



Writing Your Project Narrative

Utilizing the Review Criteria to Develop
Your Project Narrative



*Regional Food System Partnerships
Program*



PROJECT NARRATIVE AND REVIEW CRITERIA

AMS LAMP GRANTS



Executive Summary

Tip: It can be easiest to do this last.

Alignment and Intent



NEED



GOAL



APPROACH

ALIGNMENT TO PROGRAM PURPOSE

Technical Merit



WORKPLAN

MILESTONES

TIMELINE

Achievability



MEASURE



ADAPT



DISSEMINATE

Expertise and Partners

KEY STAFF

COORDINATION



TEAM SKILLS

SUSTAINABILITY

Fiscal Plan and Resources

BUDGET AND JUSTIFICATION



ALLOWABLE COSTS



RFSP Project Narrative and Review Criteria Guide

Instructions for Guide

This document is to be used as a guide to help prepare applications for the Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) program. Use this guide as a supportive tool while developing your project narrative. Whenever you need clarification or additional detail, refer directly to the official [RFSP Notice of Funding Opportunity](#) or NOFO. The program NOFOs are the primary and authoritative source for all program requirements and guidance.

Applicants MUST use the [RFSP Project Narrative Form](#), complete all sections of the Project Narrative Form, and comply with the specific instructions and format as directed within the NOFO.

Applicant Information

The first section of the Project Narrative Form (~2 pages), requests information about the applicant organization and project. The instructions below provide additional guidance about the information required for this section.

1. Applicant Organization

This section must be the same as Box 8 of the SF-424. This represents the legal name and information of the organization applying for the grant exactly as registered in SAM.gov. Awards are made to organizations, institutions, or companies and not to individuals. Applicants must meet the eligibility requirements as described in section 2.0 of the NOFO to receive an award.

2. Authorized Organization Representative (AOR)

This section must match Box 21 of the SF-424. The AOR is the individual who is authorized to sign any document on behalf of the organization. This is the member of the organization that authorizes the submission of the application to Grants.gov on behalf of a company organization or institution. It is highly recommended that the AOR be different from the Project Coordinator or person designated by the organization to direct the project or activities being supported by the grant. Ensure the AOR listed has an active Grants.gov role and authority to submit on behalf of the organization.

3. Project Coordinator or Director

This person should be a different individual than the AOR. Separating these roles helps ensure appropriate oversight and reduces risk of internal control issues within the organization. The Project Coordinator or Director is the individual leading the project and activities supported by the grant.

4. Partnership Entity Types

Select the entity and partner types that best represents the applicant's legal structure of the organization and partners. Sections 2.1-2.3 of the NOFO describes each entity and partner type. If your organization is a State Agency with a Regional Farmers Market Authority, you must provide citation in the application narrative of the regulatory statute(s) that identifies your organization as that entity type.

5. Project Activities

Select all the activity categories that apply to the activities you are proposing for your project. If an activity is not listed; you may add it under other.

6. Project Title

This section must match Box 15 of the SF-424. Provide a descriptive and concise title that clearly describes the who, what, and intended outcome of the project (e.g. *Developing a Regional Food Hub to Expand Market Access for Small-Scale Producers in Virginia*). The title must summarize the main idea(s) of your project. If selected for funding, the title of your project and the executive summary will be made publicly available on the USDA AMS website. The title should be limited to 200 characters.

7. Grant Project Type

Only one project type must be selected. Applicants must review section 3.3 of the NOFO to understand the difference between the two project types. Also, you can review the [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#) document for more information. If a project includes activities that fit both project types, select the type that represents the primary purpose of the project. The primary purpose should be determined based on where the majority of the project resources (e.g. budget and effort) are allocated.

8. Requested RFSP Funds

This section must match Line 18a of the SF-424. This is the amount of total federal funds the applicant is requesting. The amount of funds requested must not be less than the minimum amount or exceed the maximum award amount. See section 1.4 on the NOFO. Applications requesting funds below the minimum or above the maximum award amount may be deemed ineligible.

9. Cost Share Funds

This section must match Line 18b of the SF-424. Applicants must provide cost sharing, in the form of **cash only, amounting to** at least 25% of the total Federal funds requested. Applications that do not meet this minimum cost share requirements may be deemed ineligible. See Section 2.5 of the NOFO for more information on the required cost-sharing.

Applicants may propose a cost share above the required minimum. This excess cost share can be in the form of cash or in-kind and could count towards meeting the Priority Consideration of “using significant non-Federal financial and technical resources”. If cost share contribution exceeds the required amount applicants will be voluntarily committing to it. The excess amount will need to be documented and provided if the project is awarded. Applicants must provide [Letters of Verification for Cost Sharing Funds](#) for each cost sharing contribution.

10. Priority Consideration

Priority consideration is given to projects that “use significant non-Federal financial and technical resources and work together with other local, State, Tribal, or national efforts” or “involve multiple entities and partners”. Applicants should select yes in the appropriate section only if the project clearly demonstrates how it meets the selected priority considerations (you may choose both).

Priority Consideration is also given to projects that cover areas in distressed low-income rural or urban communities with persistent poverty. Identify the counties or zip codes that will benefit from your project and using the [Distressed Communities Index](#) map collect and provide the community distress scores for each area. If your project benefits more than 5 areas, select the 5 highest scores.

Executive Summary

Sum up your plan! The executive summary is the first impression of the project and is an opportunity to capture the reviewer's attention. In 250 words or less, talk about the purpose of the project, what you are trying to achieve, who the intended beneficiaries are, how they will benefit and how you plan to make it all happen! **It might be easiest for this to be the last step.** You must use full sentences (no bullets, use generic language that is easily understood by all audiences, and describe any subawards. The executive summary will be published on the USDA AMS website for public view.

Alignment and Intent

Issue

Talk about the issue you have identified and how your project will address this issue. This section should use key words and topics from Section 3.1 of the NOFO. When responding to this section, do not just provide statistics and data related to your project. Instead, clearly describe how the project approach will address the issue you identified. Data and statistics are helpful to support your explanation but explaining your project in plain language will make your application easier to understand.

Objectives

Describe the objectives of the project in a way that is specific, measurable and something you can achieve. Throughout the rest of your application, you will be asked to show how your workplan, outcomes, staff and budget align with your chosen objectives, so make sure you are comfortable and confident with what you have written here. It is good to have more than one objective.

Partnership Goals

Describe the specific goals of this partnership and clearly explain how collaboration among partners will achieve the project outcomes. What are you seeking to achieve through this partnership? How would forming this partnership improve marketing opportunities for farms and food businesses?

Description of the Partnership

Scope

Give a full description of the proposed region (geographic, economic, etc.). Explain why this region is appropriate for the proposed activities and how it relates to the identified need. In other words, why it is the best place to carry out this work and how this partnership working together would add the most value to farm and food businesses in this region (as opposed to each entity acting independently).

Producer and Food Business Benefit

Describe the intended benefits (direct and indirect, short- and long-term) for producers or food businesses resulting from partnership activities. Have you considered engaging project beneficiaries as active participants in planning and executing your project? If so, describe your plans to do so in this section. *Note: This is not required if your project is solely for planning or a feasibility study.*

Think Like a Reviewer!

Review Criteria Checklist: Alignment and Intent

Read through your response to the “Alignment and Intent” section and go through the checklist below to ensure that your responses in this section address every question below.

Did you:

- Identify specific local or regional food system issues, describe project objectives and explain how your project will address them?
- Demonstrate a strong history of collaboration or provide detailed and clear plan on how your partners will coordinate roles, responsibilities, and decision making in this project?
- Describe where the project is happening and why it needs to be there?
- Explain why it is better for the partners to work together instead of alone to improve the local or regional food system?
- Identify who will benefit from the project and how each partner will work to create these benefits? (Not required for planning or feasibility projects).
- Follow the instructions and requirements in the NOFO (\$4.0–\$5.0) and Project Narrative Template?

Technical Merit

Partnership Preparation

Describe the partnership prior experience working together, including specific activities, outcomes, and accomplishments. If the partnership is new, describe how it was formed and the rationale for the partner selection. Has this partnership or any portion of this partnership engaged in any prior relevant activities? Give a brief history of how the partnership was developed and the accomplishments of the partnership. Discuss any current and future plans and how this project fits into those plans.

Work Plan

Describe in detail the plan to achieve each of the objectives described in the Alignment and Intent section. This includes:

- Description of each planned activity and how it relates to a specific objective
- Timeline for each activity including projected completion date (must be within the period of performance for your project)
- Resources required to complete each activity
- Project milestones (used to judge progress and success of each activity)
- Responsible staff for completing each activity (if someone is listed here, they must also be listed as Key Staff in the Expertise and Partners section)
 - If you plan to conduct trainings or provide technical assistance, also include how participants will be recruited and how you will help guide program development and delivery.

Previously Funded Projects

The project narrative asks if the partnership has received any previous funding to support partnership activities or projects, and if this project has been submitted to another grant program.

If your answer is “yes” to any of the above questions, you must provide the year, funding source and description. If you have an AMS grant, you must also include the AMS agreement number for grants received in the past five

(5) years. Describe how the project is different from previous grants or how it supplements the proposed activities; and, if applicable, provide the results of the project. Include lessons learned and how these lessons will be incorporated into this project. Projects that are duplicates of a previous grant will not be selected for funding.

Community Engagement

Describe how the partnership will engage and involve the community throughout the project, including partnering with other organizations. Your response must include:

- The specific roles of community members and partner organizations in project design, implementation, and/or evaluation.
- How new partners will be identified, recruited, and integrated into the project.
- Anticipated challenges to community engagement or partner participation and specific strategies to address those challenges.
- How engagement activities will support successful project outcomes and long-term impact.
- What types of technical assistance will this partnership be providing through this project?
- Who will be the target audience? What topics will be covered?

Note: Technical assistance related information is not required if your project is solely for planning or a feasibility study.

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Review Criteria Checklist: Technical Merit

Read through your response to the “Technical Merit” section and go through the checklist below to ensure that your responses in this section address every question below.

Did you:

- Describe the specific technical expertise and resources each partner brings to the project for development, implementation and/or management?
- Include a work plan with clear goals, objectives, and a system for how partners will work together?
- Present a detailed and realistic schedule with clearly defined milestone and timelines for the project activities?
- Describe anticipated challenges to achieving project goals and working with partners and explain how you plan to address those challenges?
- Incorporate lessons you’ve learned from previously working with these partners? (if applicable)

Achievability

Outcomes and Indicators

Four Objectives and associated Indicators that have been developed by USDA AMS are listed within this section of the Project Narrative Form. Look through the list of indicators within each of the three Objectives and choose the ones that best apply to your project. Choose at least one indicator(s) from Objectives 1-3. A 4th blank objective is optional but highly encouraged. For each selected indicator, state your estimated quantifiable target number, how you determined that target number, and how you will evaluate your progress. Also, list any potential challenges to achieving the estimated targets and how you would address those challenges.

Outcome and Indicator Measurement Plan

For each selected Outcome and Indicator, describe how you determined (data collections methods and tools) your estimated target number, and how/when you will evaluate your progress. Also, list any potential challenges to achieving the estimated target numbers and how you would address those challenges.

Dissemination of Project Results

Describe how project results (both positive and negative) will be shared. List similar organizations, beneficiaries or other relevant parties that would be interested in your results or implementing a similar project and the methods you plan to use to share this information (in-person, publications, podcasts, etc.)

Sustainability

Describe how the project, its partnerships and collaborations, and the results of the project will be sustained after the grant ends and funding is no longer available. Describe the project's plans to ensure high levels of participation, collaboration and engagement among partners and beneficiaries and what work will be done to sustain this after the completion of the project. This could include but is not limited to, continued collaboration with partners, the implementation of new practices, and commitment to continuing to identify and address issues in the community.

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Review Criteria Checklist: Achievability

Read through your response to the "Achievability" section and go through the checklist below to ensure that your responses in this section address every question below.

Did you:

- Include at least one clear, measurable outcome supported by appropriate indicators?
- Include target numbers for at least one outcome and at least one indicator and explain how target numbers for Outcome and Indicator(s) were decided?
- Describe a monitoring and evaluation plan that includes how data will be collected, analyzed, and used to assess and measure project results?
- Explain your plan for distributing the project's results?
- Show how the partnership will continue without grant funds once the grant period is over?

Expertise and Partners

Key Staff (Applicant Personnel and External Partners/Collaborators)

List all key project staff, including applicant organization personnel and external project partners and collaborators that comprise the Project Team, their role in the project, their relevant experience, qualifications and past successes in developing and operating projects similar to your proposed project. You must include [Letters of Commitment from Partner and Collaborator Organizations](#) to confirm the information provided in the application and their commitment to the project.

Project Management Plan

Describe your project management plan for coordination, communication, and data sharing and reporting among members of the Project Team and stakeholder groups, including both internal applicant organization personnel and external partners and collaborators.

Within this plan, explain the roles/responsibilities of the project team and how they will contribute to achieving the project’s objectives, activities and outcomes. Your plan should describe who would have day-to-day responsibility for key tasks such as: leadership of the project; monitoring the project’s ongoing progress, preparing reports; communicating with other partners. It should also describe the approach that will be used to monitor and track the progress of the project team.

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Review Criteria Checklist: Expertise and Partners

Read through your response to the “Expertise and Partners” section and go through the checklist below to ensure that your responses in this section address every question below.

Did you:

- Include signed [Letters of Commitment](#) from all project partners and collaborators that clearly define each partner roles, responsibility, and level of contribution to the project?
- Identify key staff responsible for managing the projects and describe their roles and responsibilities?
- Provide names, job titles, and relevant work experience of all project team staff?
- Describe the specific role of each partner in achieving project goals and outcomes?
- Describe how project beneficiaries will be engaged as active participants and how they would contribute to project success?
- Describe coordination, communication, data sharing and reporting plans for the project partnership?

Fiscal Plan and Resources

Budget and Justification

Note: For more information about filling out your Budget and Justification, refer to the [Budget Toolkit Snapshot](#). Provide the total cost of the project and the detailed breakdown of project costs by category (personnel, fringe benefits, travel, equipment, supplies, contractual/subawards, other, and indirect costs). Explain how these costs were determined and how they relate to the Project Objectives, Expected Outcomes and the project work plan.

The budget must show the total cost for the project and describe how you came up with the costs listed in each category. The budget justification must provide enough detail for reviewers to easily understand how costs were determined and how they relate to the project objectives and expected outcomes. The budget must show a relationship between the work you plan to do, and the costs listed in the budget. The cost should be proportional to the scale and impact of the proposed activities and expected outcomes.

You must account for both federal funds and cost share funds in the budget and be specific about the amounts for each category. The cost-share amounts listed in the table (provided within the Project Narrative Form) must match the amounts described in the cost share fund letters. The total costs on the budget summary table must match the subtotals in the “Requested RFSP Funds” (Project Narrative Form page 2: question 8) and “Cost Share funds” (Project Narrative Form page 2: question 9) amounts.

You are also required to submit the SF-424A Budget information For Non-Construction Programs form along with completing the budget section of the Project Narrative. The SF-4242 A must be consistent with the budget narrative and all costs provided in the application.

Cost Share

Cost Share funds are required. Applicants must provide a minimum 25% cost share (must be CASH) of the Federal portion of the grant. You must submit signed [Letters of Verification for Cost Share Funds](#) for each cost share commitment. *Note: Only applicants with a valid Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) can use indirect cost as a source of sharing. Applicants electing to use the 15% de minimis indirect rate may NOT use indirect costs as cost share.*

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Review Criteria Checklist: Fiscal Plan and Resources

Read through your response to the “Fiscal Plan and Resources” section and go through the checklist below to ensure that your responses in this section address every question below.

Did you:

- Provide a clear and detailed description for each budget line item?
- Demonstrate how the budget is reasonable and consistent with the size and scope of the project?
- Clearly link each budget items to specific project activities described in the project narrative?
- Clearly describe how partner resources committed as cost sharing funds will be used? (cash/in-kind)
- Include signed [Letter\(s\) of Verification of Cost Sharing Funds](#) to show that cost-sharing funds or in-kind contributions are available?
- Budget for travel expenses for at least one Key Staff member to attend the AMS Coordinator Meeting (estimated to be around \$1,700 per person)?
- Make sure the responses to question 8 and 9 in the [RFSP Project Narrative Form](#) match your budget summary table?

Additional Check: Form Requirements

Did you:

- Use the [RFSP Project Narrative Form](#)?
- Use 11-point font, type and single space your project narrative and not exceed the page **Fifteen (15)** 8.5 x 11 pages (excluding existing Project Narrative form content)?
- Convert your project narrative to a .pdf to submit to Grants.gov? (Handwritten applications or applications in MS Word will not be accepted).