

**United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service - National Organic Program
REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS
“Human Capital Capacity Building”**

Background

The Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) established the National Organic Program (NOP) within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). OFPA also authorized development of the USDA organic regulations, which are published at 7 CFR Part 205. Central to the organic regulations is organic certification. The NOP accredits certifying agents to review, inspect, and certify the practices of farms, ranches, and processing facilities that meet the USDA organic regulations. There are certified organic operations in all 50 states, as well as many foreign countries. At the beginning of 2021, there were more than 28,000 certified operations in the United States.

A key part of the certification process is initial and annual on-site inspection of certified operations, followed by certifier review. Inspectors and certification reviewers need to be highly skilled and trained to effectively perform these activities. Therefore, a robust and skilled inspector and reviewer workforce is essential for maintaining organic integrity. Inspectors are critical representatives of certifiers. These professionals provide direct oversight of organic operations and record their observations in an inspection report. Certification reviewers use the information in an inspection report to determine if an operation is following the organic regulations. Organic inspectors and certification reviewers may be employed by a certifier, but many work as contractors.

The organic industry faces a shortage in well-qualified organic inspectors and reviewers. Given this issue, the NOP is implementing an “Organic Industry Human Capital Capacity Building” initiative. The goal of the Human Capital Capacity Building initiative is to improve the oversight capacity of the organic industry by supporting and expanding the pool of qualified inspectors and reviewers. The initiative will support projects across the human capital pipeline, from initial workforce development to creating resources for existing professionals.

The Human Capital Capacity Building initiative is the result of many years of input and dialogue amongst the organic community. The specific projects proposed under this initiative were originally suggested by inspectors, organic certifiers, professional associations, the National Organic Standards Board, and other members of the organic community.

The Biden-Harris Administration is committed to ensuring equity across the Department, removing barriers to access, and building inclusive programs for the agricultural sector. The NOP is very interested in proposals with a focus on increasing diversity and racial equity in the inspector and reviewer workforce; and building and supporting an inclusive culture within the sector. We encourage partnerships and urge organizations to engage diverse beneficiaries when developing their proposals.

This Request for Applications (RFA), or call for proposals, invites proposals for projects aimed at organic inspector and reviewer workforce development, recruitment, and retention.

Scope of Work

Each project proposal must include a clear description of the proposed scope of work. Project scopes may involve the design and development of training resources, create professional resources for inspectors and reviewers, or develop and pilot new programs. Detailed project ideas and descriptions are available in Appendix A. These descriptions are not designed to be limiting or exhaustive, but rather, to give examples to assist in project scoping. NOP welcomes innovative proposals that contribute to the primary goal of supporting and expanding the pool of qualified organic inspectors and reviewers. Projects must be self-sustaining, as NOP does not intend at this time to provide additional support beyond the initial cooperative agreement. Any resources or programs initiated under the agreement should last beyond the life of the cooperative agreement itself.

All programs, tools, resources, and/or training developed for this project must adhere to the certification and compliance requirements of the Organic Foods Production Act and USDA organic regulations.

The general target audience for the project being proposed must be described in the applicant's proposal. NOP is particularly interested in resources, outreach programs, training programs, and/or professional programs that include a focus on increasing and supporting racial equity and diversity in the inspector and reviewer workforce.

Monthly progress conference calls will be held throughout the project implementation to set and clarify project goals and policies, project constraints, submission schedule, and other relevant project information. More frequent calls during specific phases of the project may be mutually agreed upon by NOP and the applicant to support project development.

Because these projects will be paid for by U.S. taxpayer dollars, all interim, draft, and final deliverables (products) generated through the funded projects will be considered public domain. This means that all materials developed to support this cooperative agreement will be delivered to the NOP and may be posted as public information on a government website at the discretion of the NOP. Deliverables prepared for this cooperative agreement are not proprietary to the project award recipient(s) (although they may be used by the recipient as a public work).

Award Information

AMS will use Cooperative Agreements to provide Federal funding awards to successful applicants. NOP intends to fund multiple projects (approximately 3-6 total) with different organizations, each of which may last no longer than one year.

Each applicant receiving an award will perform most task-related activity at the applicant's place of business. The NOP will not provide equipment or materials to support the project beyond what is publicly available on the AMS website.

We encourage organizations with complementary capabilities to partner to achieve project goals. One organization must be identified as the primary applicant and will be responsible for submitting the completed application package. The primary applicant is expected to perform a major portion of the project, will hold the cooperative agreement with AMS, and will be responsible for managing subawards

or subcontracts with partners. All projects must be led by an U.S.-based organization with non-profit status.

Application Content and Submission Instructions

Application Checklist

- Project Narrative
- If applicable, Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement

Project Narrative

Applicants are required to prepare and submit a project narrative. When writing your project narrative, consider the evaluation criteria to receive the highest possible rating by the NOP evaluation team. Organizations should use Appendix A as a guide for their types of projects that NOP seeks to fund. The project narrative must include:

- A cover page listing the applicant organization and contact information, DUNS number, and Tax ID number, authorized organization representative (AOR).
- A project title
- Amount of Federal funds requested
- A description of the project objectives
- Intended target audience for the project
- Expected short- and long-term impacts
- A workplan, including a timeline and major deliverables. Note: Deliverables may include event-based deliverables (e.g., delivery of a pilot or final training program) and/or paper-based or technology-based solutions. Deliverables shall be delivered in electronic format either via e-mail or other method in Microsoft Word, Microsoft PowerPoint, or compatible formats. (NOP is open to discussing other electronic formats based on the project's goals and needs, but reserves the right to reject formats that it is not able to work with or modify after delivery.)
- A list of key staff and their roles in the proposed project
- A list of partner organization(s), contact information, and key staff
- A description of how the project will be sustained beyond the cooperative agreement and without additional NOP funding
- A budget summary and justification
- A billing table (See Appendix B)
- Key staff resumes from applicant and partner organization(s) (not included in page count below)
- Signed Letters of Commitment from each partner organization (not included in page count below)

The project narrative is not to exceed 20 pages. The page limit does not include personnel resumes and signed Letters of Commitment. Margins should be set at a minimum of 1-inch all sides, and text font should be 11-point or more for readability. We reserve the right to consider proposals that exceed the maximum page length but are not required to evaluate items that exceed page limitations.

Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA)

If the applicant has a NICRA, it must submit a copy of its approved NICRA along with its application. If you do not have an NICRA, you do not need to provide this.

Submission

Applications must be submitted via email to laura.gallagher@usda.gov no later than **11:59 PM EDT on July 2, 2021**. Applicants are encouraged to combine documents into a single PDF file before submitting their application.

Evaluation Criteria and Other Requirements

Evaluation Criteria: Applications will be reviewed competitively by an NOP team based on the following factors and scoring. All elements must be fully addressed in the project narrative.

- **Project Goals** – Applicant’s description of its proposed project outcomes and its target audiences; the extent to which the project is likely to expand and/or support the qualified organic inspector and reviewer workforce; the extent to which the project addresses racial equity and diversity in the inspector and reviewer workforce (20%)
- **Project Approach** – Applicant’s approach to designing and implementing the project, tasks, and deliverables; the extent to which the schedule is realistic for achieving tasks and deliverables. Proposal must clearly describe tasks and activities, proposed deliverables (work products, outputs) and the proposed project timeline. (30%)
- **Project Team – Partners and Key Staff** –Expertise of project team necessary to complete the proposed project, demonstrated through how work is divided across partners; resumes that identify educational and technical qualifications and past experience; commitment of partner organizations; description of collaborative approach and how project tasks will be divided between applicant and project partner(s) (30%)
- **Fiscal Plan and Long-term Viability** – Applicant’s proposed budget, including how it allocates labor hours and materials to conduct the project; degree to which the budget proposal is reasonable for the deliverables proposed; viability of the project in terms of potential for sustained long-term use without continued fiscal support from NOP (20%)

Communication: The applicant shall not issue a news release, public announcement, advertisement, or any other form of publicity concerning its relationship with the NOP or its efforts in connection with this cooperative agreement without obtaining the prior written approval of the NOP lead contact.

Award Recipient Requirements: Applicants that are selected to receive a cooperative agreement must have an organization DUNS number, an active SAM.gov account, and a TIN/EIN prior to any award being made. It may take up to **four weeks** to establish profiles and accounts. Applicants that do not already have a Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number must [obtain one from Dun & Bradstreet \(D&B\)](#). Applicants must be [registered with the System for Award Management \(SAM\)](#). SAM.gov accounts must be updated annually. These accounts may be established *after* NOP has informed applicants of their selection to receive an award.

Administration

Government Officials

Technical Point of Contact:
Jennifer Tucker
NOP Deputy Administrator
jennifer.tucker@usda.gov

Payment

Funds obligated by this cooperative agreement will be managed through the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service Budget Office. Invoices for work performed shall be submitted to the Technical Contact above and will be processed for payment once the work products have been reviewed and approved by NOP. Invoices must align with the deliverables listed in the proposal and incorporated into the award.

APPENDIX A “Human Capital Capacity Building” Project Descriptions

This appendix describes a range of projects that could support human capital in the organic industry.

The NOP welcomes proposals to implement the projects described below or other projects that address the needs described here and in the Call for Proposals. Proposals may include elements from multiple project areas, they do not need to include all the listed sample activities to be considered, and they may include activities that are not listed.

A. Inspector Apprenticeship Program

Project Need: New organic inspectors need experienced mentors to provide in-field training and guidance. However, new organic inspectors face financial and logistical barriers to finding mentors, and many experienced inspectors report that they are not fairly compensated for providing mentoring services. A formalized apprenticeship program would provide an “on-ramp” for new inspectors through classroom (or online) and in-field training. The program could also match new inspectors with mentors in their geographic areas and compensate all participants for their work.

Sample Activities/Deliverables: Projects may be aimed at establishing a framework and resources for use by other entities. Projects could also implement a pilot program. Deliverables should match the target activity and outcomes. Deliverables may include:

- Concept of Operations for an apprenticeship program
- Descriptions of standard requirements for classroom and in-field training
- New inspector training curriculum
- Mentorship resources, i.e. trainings, guides, or tip sheets to help ensure mentor success
- Description of responsibilities and considerations for apprenticeship host organizations
- Marketing/advertising materials that could be adapted and used by host organizations
- Recruitment materials for prospective apprentices
- Summary report describing pilot project outcomes

Note: NOP is interested in funding proposal(s) that establish and pilot an apprenticeship program, but cannot commit to the long-term funding of such a program. As such, the proposal and project need to address methods by which the program would become self-funding and self-sustainable over time.

B. Inspector Workforce Data Collection

Project Need: Currently, there is little data on the organic inspector workforce. While anecdotal reports suggest that there is a shortage of qualified inspectors, data is needed to understand the extent and whether additional qualified inspectors are needed in specific geographic regions or certification scopes (crop, livestock, wild crop, or handling). Data on the current level of inspector training and experience will enable the industry to identify priority training and workforce development activities. Qualitative data on inspector career paths will provide valuable insight into how to develop and recruit the next generation of inspectors. Current data gaps include:

- Number and availability of inspectors
- Geographic location covered by inspectors
- Certification scope(s) covered by inspectors
- Level/type of training completed
- Other (non-inspection) work experience
- Years of organic inspector work experience
- Inspector career paths and barriers to continued inspection work
- Factors contributing to the retention and attrition of inspectors

Sample Activities/Deliverables:

- Data collection plan
- Draft and final reports on data collection, analysis, and key findings
- Recommendations for addressing inspector shortages in priority areas

C. Training Course Development

Project Need: Organic stakeholders have identified several human capital challenges that could be addressed through new training resources. These barriers include the highly seasonal nature of inspection work; lack of awareness about the inspector field amongst job seekers; and emerging challenges in contract employment, such as rising prevalence of gig economy laws. Additional courses developed through this project and hosted in NOP’s Organic Integrity Learning Center (OILC) could help the organic industry and new inspectors navigate these challenges. The OILC provides free, interactive training to learners. All course material is developed in accordance with a standard course planner. Courses provided through the OILC must not provide legal advice or make policy. All course material must be aligned with NOP regulations.

Sample Activities/Deliverables:

- Course curriculum aimed at engaging new and prospective inspectors, e.g., a “So You Want to be an Organic Inspector?” course
- Cross training programs for current organic professionals, i.e. training inspectors to work as contract reviewers during the winter season
- Outreach materials and strategies for advertising the OILC beyond the organic industry, e.g., to prospective organic professionals

D. Youth and Post-Secondary Career Education Materials

Project Need: The organic industry does not have a well-established workforce pipeline to fill the demand for new organic inspectors. Youth-focused agricultural programs offer an opportunity to expose young people to organic inspection as a possible career path. Similarly, training programs offered through colleges, universities, or other post-secondary education institutions would introduce students to the profession and could provide practical training experience that enables students to begin work as an organic inspector upon graduation.

Sample Activities/Deliverables: Projects may be aimed at establishing a framework and resources for use by other entities. Projects could also implement a pilot program. Deliverables should match the target activity and outcomes. Deliverables may include:

- Curriculum and learning resources that can be integrated by educational institutions, such as agricultural education organizations or sustainable/organic agriculture degree programs
- Engagement/advertising resources to “sell” the program to partner organizations
- Summary report of a pilot project outcomes

E. Organic Inspector and Reviewer Job Board

Project Need: The organic industry lacks a centralized resource where certifiers can post inspector and reviewer job or contract opportunities, making it challenging to efficiently match contract inspector and/or job candidates with certifier needs. Certifiers also report that they are unable to assess the skills and availability of the organic inspector pool. An inspector registry or job board could be designed to include a “registry” for inspectors and reviewers to post credentials, geographic availability, and opportunities. This would help certifiers assess the availability of qualified inspectors in their certification areas.

Sample Activities/Deliverables:

- Development plan for a job board considering factors such as host platform, cost for development and maintenance, user fees, and privacy concerns
- Interview certifiers and inspectors for feedback on job board plan and to get user buy-in
- Program and pilot job board
- Report initial job board metrics such as number of job announcements and applicant users

Note: NOP is interested in funding proposal(s) that establish and pilot an inspector registry and/or job board, but cannot commit to the long-term funding of such a tool. As such, the proposal and project need to address methods by which the tool would become self-funding and self-sustainable over time.

F. Organic Inspector Credentialing Program

Project Need: The organic regulations at 7 CFR §205.501(a) require that certification staff, including inspectors, have sufficient expertise in organic production and handling techniques. Certifiers are responsible for setting specific criteria for inspector qualifications and training. Many organic stakeholders have pointed to the need for a credentialing program to standardize inspector requirements, provide third party review, and ensure a qualified inspector pool. Such a program could incorporate different credential levels, which would better enable certifiers to recognize varying levels of expertise and compensate inspectors accordingly.

Sample Activities/Deliverables:

- Interview certifiers, inspectors, and other organic stakeholders to receive input on the viability and demand for a Credentialing Program
- Summary report of organic industry input
- Develop a Concept of Operations for credentialing program

Note: NOP is interested in funding proposal(s) that establish the need and foundational plan for a credentialing program, but cannot commit to the long-term funding of such a program. As such, the proposal and project need to address methods by which the program would become self-funding and self-sustainable over time.

G. Internship Program for National Organic Standards Board Technical Support

Project Need: The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) has received valuable feedback on the NOP's Memo to the Board on Human Capital. The Compliance, Accreditation, and Certification Subcommittee is currently developing a discussion document about how projects designed to develop the next generation of the organic workforce could also provide technical support to advance the technical work of the Board that ultimately drives NOP rulemaking. The level of work involved for NOSB members has been cited by some as a discouragement towards serving on the board. The board has discussed previously if there might be ways to obtain outside assistance in its work without compromising the integrity of the process or the independent nature of the production and deliberation of its proposals. This project would begin to explore this idea further.

Sample Activities/Deliverables:

- Interview NOP staff and current and former NOSB members to develop a list of tasks that could be completed by interns in such a program.
- Develop a summary of qualifications that would be needed: (1) by an organization that would run the internship program; and (2) baseline pre-existing skills and qualifications that would be needed by the interns themselves.
- Based on interviews, an estimate with justification of how many interns at how many hours a week would be needed to effectively support the Board's work given the identified tasks.
- Propose a Concept of Operations for how such an internship program might be structured to ensure transparency, consistency, and alignment with both program and Board needs.

H. Professional Organization for Contract Inspectors and Reviewers

Project Need: Independent contract inspectors and reviewers face unique challenges in accessing professional resources and support, such as insurance options and continuing education. These challenges drive many qualified inspectors and reviewers to pursue different employment opportunities. A professional organization or cooperative could help fill the gap by providing services while still allowing for the job flexibility sought by many independent inspectors and reviewers.

Sample Activities/Deliverables:

- Articulate the possible scope of services of this type of cooperative, proposing the types of services that are most needed for both the inspector and certifier communities.
- Develop a business plan and possible marketing plan for an independent inspector and reviewer professional cooperative
- Engage the independent inspector and reviewer workforce to identify and/or assess interest and possible incentive and criteria for membership in a cooperative.
- Research cost-effective solutions and alternatives to provide services for cooperative members

Note: As with other projects above, NOP is interested in funding proposal(s) that establish the need and foundational plan for an inspector-facing cooperative but cannot commit to the long-term funding of such a program. As such, the proposal and project need to address methods by which the program would become self-funding and self-sustainable over time.

APPENDIX B
Billing Table Format

In addition to the budget justification, please include a proposed billing table using the following format. Invoices to awardees will be paid after NOP reviews and approves work products. The deliverables and estimated invoice date should align with the major deliverables and timeline described in the project narrative. In the billing table, please list deliverables proposed to be completed each quarter (i.e., phase 1 should include all deliverables planned for the first three months of the project period). Provide the total cost for all listed proposed deliverables, as described in the budget justification, in the price column.

Phase No.	Deliverables	Proposed Invoice Date (In Days, Weeks, or Months After Award)	Price
1			\$ USD
2			\$ USD
3			\$ USD
4			\$ USD
		Total:	\$ USD