

Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP)

Frequently Asked Questions

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Program Overview: Understanding the RFSP Program

What is the purpose of the Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) program?

The purpose of the RFSP program is to support partnerships that connect public and private resources to plan and develop local or regional food systems. Projects should demonstrate how partners will work together to address local and regional food system challenges (i.e. market access, coordination across value chains, producer support). Eligible applicants are partnerships established through an official agreement between at least one eligible entity and at least one eligible partner, as described in the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO).

How should applicants define a region?

Applicants should define a region based on the geographic area where the partnership will implement activities and address food system challenges. The size and scope of the region should be based on the proposed project and partnership. A region may include a neighborhood, one or multiple counties, multiple states, tribal regions, or other locally defined food systems areas, as appropriate for the proposed project.

Eligibility

Who is eligible to apply for an RFSP grant award?

Applications must be submitted by a partnership. As described in the NOFO, partnerships are made up of at least one eligible entity and at least one eligible partner under an official agreement. The application may be submitted by either an eligible entity or an eligible partner on behalf of the partnership. The partnership must specify in its application which organization in the partnership are responsible for receiving and managing the award.

What is considered an eligible entity for the RFSP program?

Eligible entities are described in Section 3.2 of the RFA NOFO. Applicants should review the section for the fill list and definition of eligible entity types.

What is considered an eligible partner for the RFSP program?

Eligible partners are described in Section 3.3 of the RFA NOFO. Applicants should review the section for the fill list and definition of eligible entity types.

What qualifications or capacities should be considered when deciding which partner should be the applicant entity?

The partnership must designate one organization to serve as the lead applicant and manage the award if funded. The lead applicant should have the administrative, financial, and organizational capacity to manage Federal funds and to coordinate the partnership activities. Partnerships should consider which organization is the best positioned to fulfill these responsibilities when selecting the applicant entity.

Can the lead applicant on an RFSP application have an active Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) or Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) award?

In general, this is allowable. The lead applicant or any other eligible entities may have an active FMPP or LFPP awards, provided the activities proposed in the RFSP application do NOT duplicate work funded through the FMPP or LFPP grant project. Any active FMPP or LFPP grants awarded to the entities on the application must be identified in the Project Narrative.

Can past RFSP recipients who have completed and closed their projects eligible to apply again?

Yes. Organizations that previously received an RFSP award may apply again, provided the proposed project does not duplicate any work completed in the closed project(s).

Is an LLC or L-Corp eligible to apply for the RFSP program?

An LLC or L-Corp may serve as an eligible entity or partner if it is qualified as described in the NOFO.

Can we apply for an RFSP grant if our non-profit 501(c)(3) status is still pending with the IRS?

Yes. Organizations may apply while their 501 (c)(3) status is pending. However, if selected for an award, the applicant would need to verify their 501c3 status to receive the RFSP award.

If we are a nonprofit corporation in a particular State but not yet a 501 (c)(3) organization, are we eligible?

Yes. State certification of nonprofit status is sufficient for 'eligible entity' status.

Does the lead applicant for an RFSP grant need to be a U.S. based domestic organization?

Yes. The lead applicant must be a U.S. based domestic organization. The RFSP grant program only supports projects focused on local and regional food systems within the US and US territories. The [USDA Foreign Agriculture Service \(FAS\)](#) supports US-based organizations performing projects overseas, so you may want to explore grant options with them as well.

Is there a minimum amount of time an applicants or partner organizations must have existed to be eligible?

No. However, partnerships should consider the administrative and financial management reporting requirements for a federal award when deciding which entity should serve as lead.

Can volunteer groups be considered an eligible entity or partner?

These types of loosely structured organizations could be listed in the partnership as an eligible entity (such as a producer group) but not an eligible partner. In a case where such an entity may become a subrecipient through an RFSP award, the applicant must ensure the volunteer entity has the capacity to manage the subaward.

Do Aquaculture/Seafood producers qualify as 'producers' under the RFSP program?

Yes. Aquaculture and seafood producers may qualify as "producers" under the RFSP program, if they meet the eligibility criteria described in the NOFO.

Partnership Requirements

How many partners are required in a partnership?

A partnership must include at least one eligible entity and one eligible partner. Applicants should focus on selecting partners based on their relevance and capacity to contribute to the projects, rather than the number of partners. Successful applications typically include partners that represent key parts of the regional food supply chain.

Is there a preferred partnership structure?

There is no required or preferred structure. The applicant should clearly describe the nature of the partnership agreement (such as an MOU or contract document) and the specific project role of each partner in the application.

Who does the term “recipient” refer to in the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)?

The term “recipient” refers to the organization (entity or partner) primarily responsible for receiving and managing the award, if selected. The organization is responsible for administering the award and ensuring compliance with all program and federal requirements.

What roles should partners play in the project?

Partners should have clear and meaningful roles such as, but not limited to:

- Providing technical expertise
- Contributing funding or resources
- Implementing project activities
- Providing market access or infrastructure
- Supporting outreach and stakeholder engagement

Can a partner receive funding from the grant?

Yes. Partners may receive funds through subawards or contracts, depending on the nature of the work. Applicants should ensure the structure aligns with federal grant management requirements.

Can partners members change after an award is made?

Applicants are encouraged to partner with organizations that can support the project throughout the entire period of performance. Changes to partners will require prior approval from AMS.

Project Types

What is the difference between Planning and Design and Implementation and Expansion project types?

Planning & Design Projects focus on feasibility studies, partnership development, and strategic planning. These projects support the development of regional strategies, feasibility assessments, or business plans. Planning projects have a maximum project period of 24 months.

Implementation & Expansion Projects build on existing work and focus on executing strategies, expanding infrastructure, or scaling regional food system activities. Please refer to Section 1.3 of the NOFO for additional detailed information.

What factors should be considered when choosing a project type?

The applicant may consider partnership development stage, structure, partner diversity, and level and type of activities performed under the project scope, among other factors.

Can a project include both planning and implementation activities?

Project should align with the selected project type. For example, planning projects should emphasize planning activities, while implementation projects should demonstrate readiness to implement and expand existing activities.

Funding Priorities

Are there priority considerations for the RFSP program?

Yes. The RFSP program includes three priority considerations that may strengthen an application during the review process. Priority consideration may be given to applications that:

- Use significant non-Federal financial and technical resources and work together with other local, State, Tribal, or national efforts.
- Serve distressed low-income rural or urban communities with persistent poverty.
- Involve multiple entities and partners, even if such partners are not located within the defined region of the partnership.

Cost Share Funds

What is cost share or cost sharing?

Cost share, or cost sharing is the portion of total project costs that is not paid with Federal funds. This portion of cash and/or in-kind contributions for RFSP is specified in section 2.5 of the NOFO. Other Federal funds cannot be used as cost share.

What is the difference between cash cost share vs. in-kind cost share?

A cash cost share is the organization's own funds, or **cash** donations received from other non-federal entities or non-federal grants. As in-kind, is non-cash contribution of value that directly benefits the project, such as, donated personnel time, use of equipment, volunteer work or services, time devoted to the project, etc. For example, university faculty time spent on the grant project would be an in-kind cost share, whereas a \$10,000 cash donation from a university partner to pay for someone to work on the grant project would be a cash cost share.

Can I provide cost share contributions above the 25 % requirement?

Yes. Any cost share above and beyond the requirement, whether cash or in-kind contributions, will lend support to the proposal and can be considered as part of the priority area.

Can the cost share requirement be waived?

No. The cost share requirement is established by statute, and USDA cannot waive a statutory requirement.

Can partners contribute cost share?

Yes. Cost share may come from multiple partners, if the sources are non-federal, allowable, and adequately documented. This is a partnership grant opportunity where the idea is for partners to contribute to the cost share requirement. It is not intended to make a single organization or partner responsible for contributing the entire cash cost share to the project.

Can indirect costs be used toward the required cost share contribution?

No. Indirect costs may count as an in-kind cost share, but not as a cash-cost share contribution for RFSP.

Can unallowable costs be brought as an in-kind or cost share?

No. Cost used for cost share must be allowable under the applicable Federal cost principles and must meet the requirements in [2 CFR § 200.306](#). Unallowable costs cannot be counted toward the cost share requirements.

Can land, buildings or labor count as in-kind cost share?

Donated land and/or buildings cannot be used as an in-kind cost share. Labor/personnel may be used as cost share, however, only for the percentage of time the person is working on the project. For example, if someone is only spending 25% of their time working on the project, you may only include that 25% as a cost share contribution to the project. You must also ensure that what you would normally pay that individual is reasonable according to standard personnel rates for similar positions in your geographic locality.

Can unrecovered indirect cost be used as part of the cost sharing?

Yes. unrecovered indirect cost may be used as cost share with prior approval. Unrecovered indirect cost means the difference between the amount charged to the Federal award and the amount that could have been charged to the Federal award under the potential recipients approved negotiated indirect cost rate.

However, applicants using the de minimis indirect cost rate generally cannot claim unrecovered indirect cost as cost share, because the de minimis rate is a voluntary election rather than a negotiated rate.

Do the non-federal contributions have to be confirmed at the time of proposal submission, or can it be lined up by the time of the award?

All cost share contributions must be committed or in place when the proposal is submitted to AMS. Additional anticipated cost share funds not in place by the time the project commences cannot be counted toward the cost share requirement. Cost share verification letters are required to be submitted with the application.

Does an organization providing a cash or in-kind cost share contribution need to be a partner or entity named on the project team?

No. However, a Cost Share Verification Letter as described in section 5.2.5 of the RFA must be included in the application packet. We also recommend including the organization in the Project Narrative table that lists the partners and entities for the project (in the Expertise and Partners section) and put their role as “Funder.”

Allowable and Unallowable Costs

Can RFSP funds be used to purchase land or buildings?

No. It is unallowable to use grant funds for the acquisition of buildings, facilities, or land or to make additions, improvements, modifications, replacements, rearrangements, reinstallations, renovations or alterations to an existing building or facility (including site grading and improvement, and architecture fees).

Grant funds may be used to rent a building or facility for project-specific purposes, during the project’s period of performance.

Note: AMS offers architectural design technical assistance at no cost. For more information, visit <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/facility-design>.

Can grant funds be used for construction?

No. LAMP’s authorizing statute ([7 U.S.C. 1627c](#)) does not allow grant funds to be used for any type of construction activities. This also includes construction and construction-related materials, which may include, but are not limited to, the purchase of building materials such as wood, nails, concrete, asphalt, roofing, gravel, sand, paint, insulation, drywall, or plumbing.

Does the LAMP program have restrictions that would prevent the use of grant funds for capital equipment?

Capital expenditures such as land, buildings, or construction-related costs are generally unallowable under LAMP statute. However, special purpose equipment purchases may be allowable when they are necessary for the approved project activities and are not related to construction. Applicants should refer to Section 8 of the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#).

Would the engineering and planning costs for a future capital project be allowable?

In the case of capital project elements, RFSP does allow funds to be used for creating and conducting feasibility studies, implementation plans, and assessments, including studies analyzing capital needs and gaps, research on infrastructure investments for the regional food system, and identifying and applying for resources from other programs to meet those needs (such as paying for a resource development staff to research loan, grant, and other financial resource opportunities for such projects).

Note: AMS offers architectural design technical assistance at no cost. For more information, visit <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/facility-design>.

Are administrative fees allowable under RFSP?

RFSP allows for the inclusion of indirect costs (also known as Facility & Administration Fees) as part of the project budget. Indirect cost must be calculated using either a Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) or the de minimis rate. See section 3.9 “Indirect Costs” of the NOFO for additional information.

Can RFSP funds be used to purchase kitchen equipment for a shared community food center?

Equipment purchase may be allowable if the equipment is necessary for the project and supports the approved activities. If the equipment is shared with other users, not performing functions on the proposed project, it cannot be purchased with RFSP funds. If the equipment is solely used for the proposed project, it will be reviewed according to the guidelines outlined in Section 8.2 of the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#).

For the travel budget section, how should costs be calculated for the AMS grants management meeting required by the RFA?

Applicants should include an estimated travel budget for attendance at the required AMS grant management meeting. This estimate should include costs such as airfare, per diem, hotel etc. for at least the Project Coordinator/Manager and potentially up to two more key members of the project team.

Can RFSP funds be used to purchase processing equipment for food hubs?

Processing equipment may be an allowable cost under specific conditions and if necessary for the approved project. Refer to the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#), Section 8.2, for ‘special purpose equipment’.

Are the maximum award amounts *inclusive* of indirect/administrative costs?

Yes.

Are we allowed to apply for this grant using a fiscal agent or sponsor?

RFSP eligible applicants may use fiscal sponsors/agents in their effort to obtain and administer a grant award under RFSP. Applicants may apply directly and include the contract with a fiscal sponsor in the budget’s Contractual section or use a fiscal sponsor to apply on behalf of the applicant/partnership.

An applicant **cannot** accept an award and later transfer the award to another organization (including a fiscal sponsor/agent).

Are production costs allowable?

No. Production costs (such as compost, farm tools, soil, seeds and plants, feed, wiring, etc.) are not an allowable cost under RFSP.

Does “applicant” refer to every entity and partner included in the grant application or just the lead organization who applies on behalf of the partnership?

“Applicant” refers to the primary/lead organization that submits the RFSP application on behalf of the partnership. If awarded, the applicant becomes the grant recipient and will be responsible for accepting,

administering the grant, and ensuring compliance with all the program and federal requirements. An applicant may submit more than one RFSP application but can only receive one RFSP award.

Can partners appear on multiple RFSP applications if the lead applicant is different?

Yes. An organization may participate as a partner in multiple RFSP applications, provided that each application represents a distinct project. However, an entity may not receive funding from multiple RFSP awards for the same work or activities.

If an applicant, partner, or sub-awardee performs lobbying as part of its mission and programs, would this prevent them from being able to participate in an RFSP partnership?

Organizations that conduct lobbying as part of their normal activities may still participate in an RFSP project. However, RFSP grant funds may not be used for lobbying activities, and project activities funded by RFSP must not involve lobbying.

Can RFSP funds be used for micro-loans or be re-granted?

No. RFSP funds may not be used to provide micro-loans or re-granting programs to other entities.

Can grant funds be used to purchase vehicles?

No. Vehicles may be leased but not purchased. However, lease agreements to own (i.e., lease-to-own or rent-to-own) are not allowable. The lease or rental agreement must terminate at the end of the grant period of performance. A signed copy of the lease agreement will be required prior to first payment approval.

Can funds be used to repair and/or upgrade existing equipment?

Answer: Yes. Funds may be used to repair or upgrade existing equipment that is not available and readily usable in its current condition.

Application/Submission Process

What are common weaknesses in RFSP applications?

Frequent weaknesses include, but are not limited to:

- Activities that do not demonstrate clear regional impact
- Weak or incomplete explanation of the regional food system challenge the project intend to address
- Limited partner engagement, including lack of defined roles or commitment
- Budget not aligned with proposed activities or lack sufficient justification
- Lack of measurable outcomes or evaluation methods

Do applicants need to be registered in SAM.gov and Grants.gov?

Yes. Applicants must have an active registration in SAM.gov and an active Grants.gov account before applying. Because SAM.gov registration and renewal can take several weeks, applicants are strongly encouraged to begin this process well before the application deadline.

Do subrecipients also require a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI)?

Yes. An applicant may not make a subaward to a subrecipient that has not obtained a UEI. The applicant must notify any potential subrecipients that subawards cannot be issued unless the subrecipient obtains and provides a UEI to the applicant.

Does the Project Narrative page limit exclude required documents such as key staff resumes and cost share verification letters?

Yes. The page limit only applies to *content* entered on the Project Narrative template itself. Other required documents such as cost share letters, commitment letters, and key staff resumes do not count towards this limit.

What is the difference between a contract with an organization and a sub-award?

Sub-awards are distinct from contracts. The purpose of a sub-award is to carry out a programmatic portion of the Federal award, while a contract may be used to purchase services needed to carry out the project under a federal award. Recipients must determine the appropriate relationship in accordance with [2 CFR 200.331](#).

Can AMS staff review a draft of my application prior to submission?

No, AMS cannot review or provide feedback on draft applications before they are submitted through Grants.gov. However, applicants may contact the program office with questions regarding program requirements, eligibility, or allowable costs. Questions may be submitted to IPPGGrants@usda.gov.

Can I submit my application by fax, email, postal mail, or hand delivery?

No. All applications must be submitted electronically through Grants.gov. AMS will not accept applications submitted by fax, paper, email, postal mail, or hand delivery. All applications must be submitted electronically through Grants.gov.

In selecting a contractor, do we need to go through a procurement/bid process, or could we select one of the contractors we have used in the past?

Recipient must follow procurement standards as described in section 7 of the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#). However, each state has different procurement rules that you must follow. AMS highly recommends using a competitive bid process (with at least 3 bids) for any procurements under the RFSP award and depending on the procurement method used. Applicants should follow their organization's procurement policies if they meet federal requirements.

Do we need to provide NICRAs for all the project team partners, or just the lead applicant?

Only the lead applicant should submit a NICRA with the application, if one is available.

Would only the applicant staff go under Personnel, and all other Project Team partners go under Contractual?

Yes. The applicant organization should list all personnel and fringe benefit costs for **its** project staff under those budget sections. Cost associated with project partners would typically be included as Subawards or Contractual.

Can attachments (verification, partners letters, etc.) be uploaded as they are received using the add attachment button any place in the Workspace or do some forms need to be attached in the Narrative itself?

The RFSP Project Narrative form must be submitted as a PDF and attached to the Grants.gov application package using the “Project Narrative Attachment Form” on the application package.

Other attachments must be attached to the Grants.gov application package using the “Add Attachments” button under Form SF-424 item #15.

Applicants should ensure that each attachment is clearly labeled and uploaded in the correct section of the application.

Do we need resumes for partner organizations as well as key staff?

Yes. Each person listed in the Key Staff table of the project narrative (under the Expertise and Partners section) must have a resume attached to the application package.

Who is considered the Authorized organization Representative (AOR)?

The AOR is the individual who has the legal/signing authority at an organization to submit applications and sign grant agreement on behalf of the organization. This person is typically the CEO, CFO or Board Chair. This is the person who has ultimate responsibility for administering the RFSP grant funds. The AOR must be registered at Grants.gov and is responsible for accepting the award on behalf of the organization.

Application/Review and Selection Process

If my organization submits a proposal to RFSP, can I serve as a reviewer if I do not review my own application?

No. Individuals affiliated with an organization that apply to the RFSP program competition may not serve as a review for that same competition, even if they would not review their own applications. However, they may serve as a reviewer for any of the AMS competitive grant programs for which your organization is not applying.

How can I become a reviewer for the AMS grant programs?

To become a reviewer, you can register online at [How to Become an Application Reviewer](#).

What are reviewers looking for most?

Reviewers evaluate applications using the evaluation criteria described in section 6.2 of the NOFO to evaluate applications. Applications are assessed based on how well they address each evaluation criterion. Applicants are strongly encouraged to prepare their application by addressing each of the evaluation criteria described in the NOFO.

When will applicants be notified of funding decisions?

Applicants will be notified of funding decisions after the review process has been completed and final selection has been approved.

Post Award Requirements

Where can I find information about past recipients of this grant?

Descriptions of previously funded projects are available on the [“RFSP Awarded Grants”](#) page on the RFSP website. Reviewing past projects may help applicants better understand the types of activities and partnerships supported by the program.

What are the requirements and grant reporting timelines for administering an RFSP grant?

Reporting requirements and other administrative responsibilities for RFSP award recipients are described in the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#). These requirements include submitting performance reports, financial reports, and other documentation during the project period.