



USDA Regional Food Business Centers

Request for Applications

Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-AMS-TM-LRFD-C-0001

Publication Date: September 7, 2022

Application Due Date: 11:59 PM Eastern Time on November 22, 2022

Program Solicitation Information

Funding Opportunity Title: USDA Regional Food Business Centers

Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-AMS-TM-LRFD-C-0001

Announcement Type: Initial

Assistance Listing (formerly CFDA) Number: 10.186

Dates: Applications must be received on or before 11:59 pm Eastern Time on November 22, 2022, through [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov). Applications received after this deadline will not be considered for funding.

Executive Summary: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), requests applications for the fiscal year (FY) 2022 USDA Regional Food Business Centers (Regional Food Centers). The Regional Food Centers will serve as the cornerstone of USDA’s development of local and regional supply chains. They will offer coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building support to small and mid-sized food and farm businesses, with the goal of creating a more resilient, diverse, and competitive food system. AMS will award cooperative agreements to regionally based partners to support USDA’s work on regional food supply chains. USDA is using approximately \$400 million in funds authorized under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116—260, Division N, Title VII, Subtitle B, Section 751 to develop and implement the program, with approximately \$360 million going directly to fund the Regional Centers.

Through this solicitation, AMS will fund at least six USDA Regional Food Centers. There are three High Priority Areas that will each have at least one Regional Center specifically serving all or part of that area: [Colonias](#) (counties on the US/Mexico border), high need areas of the Delta and the Southeast, and the high need areas of Appalachia. In addition, there will be one national Tribal Center. There will also be Regional Food Centers that serve other areas of the country beyond these High Priority areas and the Tribal Center.

This announcement identifies the eligibility criteria for USDA Regional Food Centers, and the application forms and associated instructions needed to apply for a USDA Regional Food Center agreement.

This program is intended to benefit small and mid-sized producers, processors, aggregators, and distributors that sell into all types of markets, including local and regional markets. This program is inclusive of all types of products produced locally or regionally, including fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, fish, grains, and dairy. Applicants are required to prioritize service to underserved communities and businesses. Applicants to be USDA Regional Food Centers should engage and involve these beneficiaries when developing projects and applications.

Timing to Obtain and Submit Grants.gov Required Elements

Required Action	<i>Timing to Obtain/Submit</i>
AMS Deadline to receive final application and all supporting materials through Grants.Gov.	<i>November 22 – 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time</i>
Establishing an <i>Active</i> SAM.gov Account (if you do not already have one) and obtaining your Unique Entity ID.	7-10 business days
Obtaining a TIN/EIN (if you do not already have one)	Up to 2 weeks
Creating your Grants.gov profile and registering your Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) authorization	Up to 2 weeks

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1.0 FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

1.1 LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

The USDA Regional Food Business Centers (Regional Food Centers) are authorized and funded by the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116—260, Division N, Title VII, Subtitle B, Section 751. Under this section, the Secretary is directed to provide support for agricultural producers, growers, and processors impacted by coronavirus, including producers and growers of specialty crops, non-specialty crops, dairy, livestock, and poultry, producers that supply local food systems, including farmers markets, restaurants, and schools.

1.2 PURPOSE

The USDA Regional Food Business Centers are intended to support a more resilient, diverse, and competitive food system. Small and mid-sized food and farm businesses often lack the tools and resources to access customers and develop robust local and regional markets. The Regional Food Centers will offer coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building to small and mid-sized food and farm businesses (producers, processors, aggregators, and distributors) to create new markets and expand current linkages throughout the supply chain. Regional Food Centers will serve producers by providing localized assistance to develop linkages between producers and other parts of the supply chain. The Regional Food Centers will also provide technical assistance needed to access new customers and markets, and to access federal, state and local resources, thereby closing the gaps or barriers to access. By strengthening connections between rural and urban areas, the Regional Food Centers will drive economic opportunities across the regions.

Regional Food Centers will focus on underserved producers, processors, aggregators, distributors, and other business within the supply chain. The Regional Food Centers will offer comprehensive, collaborative, and regionally-driven community and economic development that improves opportunities and competitiveness of food and farm businesses, including value-added activities that generate additional business revenue.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented changes in where, how, and what food U.S. consumers purchased and acquired. The 2020 Local Food Marketing Practices Survey, administered by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, found that the number of farms selling locally produced food decreased by 12% nationally between 2015-2020. Despite this decrease, the demand for local food persists. A [consumer survey](#) conducted by Colorado State University in fall 2020 showed that 35% of consumers tried at least one new market channel, such as farmers markets or local restaurants, in spring and summer 2020. While pandemic impacts were extensive, and often detrimental, COVID-19 also highlighted the strengths of local and regional food systems, and food acquisition and purchasing took on new dimensions as local food businesses such as CSAs, co-ops, and farmers markets saw a rise in popularity and filled gaps (e.g., connecting producers with new markets, enhancing distribution of food products, and alleviating the lack of processing in high production areas) in the middle of the supply chain. A follow up consumer survey conducted in winter 2021 showed that many of the consumer shifts to direct from producer purchases have persisted since fall 2020.

The Regional Food Centers will create new market opportunities for producers and businesses within regions tailored to their business development and investment needs. Resilient supply chains are built upon strong relationships between individuals, communities, regions, sectors, and institutions and this regional approach relies on the cultivation of strategic alliances within the supply chain, which are intentionally structured to produce both economic success and equitable social benefits.

Modeled after the Dairy Business Innovation (DBI) Initiatives, the Regional Food Centers will also increase capacity through business builder subawards, to food and farm businesses looking to start or expand in their region. The Regional Food Centers are expected to coordinate with a wide range of existing USDA programs and other programs that provide similar business development assistance to limit duplication and complement their purposes and activities. The ultimate goals of the Regional Food Centers are to:

- Expand and strengthen regional food systems networks and partnerships in response to hardships and vulnerabilities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic,
- Increase food and farm business and financial acumen, particularly among small and mid-size operators,
- Create more, new, and better markets, and increase market awareness and access for small and mid-size producers and processors,
- Increase the number of local producers that distributors, retailers and foodservice buyers source from, either directly or through intermediaries.
- Increase the number of new food and farm businesses and improve the viability of existing businesses, and
- Increase the revenue of food and farm businesses served.

The Regional Food Centers will monitor and report on specific metrics undergirding these goals, as detailed in the [semi-annual report](#) also available in Appendix A. The Regional Food Centers will be leaders in food systems development and will contribute to the body of knowledge in food systems and market development. In addition to these goals and associated metrics, USDA welcomes Regional Food Centers to define their own region-specific goals and metrics to address their specific local challenges and opportunities.

1.3 PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Regional Food Centers will be operated by partnerships of eligible entities as described in [Section 3.1](#) and will have three main interconnected responsibilities, along with administration, monitoring, and evaluation, which may be accomplished through sub-agreements with organizations or additional partners in the region:

- **Coordination** - The Regional Food Centers will act as coordinating entities across their geographic areas with USDA, other federal, state, and tribal agencies with relevant resources, regional commissions, stakeholders, and the other Regional Food Centers. They will engage with stakeholders and partners to develop and implement strategic and funding plans for serving the region through technical assistance and capacity building. They will conduct outreach to underserved communities and businesses.
- **Technical Assistance** - The Regional Food Centers will provide direct business technical assistance to small- and mid-sized food and farm businesses (producers, processors, aggregators, distributors, and other businesses within the food supply chain) and food value and supply chain coordination. Each Regional Food Center will identify priority areas for technical assistance (e.g., aggregation/distribution, specialty crop processing for institutions) for the region it plans to serve.
- **Capacity Building** – The Regional Food Centers will provide financial assistance through business builder subawards of up to \$100,000 each to support projects focused on meeting regional

needs and increasing capacity among businesses working towards expansion. These subawards may support staff time, business planning activities, software implementation, the purchase of equipment (such as food safety, processing and/or packaging equipment), value chain and supply chain coordination and innovation, product development, marketing and other associated expenses as outlined in this RFA.

Similar to the Dairy Business Innovation (DBI) initiatives work, a Regional Food Center may provide a subaward to a business that receives direct technical assistance to advance the business activities recommended by the Regional Food Center, and the Regional Food Center may conduct a competitive subaward program to farm and food businesses that did not seek or receive direct technical assistance.

1.3.1 EQUITY AND TRUST

In alignment with [E.O. 13985](#), *Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*, and the [E.O. 13175](#), *Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments*, the USDA Regional Food Center program takes a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality, and meeting a Federal trust responsibility to advance programming that recognizes tribal sovereignty, policies, and standards.

The Regional Food Centers will target investment in underserved and tribal communities. This includes, but is not limited to: consulting with members of communities and organizations led by and serving communities that have been historically underrepresented and underserved by, or subject to discrimination in, Federal policies and programs; gathering data and conducting analyses that helps measure and advance equity; addressing barriers to full participation in programming for historically underserved communities; and, conducting equitable hiring practices in accordance with the law. Applicants are encouraged to include specific elements for how they will advance these efforts.

1.3.2 COORDINATION

The Regional Food Centers will serve as part of USDA's regional network and must maintain and cultivate partnerships with a variety of organizations, including organizations led by and serving historically underserved individuals. USDA encourages collaboration among applicants as they plan and submit proposals, and as outlined in [Section 5.2](#), finalists may be encouraged to partner with other applicants during the selection process. Additionally, Regional Food Centers will be encouraged to collaborate with related initiatives and hubs both inside and outside of USDA to plan and deliver services.¹ The Regional Food Centers will be vital links, working across the supply chain, collaborating with other Regional Food Centers and across USDA, including, but not limited to the Rural Partners Network, AMS grant programs (e.g., Dairy Business Innovation Initiatives (DBI), Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (FMLFPP), Rural Development (e.g., Value Added Producer Grants (VAPG), Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program (MPPEP)), Farm Service Agency (e.g., land access issues, farm storage facility loans), and Natural Resources Conservation Service (e.g., land access issues, conservation programs, urban agriculture), among many others. The Regional Food Centers will serve as regional hubs of USDA resources for food producers, processors, aggregators, and distributors who have been impacted by the pandemic.

The Regional Food Centers will work closely with AMS's Transportation and Marketing Program, particularly the Grants Division and the Local and Regional Foods Division. Specifically, they will work to

¹ For example, the Small Business Administration's Regional Innovation Clusters, NIFA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, USDA's Climate Hubs, FNS's State Nutrition Action Councils, and university-based food innovation centers.

engage with grant recipients and applicants in AMS programs as well as other programs across USDA to build stakeholder capacity to apply for and execute successful projects. In addition, the Regional Food Centers will be thought partners on, and users of, local and regional food systems research and data, working closely with AMS and other USDA agencies to share resources with relevant stakeholders. Regional Food Centers, in partnership with AMS Regional Coordinators, will collaborate with other USDA staff to ensure their regions are aware of and engaged in all relevant programming and resources.

1.3.3 TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

As required in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, the Regional Food Centers will provide technical assistance to a variety of businesses impacted by the pandemic. The Regional Food Centers will provide technical assistance through their partnership members or by issuing sub-agreements to support direct technical and value chain/supply chain coordination assistance to farm and food businesses. The Regional Food Centers themselves may also provide technical assistance. Technical assistance providers will be:

- Established and expected to maintain a physical presence in the Regional Food Center's geographic region (excluding the tribal center, which has nationwide reach).
- Able to support the wide-ranging needs of stakeholders in the region, including providing market development, and value chain/supply chain coordination.
- Experienced in helping smaller-scale food producers and food and farm businesses in the middle of the supply chain in identifying and navigating third party financial assistance, particularly from federal, state, tribal, and other sources.
- Experienced in food and agriculture business development services, including developing non-food revenue streams from by-products or co-products such as leathers, ornamentals, agritourism, etc.

Technical assistance providers must demonstrate an understanding of unique regional needs and the capacity to meet the needs of small and mid-sized food businesses in the region. Technical assistance will support a variety of business assistance needs such as:

- *Value chain/supply chain coordination*, including networking and peer-to-peer sharing.
- *Market development*, including market research, access, and generic marketing support.
- *Navigating and managing financial resources from third parties*, including federal, state, tribal, and other sources.

Business development services or training, as resources allow, including planning, financial literacy, legal and regulatory awareness, succession planning, record keeping, and creating value-added non-food items and activities to generate additional revenue. Technical assistance providers will provide training and guidance to:

- Producers with a focus on direct marketing or accessing local and regional intermediated markets, such as locally focused distributors, food hubs, institutions, restaurants, and retailers.
- Small- and mid-size food processors, distributors, aggregators, and food hubs.
- USDA grant applicants and recipients, with a priority on small and mid-sized producers and food and farm businesses in the middle of the supply chain.
- Other entities as determined by the Regional Food Center and USDA.

1.3.4 CAPACITY BUILDING

The Regional Food Centers will support supply chain resiliency and pandemic response by building the capacity of small and mid-sized food producers, businesses, or networks of businesses. As with the Dairy Business Innovation (DBI) initiatives, business builder subawards (grants or other financial assistance) will go to projects predominantly aimed at starting or expanding in the region, through value-added opportunities, diversification of on-farm activities, expansion of access to new markets, and/or innovations to generate income from co-products or byproducts. Business builder subawards will provide food and farm businesses the capital needed to launch and expand their businesses while they work to build income streams or identify needed investors.

The business builder subawards will provide financial assistance of up to \$100,000 to support individual food businesses, projects focused on regional needs, and businesses that are working towards expansion and other investment. These subawards may support staff time, business planning activities, software implementation, the purchase of equipment² (such as food safety, processing and/or packaging equipment), value chain and supply chain coordination and innovation, product development, marketing, and other associated expenses as outlined in this RFA. Business builder subawards may also fund supply chain analysis and strategy development for identified gaps and specialization opportunities. The Regional Food Centers will be expected to direct most of the capacity building funding to priority areas identified in the application.

The Regional Food Centers will issue business builder subawards on a rolling basis with each subaward lasting for no more than two years. USDA encourages Regional Food Centers to streamline business builder subaward applications or consider making subawards on a noncompetitive basis to an entity that receives technical assistance from that Center to advance the business activities recommended as a result of that assistance.

1.3.5 ADMINISTRATION

“The applicant” is the lead eligible entity of the partnership applying to operate the Regional Food Center. The applicant must have demonstrated capacity and experience managing a high value and quantity of federal funds. These are large complex agreements with many partners that require close programmatic and financial monitoring. Successful applications will demonstrate:

- Ability to manage many (100+) subagreements and/or subawards per year.
- Ability to manage reporting and financial tracking of subagreements and subawards.
- Capacity to maintain proper financial controls as required by [2 CFR part 200](#).
- Experience in managing large complex federal agreements and/or grants.
- Experience working with historically underrepresented communities.
- Experience facilitating large-scale collaborative projects to advance a goal.

Regional Food Centers must ensure that all subrecipients maintain appropriate records and follow all applicable Federal statutes and regulations as well as the [Cooperative Agreement and Program Specific](#) and [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#).

² Special purpose equipment includes food safety equipment, processing equipment, refrigeration and freezer equipment, packaging equipment, or vehicles such as delivery vans. More information on allowable costs can be found in [Section 4.6.1](#).

1.3.6 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

In addition to the responsibilities outlined above, the Regional Food Centers will be responsible for developing and executing monitoring and evaluation plans. The applicant must demonstrate how it will collect and compile data and reports from partners and sub-agreements, including the systems and infrastructure that will be used. The applicant will be responsible for submitting a semi-annual report that captures information about the Regional Food Center's operation as a whole and from the sub-agreements and subawards. In addition to the goals outlined above and required in the semi-annual report (Appendix A), the applicant may propose additional metrics, with a particular focus on equity and diversity.

1.4 REGIONS

The Regional Food Centers will be geographically based. Applicants must define the geographic region it intends to serve and high need areas within that region. For each of the following High Priority Areas, USDA intends to select at least one Regional Food Center specifically serving all or part of that area:

- [Colonias](#) (counties on the US/Mexico border)
- High need/limited resources areas of the Delta and the Southeast, including areas where there is persistent poverty.
- High need areas of Appalachia

Applicants proposing to serve the High Priority Areas listed above are encouraged to include geographic areas beyond the high need areas, to connect producers and processors to markets. USDA intends to make awards to Regional Food Centers that serve other areas of the country beyond those explicitly listed above.

For the purposes of this program, a geographic region is defined as reaching all, or part, of at least three states or territories or a 400-mile radius. While desired, regions do not need to be geographically contiguous. For example, multiple states and/or territories with similar needs, such as locations outside the lower 48 states, may propose a region serving noncontiguous areas of the United States or territories. Applicants must include details describing why this region would benefit from a USDA Regional Food Center, with a specific focus on small and mid-sized farm and food businesses and priority areas (defined below) that would benefit. The application must demonstrate the availability and commitment of local government, philanthropy, and industry to support the growth of agricultural opportunities and markets in the region.

Priority Areas: Applicants must define priority areas that they will serve within their proposed region that would classify as high need, underserved communities that were particularly affected by the pandemic. Project narratives should include specific data showing why the region and priority areas were chosen. Applications should describe the degree of historic economic distress experienced in the project region, including the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Applicants may include data such as:

- [Persistent poverty](#) (poverty rates exceeding 20% for the last 30 years);
- [Social Vulnerability Index](#) (SVI; indication of vulnerability to social factors including socioeconomic, demographic, and housing/transportation);
- [Distressed Community Index](#) (DCI; a measure of distress by zip-code)
- [Persistent child poverty](#)
- [Low employment](#)

The criteria in [Section 5.0](#) describe how Regional Food Center proposals will be evaluated and selected. USDA recognizes the Regional Food Centers will likely not reach every state and territory.

In addition, USDA will evaluate proposals according to the process outlined in [Section 5.0](#) and will work with applicants to ensure High Priority Areas are covered while avoiding geographic overlap. From the start, Regional Food Centers should be looking to forge connections and collaborations; under the selection process USDA may offer an opportunity for the finalists in similar or overlapping regions to coordinate efforts and resubmit proposals with additional partners or activities for final consideration by USDA.

As outlined in [Section 2.6](#), USDA will work closely with the Regional Food Centers to create a national network of support. This network will meet regularly with USDA, and share resources, challenges, and lessons learned.

Tribal Center

In addition to the High Priority Areas listed above, AMS will also fund one national Tribal Food Business Center. Given the unique legal challenges Indian Country faces with regard to complex trust land, tribal and federal law, and other issues, the Tribal Regional Food Business Center will be uniquely capable of supporting American Indian/Alaskan Native food systems while navigating the legal, cultural, and commercial interests across Indian Country. The Tribal Food Business Center must include an eligible applicant that is a tribal or Native run organization that primarily serves Native American and tribal communities, that has a documented history of successfully working with tribal communities in this space, and it must demonstrate a collaboration across a nation-wide network of partners. While this Center may employ some place-based strategies, its network will focus on Indian Country nationally.

2.0 AWARD INFORMATION

2.1 TYPE OF FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

AMS will use a Cooperative Agreement to provide a Federal award to successful applicants.

2.2 TYPE OF APPLICATIONS

AMS will review all new applications for conformity with the criteria in [Section 4.2](#). Applicant to provide additional information or clarification by a specified date.

2.3 AVAILABLE FUNDING

The anticipated amount available to fund applications for Regional Food Centers is at least \$360,000,000.

Enactment of additional continuing resolutions, funding rescissions, or an appropriations act may affect the availability or level of funding for this program. There is no commitment by USDA to fund any application or to make a specific number of awards.

2.4 ELIGIBILITY FOR SUPPLEMENTAL PROJECT APPLICATIONS

Applications for renewal or supplementation of existing projects are not eligible to compete with applications for new Federal awards. An application for renewal means an application submitted to continue an existing agreement that meets the objectives and requirements of this RFA. An application for supplementation of an existing project means an application to add components to an existing agreement so that it would meet the objectives and requirements in this RFA. USDA does reserve the

right to renew or supplement awards under this RFA in the future with additional federal funding without further competition.

2.5 FEDERAL AWARD PERIOD DURATION AND SIZE

AMS expects recipients to complete their projects within the required timeframe. The applicant must indicate the start date and end date on Block 17 of the SF-424 "[Application for Federal Assistance](#)". Per AMS Terms and Conditions, if the activities cannot be completed within the agreement's period of performance, extensions of up to 12 months may be granted at the agency's discretion.

Duration (Months)	Minimum Award	Maximum Award
60	\$15M	\$50M

2.6 SUBSTANTIAL INVOLVEMENT

AMS will be substantially involved throughout the period of performance of the award. Substantial involvement may include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Specification of the manner, method, performance, or timing of the work in an approved work plan;
- Ensuring work plans maintain consistency across the Regional Food Centers while also being responsive to the needs of the region;
- Review and approval of one stage of work before a subsequent stage may begin during the period of performance;
- Participation in the selection and approval of new partners;
- Participation in potential geographic expansion or adjustment and approval of geographic reach;
- Review and approval of an evaluation plan;
- Participation in the selection and approval of individuals or organizations that will conduct all required evaluations;
- Participation in the selection and approval of individuals or organizations that are considered for funding in sub-agreements or subawards;
- Establishing performance requirements, collaborating on data collection methods and data analysis for required evaluations and other performance reports;
- Provision of specific direction or redirection of work during the period of performance; and
- Establishing guidelines to ensure funds are distributed equitably and driven by the region's priorities and needs.

3.0 ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

3.1 ELIGIBLE ENTITIES

All applications to lead a Regional Food Center ("the applicant") must come from an eligible entity representing a partnership and must be physically based in the region (excluding the tribal center, which has nationwide reach). A partnership is an agreement among three or more eligible entities representing at least two of the eligible entity types. To demonstrate partnerships, the applicant must submit letters of commitment outlining the partnership. Within 45 days of award, the partnership will provide USDA with a Memorandum of Understanding between the partners detailing how each partner will contribute to the Regional Food Center.

The applicant must be the organization in the partnership that is responsible for receiving and managing the award.

Partnerships that include organizations that serve or represent Limited Resource Entities are strongly encouraged to apply, including organizations that may not have capacity to apply as lead applicants. Serving or representing a Limited Resource Entity means that the organization provides technical assistance services to, and meaningfully engages, historically underserved farmers, ranchers, and businesses in addressing their needs. See USDA definition of [Historically Underserved Groups](#) for further information.

All applicants and the eligible entities that make up the partnership must have a physical presence within, and have a history of serving, the region for which they are applying to serve as a Regional Food Center, and must be domestic entities owned and operated within the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the United States Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands or Indian tribal lands in the geographic regions of the United States.

Applications should include engagement from multiple sectors such as local, state, tribal, or regional governments, tribal-serving organizations, food policy councils, producers and/or producer organizations, universities, urban and rural food system stakeholders, philanthropy, and entities across the food value chain and supply chain, such as distributors, processors, food hubs, retailers, and underserved communities and agricultural businesses. In cases where more than one application proposes to serve the same, similar, or overlapping geographic regions, USDA may invite finalists to partner with other eligible entities in their region and resubmit an expanded partnership proposal for reconsideration.

Eligible entities are Non-Federal Entities, which are defined in [2 CFR 200.1](#) as State, local governments, Indian tribes, Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), and nonprofit organizations.

Eligible entities include:

Entity Type	Description
Producer Network or Association	Producer group- or member-owned organizations that provide, offer, or sell agricultural products or services through a common distribution system for the mutual member benefit of the owners, as well as organizations that assist, represent, or serve producers or producer networks.
Food Council	Food policy council or food and farm system network that represents multiple organizations involved in the production, processing, and consumption of food, and local, tribal, and State governments.
Tribal Governments	Tribal government has the meaning as defined in the Federally Recognized Indian Tribe List Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-454; 108 Stat. 4791, 4792).

Entity Type	Description
State Agencies or Regional Authorities	State government agencies such as departments of agriculture or natural resources, planning commissions, councils of governments, regional economic development organizations/districts, and similar organizations.
Institutions of Higher Education	Educational institutions that meet the requirements specified at 20 U.S.C. § 1001 .
Nonprofit Corporations	Any organization or institution, including nonprofits with State or IRS or Tribal 501 (c) status and accredited institutions of higher education, where no part of the organization's or institution's net earnings inure to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual.
Economic Development Corporations	Organizations whose missions are to improve, maintain, develop, and/or market or promote a specific geographic area.

The entities in the partnership may subaward or contract with private or public, for-profit or nonprofit entities to support the coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building services of the center.

3.2 COST-SHARING AND MATCHING

This funding opportunity does not have a Federal cost-sharing or matching requirement and such information should not be included in the submitted application nor subsequent performance or financial reports.

4.0 APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION INFORMATION

To be considered for funding, an applicant must submit a complete application with all required documentation outlined below.

USDA may seek additional information or documentation from the applicant to clarify information presented in the application. USDA also may, in its sole discretion, continue review of any application with minor defects or errors, while the applicant supplies the missing information.

4.1 ELECTRONIC APPLICATION PACKAGE

Only electronic applications for this RFA will be accepted and must be submitted via Grants.gov. We urge applicants to submit early to the Grants.gov system. For an overview of the Grants.gov application process see Grants.gov's [Apply for Grants webpage](#). This RFA contains the information needed to obtain and complete required application forms and AMS-specific attachments. More information about applying through Grants.gov can be found in [Section 4.7](#).

Applicants can find the opportunity under either the Assistance Listing number "10.186," or the Regional Food Business Center Funding Opportunity Number "USDA-AMS-TM-LRFD-C-0001".

4.2 CONTENT AND FORM OF APPLICATION SUBMISSION

4.2.1 SF-424 APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

Required: Form SF-424 is available via the opportunity at Grants.gov. Most information blocks on the required form are either self-explanatory or adequately explained in the instructions. However, applicants must use the following supplemental instructions associated with specific blocks on the SF-424.

Block	Instructions
#1 Type of Submission	Application
#2 Type of Application	New
#4 through #7	Not required
#8d Address	Enter the applicant organization street address as it appears in SAM.gov. P.O. Boxes will not be accepted. Enter a 9-digit zip code
#10 Name of Federal Agency	AMS, USDA
#11 Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number (Assistance Listing Number)	10.186
#12 Funding Opportunity Number	USDA-AMS-TM-LRFD-C-0001
#13 Competition Identification Number	Not applicable
#14 Areas Affected by Project	Enter cities, counties, States affected by project
#15 Descriptive Title of Applicant's Project	Provide a short description of the project
#16a Congressional Districts for Applicant	Enter the Congressional district where the applicant main office is located
#16b Congressional Districts for Program/Project	Enter the Congressional district where your project will be implemented. Write "All" if the project will be implemented in more than one location
#17 Proposed Project Start Date and End Date	Start Date: Upon Award End date: Enter the appropriate End Date
#18a Estimated Funding – Federal	Total Federal amount requested
#18b – 18f Estimated Funding – Applicant	Not applicable
#19 Is Applicant Subject to Review by State Under Executive Order 12372 Process?	See Section 4.5

4.2.2 SF-424A BUDGET INFORMATION

Required. SF-424A is available via the application package in Grants.gov. Most information blocks on the required form are either self-explanatory or adequately explained in the form instructions. However, for applications the following supplemental instructions must be used for specific boxes on the form. **Do not use instructions found on Grants.gov or elsewhere on the internet for the boxes below.**

On SF-424A, please complete **only** Sections A and B. Do **not** complete Sections C - F.

Section A – Budget Summary

Box	Instructions
1.a – Grant Program Function or Activity	Enter “Regional Food Centers – Federal”
1.b – Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number	Enter “10.186”
1.e – Federal	Enter the amount of Federal funding requested for the project

Section B – Budget Categories

Box	Instructions
6.a – 6.j – Object Class Categories	<p>In Column 1, enter the amount of Federal funds requested for each Object Class Category.</p> <p>For example, if you are requesting \$2,000 in Federal funds for “Supplies”, enter 2000 in Column 1, box 6.e.</p>

4.2.3 PROJECT ABSTRACT SUMMARY

Required. The Project Abstract Summary form available in [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) will be used as the award description for the overarching Federal award. This is separate from the [Project Narrative](#). The Project Abstract box must include:

- Project purpose
- Activities to be performed
- Deliverables, expected outcomes, and associated performance measures
- Intended beneficiary(ies): Who will benefit from this beyond the applicant organization?
- Subrecipient activities. Outline who the actual or intended subrecipients are and how the sub-agreement supports the program goals. The subrecipient activities may support coordination, technical assistance, outreach, and/or capacity building.

4.2.4 PROJECT AND BUDGET NARRATIVE

Required: Applicants are required to prepare and submit a narrative using the Regional Food Center Project Narrative form. The Project Narrative must clearly describe the project’s partners, actual or potential definition of the geographic region served, objectives and goals, types and sequence of project activities, monitoring and evaluation strategies associated with the proposed activities, and how the applicant will manage the project, with an emphasis on financial controls.

The project narrative must be typed and single-spaced in an 11-point font and must not exceed fifteen (15) 8.5 x 11 pages (excluding pre-existing form content). For example, if the form is 10 pages before you begin entering your project narrative information, your form may be up to 25 pages in length when completed (10 original pages + 15 pages of applicant content). DO NOT modify the margins of the Project Narrative form. Applicants must submit the Project Narrative form as a PDF and attached to the Grants.gov application package using the “Project Narrative Attachment Form” on the application package. Handwritten applications or applications submitted in MS Word will not be accepted.

Prior to submitting the application to Grants.gov, please make sure no tracked changes or mark-up edits and comments are visible.

The supporting documents listed below do not count toward the 15-page limit.

4.2.5 LETTERS OF COMMITMENT FROM PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Required: Applicants must provide letters of commitment (not letters of support) from all project partners at the time of application.

AMS has posted a [partner organization template](#) on the program’s application website. We highly encourage you to use this template. If you do not use this template, the Letters of Commitment must include at least the following information:

- Project Applicant.
- Project Title.
- A short introduction describing the partner entity’s mission and its reason(s) for joining the partnership.
- The specific role(s) the entity is committing to for the project, including the participation of specific individuals, as applicable; and
- A statement that these individuals and the entity agree to abide by the management plan contained in the application.

Submit *Letters of Commitment* on letterhead and address them to the applicant (i.e., Project Director). Clearly indicate at the top that they are **LETTERS OF COMMITMENT**. Letters must accompany the proposal at the time of application. Unsigned letters or letters emailed separately will not be accepted.

Letter(s) must be attached to the Grants.gov application package using the “Add Attachments” button under SF-424 item #15.

PLEASE NOTE: The Regional Food Center program does not require Congressional letters of support and such letters do not carry additional weight during the evaluation process.

4.2.6 NEGOTIATED INDIRECT COST RATE AGREEMENT (NICRA)

Required if the applicant has a NICRA: Refer to [Section 4.6.3](#) for more information. The NICRA must be in PDF format and attached to the Grants.gov application package using the “Add Attachments” button under SF-424 item #15

4.2.7 ACCOUNTING SYSTEM AND FINANCIAL CAPABILITY FORM

Recipients of Federal funds must maintain adequate accounting systems that meet the criteria outlined in 2 CFR part 200’s [Standards for Financial and Program Management](#). The responses to the [Accounting System and Financial Capability Form](#) are used to assist in the AMS evaluation of your accounting system to ensure the adequate, appropriate, and transparent use of Federal funds. Failure to comply with the criteria outlined in the regulations above may preclude your organization from receiving an award.

4.3 SUBMITTED APPLICATION QUALIFICATION

Your application may **not be reviewed or considered for funding** if it is:

- Received by Grants.gov after the submission deadline, or
- Submitted via any method other than through Grants.gov, or
- Submitted to the wrong program, or

- Not responsive to the requirements of this RFA (eligibility, incomplete application, application exceeds page limit, not providing all required documents, etc.).

See [AMS' Late and/or Non-Responsive Applications Policy](#) for more information.

4.4 SUBMISSION DATE AND TIME

Applicants must submit applications electronically via [Grants.gov](#) by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on November 22, 2022. AMS cannot consider applications received after this deadline for funding. (See [AMS' Late and/or Nonresponsive Applications Policy](#).)

Ensure that all components are complete before submission. Allow enough time for the application process, as it may take more than one attempt before your application is successfully submitted. AMS encourages you to submit your application at least two weeks prior to the application deadline to ensure all certifications and registrations are met.

4.5 INTERGOVERNMENTAL REVIEW

This program is not subject to [E.O. 12372](#), which requires intergovernmental consultation with state and local officials.

4.6 FUNDING RESTRICTIONS

All AMS awards, sub-agreements, and subawards are subject to the terms and conditions, cost principles, and other considerations described in the Program Specific Terms and Conditions and in the general [AMS Terms and Conditions](#). In addition, as part of a national network of USDA Regional Food Business Centers, USDA must be listed and named as the funder on all external communications and the centers must use the name USDA Regional Food Business Center. Applicants that have questions concerning the allowability of costs *after* reviewing the [Program Specific Terms and Conditions](#) and the [General Terms and Conditions](#) should contact AMS staff using the contact information listed under [Section 7.0](#).

4.6.1 EQUIPMENT

As outlined in the Program Specific Terms and Conditions and the General Terms and Conditions, equipment purchases that support producer access to new markets and/or benefit local and regional supply chains are generally allowable as special purpose equipment, for both Regional Food Centers and subrecipients. Special purpose equipment purchases in subawards may include:

1. Transportation, processing, aggregation, or storage investments;
2. Value chain/supply chain innovation or upgrades, including equipment or technology upgrades or investments to support process adaptations; and,
3. Product development, packaging, and marketing of agricultural products.

Purchases over \$5,000 must be approved and the purchased equipment monitored by AMS, as required by [2 CFR § 200.313](#). Regional Food Center funds may not be used for construction and property acquisition, per uniform guidance on federal financial assistance. All AMS awards are subject to the terms and conditions, cost principles, and other considerations described in the Program Specific and AMS General Terms and Conditions.

Applicants that have questions concerning the allowability of costs after reviewing this document should contact AMS staff using the contact information listed in the RFA.

4.6.2 REGIONAL FOOD CENTER APPLICATIONS NOT ELIGIBLE FOR FUNDING

Applications for this Regional Food Center opportunity are not eligible for funding if the proposed activities:

- Are primarily for production-related expenses, such as farming guidance and production inputs (seeds, fertilizer, or ingredients for a value-added product); technical assistance to producers for business planning would be allowed.
- Are related to construction or purchasing land for use by a non-Federal entity.
- Benefit only one agricultural producer or individual (except for Capacity Building subawards and individual technical assistance).
- Depend upon the completion of another project or the receipt of another grant.
- Duplicate activities in a project that has received a Federal award from another Federal award program.
- Provide capital for revolving loan funds or seed equity funds.

4.6.3 INDIRECT COSTS

Indirect costs (also known as “facilities and administrative costs”—defined at [2 CFR § 200.1](#)) are those costs incurred for a common or joint purpose benefitting more than one cost objective, and not readily assignable to the cost objectives specifically benefitted, without effort disproportionate to the results achieved.

As stated in Section 704 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, USDA may not use funds appropriated by this Act to pay nonprofit institutions indirect cost rates of more than 10% of the total direct cost of cooperative agreements.

All applicants may include all direct costs, salaries, wages, applicable fringe benefits, materials, supplies, services, travel, and up to the first \$25,000 of each subaward in the base. Applicants may only charge indirect costs on the first \$25,000 of each subaward. As described in [2 CFR § 200.403](#), costs must be consistently charged as either indirect or direct costs, but may not be double charged or inconsistently charged as both. Subrecipients may charge indirect costs for the full amount of the subaward.

All applicants who charge the rate of 10 percent must use the MTDC as the base. MTDC are defined in [2 CFR § 200.1](#) as all direct salaries and wages, applicable fringe benefits, materials and supplies, services, travel, and up to the first \$25,000 of each subaward (regardless of the period of performance of the subawards under the award). MTDCs exclude equipment, capital expenditures, charges for patient care, rental costs, tuition remission, scholarships and fellowships, participant support costs, and the portion of each subaward in excess of \$25,000. Other items may be excluded only when necessary to avoid a serious inequity in the distribution of indirect costs, and with the approval of the cognizant agency for indirect costs.

All AMS awards are subject to the terms and conditions, cost principles, and other considerations described in the [Program Specific Terms and Conditions](#).

Eligible entities may propose direct costs for outreach, education, application evaluation & processing, and system improvements to properly implement the program.

4.6.4 PRE-AWARD COST FLEXIBILITY

AMS is allowing flexibility for those applicants who wish to incur pre-award costs. An applicant may, at their own risk and without AMS prior approval, incur obligations and expenditures up to 180 days before the performance start date as long as such costs:

- Are necessary to conduct the project; and
- Would be allowable under the potential award and without AMS prior approval.

If specific costs would otherwise require prior approval (see the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#) and [Program Specific Terms and Conditions](#)), the applicant may be required to provide additional documentation during the application review process before an award is made. The cost and associated activities must be included in the project narrative and budget justification.

Incurring a pre-award cost in anticipation of being selected by AMS for an award imposes no obligation on AMS either to make the award or to reimburse such costs if for any reason the applicant does not receive an award. Recipients must be fully aware that pre-award costs result in borrowing against the potential award and that such borrowing must not impair the recipient's ability to accomplish the project objectives in the approved time frame or in any way adversely affect the completion of the project.

4.7 GRANTS.GOV APPLICATION SUBMISSION AND RECEIPT PROCEDURES AND REQUIREMENTS

4.7.1 HOW TO REGISTER TO APPLY THROUGH GRANTS.GOV

The applicant **organization registration** process can take **up to four weeks** to complete. Therefore, complete your registration allowing enough time to ensure it does not impact your ability to meet required application submission deadlines.

If individual applicants are eligible to apply for this grant funding opportunity, refer to:

<https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/registration.html>.

Organization applicants can find complete instructions here:

<https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/organization-registration.html>.

- 1) *Register with SAM:* In addition to having a DUNS number, organizations applying online through Grants.gov must register with the [System for Award Management \(SAM\)](#). All organizations must register with SAM to apply online. Failure to register with SAM will prevent your organization from applying through Grants.gov. **SAM.gov accounts must be updated annually, and your organization must have an active SAM.gov account to submit your application to Grants.gov.**
- 2) *Create a Grants.gov Account:* The next step in the registration process is to [create an account with Grants.gov](#). Applicants must know their organization's DUNS number to complete this process. Completing this process automatically triggers an email request for applicant roles to the organization's E-Business Point of Contact (EBiz POC) for review. The EBiz POC is a representative from your organization who is the contact listed for SAM. To apply for grants on behalf of your organization, you will need the Authorized Organization Role (AOR).
- 3) *Authorize Grants.gov Roles:* After creating an account on Grants.gov, the EBiz POC receives an email notifying him or her of your registration and request for roles. The EBiz POC will then log in to Grants.gov and [authorize the appropriate roles](#), including the AOR role, thereby giving you

permission to complete and submit applications on behalf of the organization. You will be able to submit your application online any time after you have been approved as an AOR.

- 4) *Track Role Status*: After registering with Grants.gov and authorizing the applicant AOR, Grants.gov allows you [to track your status](#).
- 5) *Electronic Signature*: When applications are submitted through Grants.gov, the name of the organization's AOR who submitted the application is inserted into the signature line of the application, serving as the electronic signature. The EBiz POC **must** authorize individuals who are able to make legally binding commitments on behalf of the organization to act as an AOR; **this step is often missed, and it is crucial for valid and timely submissions.**

4.7.2 HOW TO SUBMIT AN APPLICATION TO AMS VIA GRANTS.GOV

Applicants may use the [Grants.gov Workspace](#), a shared, online environment where members of a grant team may simultaneously access and edit different webforms within an application. For each funding opportunity announcement, an applicant creates individual instances of a workspace.

- 1) *Create a Workspace*: This allows you to complete your Workspace online and route it through your organization for review before submitting.
- 2) *Complete a Workspace*: Add participants to the workspace, complete all the required forms, and check for errors before submission.
 - a. *Adobe Reader*: If you decide not to apply by filling out the webforms, you can download individual PDF forms in Workspace so that they will appear similar to other Standard or AMS forms. The individual PDF forms can be downloaded and saved to your local storage device, network drive(s), or external drives, and then accessed through Adobe Reader.

NOTE: You may need to visit the [Adobe Software Compatibility page on Grants.gov](#) to download the appropriate version of the software. There is no cost for Adobe Reader Software.
 - b. *Mandatory Fields in Forms*: Fields marked with an asterisk and a different background color are mandatory fields you must complete to successfully submit your application.
 - c. *Complete SF-424 Fields First*: The forms are designed to fill in common required fields across other forms, such as the applicant name, address, and DUNS number. To trigger this feature, an applicant must complete the SF-424 information first. Once it is completed, the information will transfer to the other forms.
- 3) *Submit via a Workspace*: Submit your application through Workspace by clicking the Sign and Submit button on the Manage Workspace page, under the Forms tab. Grants.gov recommends submitting your application package **at least 24-48 hours prior to the close date** to provide you with time to correct any potential technical issues that may disrupt the application submission.

SPECIAL NOTE: Grants.gov **does not** check for AMS required attachments. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that all required attachments listed in [Section 4.0](#) are present.

- 4) *Track via a Workspace*: After successfully submitting a workspace package, Grants.gov automatically assigns a Tracking Number (GRANTXXXXXXXX) to the package, which will be listed on the Confirmation page generated after submission.

Applicant Support: Grants.gov provides additional [training resources, including video tutorials](#). Applicants may also call the 24/7 toll-free support number 1-800-518-4726, or email support@grants.gov. Grants.gov will issue a ticket number to which you and Grants.gov can refer if the issue is not resolved. For questions related to the specific grant opportunity, use the contact information described in [Section 7.0](#).

4.7.3 TIMELY RECEIPT REQUIREMENTS AND PROOF OF TIMELY SUBMISSION

All applications must be received by the deadline established in [Section 4.4](#). Proof of timely submission is automatically recorded by Grants.gov using an electronic date/time stamp generated when the application is successfully received by Grants.gov. The applicant AOR will then receive an acknowledgement of receipt and a tracking number (GRANTXXXXXXXX) from Grants.gov. Applicant AORs will also receive the official date/time stamp and Grants.gov tracking number in an email serving as proof of their timely submission.

When AMS successfully retrieves the application from Grants.gov and acknowledges the download of submissions, Grants.gov will electronically acknowledge receipt of the application to the applicant AOR's email address. Again, proof of timely submission shall be the acknowledgement email stating the official date and time that Grants.gov receives your application.

AMS will not accept applications packages by fax, email or postal mail. Applications received by Grants.gov after the established due date for the program will be considered late and will not be considered for funding by AMS. See [AMS' Late and/or Non-Responsive Applications Policy](#).

Special Note for Applicants with Slow Internet Connections. Applicants using slow internet, such as dial-up connections, may experience significantly longer transmission times when submitting their application to Grants.gov, especially if there are large attachments contained in the upload. Again, Grants.gov will provide either an error message or a successfully received transmission notification via email to the applicant AOR.

4.7.4 TIPS FOR APPLICANTS

- Register and submit applications early. **DO NOT WAIT UNTIL THE DAY OF THE APPLICATION DEADLINE.**
- Thoroughly read this RFA and follow all the instructions provided by AMS.
- Thoroughly review the [Program Specific Terms and Conditions](#) and the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#) to understand allowable and unallowable costs.
- Apply to the correct grant program in Grants.gov:
 - Assistance Listing (formerly CFDA) number “**10.186**” and Funding Opportunity Number “**USDA-AMS-TM-LRFD-C-0001.**”
- Make sure you have the most recent copy of Adobe Reader installed on your computer and that it is compatible with [Grants.gov](#) software. Grants.gov supports Adobe Reader version 9.0.0 and higher.
- Limit Application File Name Characters (50 or less).

- When uploading attachments, click the “Add Attachments” button (do NOT use the “paperclip” icon in Adobe Reader).
- Do not password-protect your documents and make sure all tracked-changes are “accepted”.
- Avoid Special Characters in File Names (\$, %, &, *, Spanish "ñ", etc.).
- Review the Grants.gov Applicant User and Registration Guides:
<http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/applicant-faqs.html>
<https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/workspace-overview.html>.

5.0 APPLICATION REVIEW INFORMATION

5.1 PROJECT EVALUATION CRITERIA

Each application that meets the initial qualification screening requirements (see *Section 5.2*) will be reviewed and scored competitively based on the extent to which it addresses the criteria below.

Geographic Focus..... **20 Points**

- 1) The application describes the project’s proposed geographic region and priority area(s), why it is the most appropriate place and boundary for a Regional Food Center, the impact that the region would experience due to the geographic focus, and justification for the priority areas and their potential market connections within the region.
- 2) The application describes the region’s assets and how the proposed plan will leverage existing assets and develop new assets to support the region’s food systems.
- 3) The project serves a region of at least a 400-mile radius OR reaches part or all of at least three states and/or territories.
- 4) Includes rural, urban, and suburban areas appropriate to the region.
- 5) The application identifies and shows, using data, the degree of historic economic distress experienced in the project region, in particular the priority high need areas within the region, including the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.
- 6) The application describes the lead applicant and any key partners’ history, including prior collaborative efforts, commitment, and track record working in the identified region. Explains why the lead entity and key partners are well-equipped to serve this region.
- 7) *Note on Tribal Center:* The Tribal Center’s region is “national” in focus, and should frame Indian Country food systems nationally and how the applicant/partnership intends to leverage resources in a culturally appropriate manner.

Alignment and Intent..... **20 Points**

- 1) The application describes the project’s proposed work to serve as a cornerstone in the development of the local and regional supply chains, including coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building support to small and mid-sized food and farm businesses, with the goal of creating a more resilient, diverse, and competitive food system.
- 2) The application describes a strong history of collaboration and engagement among partners to ensure high levels of participation or provides a clear and concise plan for how such engagement will occur.

- 3) The applicant and partners describe past history successfully working with producers and partners in the region.
- 4) The application explains clearly and comprehensively how it will meet the required goals and activities outlined in this RFA. The application complies with all written instructions and requirements described within the RFA and Project Narrative Template.
- 5) The application presents a clear, well-conceived, and suitable Work Plan that describes how the applicant partners will achieve the goals and objectives.
- 6) The application describes plans for coordination, communication, data sharing, and reporting across the region, with other Regional Food Centers, USDA, and other stakeholder groups.

Sustainability **10 Points**

- 1) The application describes how the work, including partnerships, will be sustained beyond the agreement's period of performance (without federal funds) and/or how the project will lay the foundation for future resilience in the region after the project ends.
- 2) The application describes plans for leveraging and building on existing organizations, assets, and efforts, and for building capacity for this work within the region for future impact.
- 3) The application identifies the availability and commitment of local government, philanthropy, and industry to support the growth of agricultural opportunities and markets in the proposed region.
- 4) The application demonstrates plans to collaborate with other federal, state, regional, tribal, and local initiatives that support complementary efforts, including the whole-of-government Rural Partners Network led by USDA, to provide sustained support for the region.

Expertise, Partners, and Diversity **20 Points**

- 1) The applicant has demonstrated experience in food and agriculture business development services and demonstrates an ability to support the wide-ranging needs of stakeholders in the region, including providing market development and value chain/supply chain coordination.
- 2) The application represents a substantial, effective, and diverse array of relevant partners, including organizations operated by historically underserved groups and individuals, to accomplish the agreement's goals and objectives and meet the needs of the intended beneficiaries, including:
 - a. Commitment from the key staff, demonstrated through Letters of Commitment from Partner Organizations.
 - b. The key staff who will be responsible for managing the projects and the individuals (one-page resume) who comprise the Project Team and their experience demonstrated in their resume shows expertise and ability to effectively lead the project and meet the stated goals; and
 - c. The expertise and experience of the Project Team necessary to successfully manage a large amount of subawards and federal funds.
- 3) The application demonstrates a commitment from experienced partners within the region to perform specific roles to achieve project goals and outcomes as evidenced by inclusion of support letters.
- 4) The applicant and eligible entities in the partnership are established in the region and have demonstrated expertise to achieve project goals and outcomes.
- 5) The project design meaningfully involves and serves historically underserved businesses and communities.

- 6) The application demonstrates a commitment to engage potential beneficiaries as active participants in Regional Food Center activities.
- 7) The application outlines past efforts and planned strategies to reach historically underserved populations, racial minorities, and women, as well as past experience which demonstrates cultural competencies to achieve such objectives within the region. These strategies should create the connectivity and conditions for growth where it may not exist, such as in rural and underserved communities.
- 8) The application identifies potential challenges to partner recruitment and engagement, and achievement of goals or outcomes, and describes possible strategies to address the challenges.
- 9) The application demonstrates evidence of consultation with and involvement of underserved individuals prior to or during the creation of the proposal.

Monitoring and Evaluation 15 Points

- 1) The application describes a monitoring and evaluation plan that identifies potential feedback mechanisms and metrics that measure the results of project activities and will meet USDA's evaluation requirements, including submitting the required semi-annual report which will collect metrics on the objectives outlined in Section 1.2.
- 2) Proposed metrics consider equity and diversity for technical assistance providers, businesses served, and subrecipients, coordinating with USDA to align metrics and reporting with other Federal equity-focused efforts.
- 3) The application describes the methods, systems, and infrastructure that will be used to collect and compile data and reports from partners and subawards.
- 4) The application describes plans for coordination, communication, appropriate data sharing and necessary systems to monitor and collect evaluation data.

Fiscal Plan and Financial Controls 15 Points

- 1) The Budget and Justification provides a clear description for each budget line item and is consistent with the size and scope of the agreement.
- 2) The Budget and Justification relates logically to the project narrative.
- 3) The applicant demonstrates its ability to manage the financial, reporting, and evaluation burdens of a large number of sub-agreements.
- 4) The application represents a substantial, effective, and sound fiscal management system to ensure funds are provided to the intended beneficiaries, including:
 - a. Commitment from the organizational leadership.
 - b. The key staff who will be responsible for managing the financial systems and the individuals (name and title) who comprise the Project Team; and
 - c. The expertise and experience of the Project Team necessary to successfully manage the funds and implement the project.
- 5) The application demonstrates a successful financial audit history of the applicant.

5.2 REVIEW AND SELECTION PROCESS

Applications will be screened for completeness and compliance with the provisions of this RFA. If an application does not meet these requirements, it is removed from consideration. In that event, the agency will send notification of elimination to the applicant. Please see [Section 4.3](#) and [AMS' Late and/or Non-Responsive Applications Policy](#) for more information. During the initial review, the agency may contact individual applicants to request clarifying information regarding certain components of their application.

Merit/technical reviews will be conducted by a review board with relevant expertise nominated by the approving official. Each reviewer signs a conflict of interest and confidentiality agreement regarding any assigned proposals. Agency staff will conduct administrative reviews, during which the agency will work with applicants to negotiate any revisions to ensure alignment with program priorities and optimal geographic service areas. AMS will also assess an organization's ability to account for the use of Federal funds and monitor the performance associated with these monies using the guidance provided by [2 CFR 200.206](#).

The approving official will make the final award decisions. A multi-phase approval process may be used if determined necessary by the approving official. The approving official may prioritize applications that demonstrate regional impact, geographic diversity, and diverse representation of agricultural producers, growers, and processors impacted by the pandemic. This review may include an evaluation of applications and review of panel comments for alignment with program intent and with the evaluation criteria in section 5.1. Following this review, USDA may invite finalists submitting proposals for similar or overlapping geographic regions to combine efforts for expanded partnership collaborations and resubmit those proposals for final consideration by USDA. The approving official for this opportunity is the Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs.

6.0 AWARD ADMINISTRATION INFORMATION

6.1 AWARD NOTICES

Upon announcement of the Federal awards, AMS will prepare and send a Notice of Award and Cooperative Agreement to each recipient for signature by the appropriate official. Cooperative Agreements will be signed by AMS and the AOR. This is the applicant, acting as the lead eligible entity for the partnership.

The Notice of Award and Cooperative Agreement will provide pertinent instructions and information including, at a minimum, the information described in [2 CFR § 200.211](#) and a reference to the [Program Specific Terms and Conditions](#) and the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#).

6.2 UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS

Unsuccessful applicants will be contacted by AMS via email as soon as possible after the Regional Food Center awards are announced. The unsuccessful applicants will be provided anonymous review panel consensus comments regarding their proposals as feedback.

6.3 ADMINISTRATIVE AND NATIONAL POLICY REQUIREMENTS

As part of the Notice of Award and Cooperative Agreement, all AMS recipients must abide by the [Program Specific Terms and Conditions](#) and the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#), which reference applicable *Administrative and National Policy Requirements*.

Non-Federal entities (States, local governments, tribes, and non-profit organizations) with \$750,000 or more in federal expenditures are required by the Single Audit Act Amendments of 1996 (Single Audit) and [2 CFR 200 Subpart F](#) to have an annual audit of their Federal awards (e.g., grant and loan programs). AMS expects that recipients of grants through this program will exceed this threshold and will be required to have an annual audit of their Federal award(s).

6.4 REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Cooperators will be required to participate in program evaluation activities, including submitting semiannual and final reports. Specific requirements will be identified in the award. Reporting and award closeout requirements are included in the [Program Specific Terms and Conditions](#) and the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](#).

7.0 AGENCY CONTACTS

7.1 PROGRAMMATIC QUESTIONS

After closely reviewing this RFA in its entirety, applicants and other interested parties are encouraged to contact the Regional Food Centers staff by e-mail with questions about the grant program at RegionalFoodCenters@usda.gov.

For additional information, please visit the Regional Food Center Website:
www.ams.usda.gov/Regionalfoodcenters.

7.2 AVAILABLE RESOURCES

AMS provides resources and information on the Regional Food Center website (www.ams.usda.gov/Regionalfoodcenters) that may be helpful to applicants. AMS staff is available to provide timely technical assistance. Correspondence may be directed to:

Regional Food Centers
USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 1510 South Building
Stop 0264
Washington, DC 20250-0264

7.3 GRANTS.GOV QUESTIONS

All questions regarding Grants.gov technical assistance must be directed to Grants.gov's [Applicant Support](#).

8.0 OTHER INFORMATION

8.1 EQUAL OPPORTUNITY STATEMENT

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

8.2 FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT REQUESTS

The Freedom of Information Act of 1966 ([5 U.S.C. § 552](#)) (FOIA) and the Privacy Act of 1974 ([5 U.S.C. § 552a](#)), as implemented by USDA's regulations ([7 CFR § 1, Subpart A](#)) govern the release or withholding of information to the public in connection with this Federal award. The release of information under these

laws and regulations applies only to records held by AMS and imposes no requirement on the recipient or any subrecipient to permit or deny public access to their records.

FOIA requests for records relating to this Federal award may be directed to USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, FOIA/PA Officer, Room 1671-S, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250-0273, Telephone: (202) 302-0650; or email: AMS.FOIA@usda.gov.

8.3 PAPERWORK REDUCTION

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 ([44 U.S.C. 3501](#)), an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0581.0335. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 10 hours per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information.

9.0 APPENDIX A – USDA REGIONAL FOOD BUSINESS CENTERS SEMIANNUAL REPORT

A Semiannual Performance Report must be received within 30 days after the end of the first six months of the date of the signed agreement and 30 days after the end of each six-month period until the expiration date of the cooperative agreement. These performance reports illustrate the progress made toward the completion of each project within the agreement.

The report must cover the most recent six-month project performance period. The performance report must be typed, single-spaced, in 11-point font. Provide answers to each question below, or answer “not applicable” or “no results available yet” where necessary.

Cooperative Agreement Number:

Recipient Organization Name:

Representative Name:

Representative Email and Phone:

Report Date Range (e.g., January 2023 – June 2023):

Date Report Submitted:

Understanding challenges and successes at the center and network level.

1. Describe the progress and/or accomplishments on project activities. Highlight the impacts on the project’s beneficiaries.
2. Describe challenges or developments.
 - a. Describe the steps project changes taken or that will be taken to address those challenges.
 - b. Describe how the USDA might assist with any challenges, to the extent it is able.
3. Describe any significant changes, external to this project, to the region’s food system (weather-related challenges, new distributors or retail outlets, new organization playing a significant role, etc.).

Looking forward:

1. What activities/impacts do you hope to accomplish in the next three months? Include information about anticipated community impact and outreach, new technical assistance, and any other information you’d like to share.

Describe technical assistance needs of the region, including changes in needs over this reporting period.

1. What technical assistance are **new** food businesses seeking from the Regional Food Center? Select all that apply:
 - *Value chain coordination*, including networking and peer-to-peer sharing.
 - *Market development*, including market research, access, and marketing support.
 - *Navigating and managing financial resources from third parties*, including federal, state, tribal, and other sources.

- *Minor business development*, including planning, financial literacy, legal and regulatory awareness, succession planning, and record keeping.
 - *Other, please specify*
 - a. Of those, what categories or types were you able to provide?
2. What technical assistance are **existing** food businesses seeking from the Regional Food Center?
 - *Value chain coordination*, including networking and peer-to-peer sharing.
 - *Market development*, including market research, access, and marketing support.
 - *Navigating and managing financial resources from third parties*, including federal, state, tribal, and other sources.
 - *Minor business development*, including planning, financial literacy, legal and regulatory awareness, succession planning, and record keeping.
 - *Other, please specify*
 - a. Of those, what categories or types were you able to provide?
 3. How many technical assistance providers is the Regional Center working with?
 4. How many food businesses have been served via the technical assistance providers?
 - a. What are the demographics of these businesses? How many are BIPOC (black indigenous and people of color)-owned? How many serve underserved communities?
 5. How many subgrants have been distributed? (May be not applicable during some reporting cycles)
 - a. How many subaward applications were submitted?
 - b. What technical assistance was provided for subgrant applicants?
 - c. How many subgrant recipients accessed other sources of capital?

Outcome: Expand and strengthen regional food systems networks and partnerships in response to hardships and vulnerabilities exposed by recent national emergencies, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Number of partnerships and/or collaborations established through Regional Food Center activities
2. Provide the following descriptive information about the established partnerships/collaborations:
 - a. the number formalized with written agreements (i.e., MOU's, signed contracts, etc.)
 - b. the number of partnerships with underserved organizations
 - c. the number of partnerships between producers and institutions
 - d. the number of partnerships serving underserved communities
 - e. the number that reported:
 - i. higher profits
 - ii. more efficient use of resources
 - iii. increased access to institutional consumers
 - iv. additional mid-tier value chain enhancements (such as improved capacity to transport products to market)
3. What steps have been taken to sustain the work of the partnership beyond the cooperative agreement?
4. Number of new/improved distribution systems developed.

- a. Of those, the number that:
 - i. stemmed from new partnerships
 - ii. increased efficiency
 - iii. reduced costs
 - iv. expanded customer reach
 - v. increased online presence
5. Number of stakeholders that gained technical knowledge about resources within the regional food system.
6. Number of stakeholders that gained knowledge about more efficient and effective distribution systems.
7. Number of stakeholders that adopted best practices or new technologies to improve distribution systems.
8. Number of stakeholders trained on how to develop or maintain a direct-to-consumer enterprise.
9. Number of stakeholders that connected with a USDA office or personnel as a result of Regional Food Center activities.
10. Amount of non-Federal financial, professional, and technical assistance resources secured because of project activities, measured in dollars.
 - a. What other types of capital have been leveraged? Provide examples.
11. How do the new partnerships and networks affect local and regional supply chains? Provide at least two examples.

Outcome: Create more and better markets and increase market awareness and access, ensuring small and mid-size producers and processors have the opportunity to gain access to distributors, retail outlets, and institutions.

1. Number of partnerships and/or collaborations established between producers/processors and market access points.
 - a. Of those, the number formalized with written agreements (i.e., MOU's, signed contracts, etc.)
 - b. Of those, the number with and/or between underserved organizations
 - c. Of those, the number that reported:
 - i. higher profits
 - ii. increased access to institutional consumers
 - iii. other mid-tier value chain enhancements (such as improved capacity to transport products to market)
2. Number of producers/processors who increased production to meet increased demand.
3. Number of new strategies developed to improve local/regional food processing, distribution, aggregation, or storage.
4. Number of stakeholders trained to use new strategies.

5. Number of market access points that reported increased or improved processing, distribution, storage, and/or aggregation of regionally produced agricultural products.

Outcome: Increase food and farm business and financial acumen, increase the number of new food and farm businesses and improve viability of existing businesses.

1. Number of new food businesses
 - a. Of those, the number of:
 - i. Food hubs
 - ii. Distributors
 - iii. Producers
 - iv. Retailers
 - v. Restaurants
 - vi. Other, please list.
2. Number of feasibility studies conducted
3. Number of projects
 - a. deemed viable after conducting feasibility study
 - b. deemed not viable after conducting feasibility study
4. Number of business development plans created
5. Number of strategic plans developed
6. Amount of non-Federal financial, professional, and technical assistance resources secured because of the developed plan(s), measured in dollars
 - a. What other types of capital have been leveraged? Provide examples.

Additional: What else would you like the USDA to know?