to spend any time really on the Budget Spreadsheet and Budget Narrative, although it is a pretty important piece of the whole proposal. So you can read that on your own. I just do want to point out on the indirect cost - this is a change from previous years. We are limiting the maximum rate that can be used to calculate the indirect cost to the lesser of the negotiated rate or 30% of the total federal funds requested. So that is a change that is something to really pay attention to in your budgets.

Other Required Elements -- we're on page 15 towards the bottom. The Personnel Qualifications -- I just want to reiterate as we have in previous years that we don't want a detailed resume. The reviewers do not want to wade through a 15-page resume on everything that you've done over the years.

It's important for you to present the qualifications of the personnel involved in a concise way that assures the reviewers that, "Yes. These are the right people to do the type of work that's being proposed." So do keep that in mind. Don't,

you know - just extract, if you want, from your resume or just - but just don't send us a 15-page resume because it's not going to fly.

Let's see. On page 16 under three -- Letters from Third Parties Who Will Contribute Matching Resources. This is a requirement. And the details about what we want in that match letter are there. We have had proposals, not too many, but in the past we've had proposals where it was news to the third party later on after they were awarded that they were supposed to participate and actually contribute resources.

So the matching letters are really important and they are required as are letters from stakeholders or beneficiaries attesting to the value of the project. And we want at least one but no more than three letters of support.

And if you have that - now on page 17 on number five above the Promise Zone. If your project deals with a Promise Zone you need to have a letter from them and a details are there about what needs to go into the letters. And number six -- The Areas Affected by the Project. As I mentioned before, that is new. It's block 14 on the SF424 that we want submitted as a file - as an attachment.

We have an application checklist in 4.3 on page 17. What I'd like is for the 424 and the 424B to be submitted as separate forms on grants.gov. And then one file that has everything else that we've talked about in one file in the order it which it appears here. In other words, we don't want to get 20 pieces of a proposal that we then have to piece together for the reviewers. And this is really to expedite the administrative process on our end.

As we said the application deadline is 11:59 pm Eastern Time on June 16th. All the applications must go through grants.gov. We don't accept paper. We

don't accept emails - emailed applications. And so what that means is that you probably need to try to submit as early as you can.

It's unpredictable how grants.gov is, if you've had any experience with it. They could have - that could be the day when, you know, when HHS or NIH grant is due, and it could be just overwhelmed. So please don't wait 'til the last minute to try to get onto grants.gov and submit your applications because we really will not be able to accept anything after that deadline.

Okay. There are under 4.6 -- Funding Restrictions on page 18. A number of the - probably the main categories of things that people would request funds for under FSMIP. So that just clarifies kind of the dos and don'ts on things that we accept. If there's anything that you don't see in this list and you need clarification from me or you want to ask, you know, "Does this - is this okay in your budget?" You can certainly get in contact with me and I'll be happy to discuss that with you.

I'd like to turn now to page 21 -- The 5.0 Application Review Information. And I just wanted to go over this with you really briefly, if you have an understanding of how we review the proposals. It's really a three-phase type of thing.

When the application first comes into FSMIP I look at each application -- first to check with the eligibility. Is the eligible entity the one that applied? Also, have you met the match? I don't go into the detail of the budget at that point. But I just make sure, "Okay. The bottom line is - yes. You have at least met the one-to-one match. And, in general, if the topic is appropriate for FSMI - if it fits under that broad umbrella that we talked about earlier. Is there marketing? Is it - does it have a research component?"

So once we get through that phase, then it goes into phase two which is called the Technical Review. And what we do is have teams of reviewers. And they are a combination of USDA or other federal, depending on the nature of the topic of the proposals, and also university people. We recruit them -- again, subject matter specialists who have some experience, knowledge of the topic area. And they will review the proposals and individually, by themselves.

And then what they do is get together as a team and come up with a consensus score and a consensus review focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for the proposal. And you'll see on page 22 the types of things that we're looking at and how they're weighted. And I think the - on the first two, the objectives - I think next time I'm going to re-write what we're calling that. But that really focuses on the Background and Justification.

This is project. Has he made a convincing case for the need for this project and the potential impact of this project? Is it within the FSMIP scope? Is it - does the Literature Review support what they're saying?

And number two is really more getting into the nitty-gritty -- the composition of the proposal. Is it a good work plan? Is it logical? Is it doable? Are they bringing the right resources to it? It really focuses on the mechanics more of, "How are they actually going to do this project?"

And then Impact you'll see has the most weight out of the four. And then we have Deliverables and Outreach, and both of those are fairly self-descriptive. I'm going to stop here. But I do really recommend that you read everything.

Starting on 6.0 -- Award Administration Information -- this really is probably not of primary interest to you at this stage because you're developing and writing your proposal. But the information that comes in 6.0 and the rest

really focuses on, "What are we expecting of you once you get this award?" And so it would be good for you to just understand kind of what you're getting into.

So with that let me check real quick to see if I have any emails that have come in. And I don't. So I am going to go ahead and open as questions. So hang in.

Operator: This conference is now in question-and-answer mode. To alert the speaker that you have a question, press 1 then 0. Each question will be asked in the order it was received.

Janise Zygmont: Okay. I just got the notification that we're in Q & A mode right now and that I can take questions in the order in which they came in. So I'm going to ahead and do that. Maybe I didn't leave you enough time to formulate your questions, but I hope you were thinking of some things as we went through the proposal so - the proposal instructions. So do we have any questions?

Woman: Hi Janise. With the announcement of the local food promotion program last week, if we have a project that fits maybe that program better than FSMIP but maybe would like to still submit FSMI, do you have any guidance on whether or not if something fits a be- another program better that it might not get as high as a score in FSMIP?

Janise Zygmont: Well a couple of things. One is that it's true that we did announce the Local Food Promotion Program and the Farmer's Market Promotion Program last week. And the key thing - a couple of things - first is the eligible applicants. I don't know if you're from a state ag. department or not, but if you're from a state ag. department, then it's my belief that you're not eligible to apply for those programs.

But your partners -- your nonprofits, your economic development corporations, producer associations -- they would be. So I think what you need to do is to pay careful attention in looking at the FSMIP RFA to see if your project, as you're conceiving it, really fits with FSMIP. If you applied to both - and that is, again, if you're a state ag. Department - you could apply for FSMIP. Your partner could apply for local food program.

We are going to be checking so that we are not duplicating. We are not going to be able to give you, you know, funds from the two grant programs to do each. So I think it's something that you need to maybe talk with your partners and carefully look at both RFAs to see how your project really fits in with either or both. I don't know if that helps. But...

Woman: It does. Thank you.

Janise Zygmont: ...(unintelligible) into the RFAs because that's really where we give you as best instruction that we can on what we're looking for. And then you have to decide, "Does my project fit this and how do I make it fit?" That's maybe not the right terminology. But, you know, "How can we meet the objectives of whatever grant program that we're looking at?"

Woman: Thank you.

Janise Zygmont: Okay. Are there any other questions? I'm not sure how many of you have had a chance to really delve into this RFA. But if there's anything - once you do get a chance to look at it in detail - if there's anything that you have a question about or that seems vague, I'd like to hear about it, you know? Just send me an email because each year I try to make it more clear for people. And if the same question comes in or I get a question saying, "Yeah, you know, I didn't realize you could really interpret it one way or the other." It does help.

So I would appreciate, you know -- after the teleconference before the application deadline -- if you have anything, you know, any suggestions like that that would be very helpful.

Okay. It doesn't sound like I have any other questions. Let me check again. Okay. Well I think that that is it. And, really, on the behalf of the Agricultural Marketing Service thanks for your interest in FSMIP. If you have any questions as you go along, let me know. Good luck and we hope to see your proposal next month. Thanks.

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