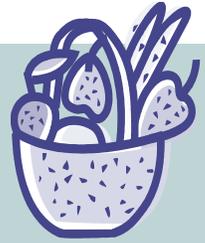


Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

Winter 2010 Outreach



Application Receipt, Review, and Selection for Funding

Happy New Year! Many of you may have started your fiscal year 2010 application process by publishing your request for proposals and organizing your grant writing workshops. Have you started planning for what happens when your organization receives a grant application? For example, who is responsible for selecting reviewers and overseeing review panels? Who is authorized to make selections for funding?

What is your organization's policies and procedures for reviewing grant applications? In this outreach document, we discuss using initial screening to determine whether an application should be further reviewed. We identify selection criteria for potential reviewers, provide guidance on conducting reviews, preparing review plans, and discuss application evaluation criteria. Another important component emphasized is documenting funding decisions for all applications. Remember that having a transparent application review and selection process maintains the integrity of the program. We hope you enjoy reading the Winter 2010 Specialty Crop Block Grant Program Outreach issue.



Special points of interest:

- Fiscal Year 2010 Notice of Funds Availability Coming Soon

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Initial Screening and Business Evaluation

Once applications are received, the organization may decide to perform an **initial internal screening** of the application to determine if it should be sent on for evaluation by the review panel. The checklist for initial screening may include items such as:

1. Is the applicant eligible?
2. Is the project eligible?
3. Does the application reflect an understanding of the program requirements (i.e. responsiveness to the program announcement)?
4. Is there enough information included for the reviewers to make a recommendation?
5. Does the budget add up?
6. Was the application submitted by the deadline?
7. Did the applicant adhere to required formatting specifications?
8. Is the applicant debarred, excluded or disqualified from receiving Federal assistance?

An **internal business evaluation** may also occur sometime during the review process which includes an analysis of the applicant's ability to manage federal funds and the application's financial aspects. A cost analysis should determine the realism of the applicant's proposed budget in relation to the technical narrative. This review may verify that the same project activities and costs are being funded by another grant program, creating "double-dipping". Another aspect of the business evaluation is a survey of the applicant's business management systems to determine a recipient's ability to properly use and manage grant funds.

Selecting a Review Process and Reviewers

There are two basic systems of reviews: panel and field review. Panel reviews are usually conducted by several people assembled in the same place that review, rate, and comment on applications as a group. Remote panels use technology such as the internet or teleconferencing allowing panel members to exchange views on applications with other experts while saving on travel and per diem costs. Field reviewers work independently rather than as part of a group. Field reviewers are generally used when it is not possible or practical to convene the necessary number of experts to review an application, or in situations in which a conflict of interest exists, making it impractical for the application to undergo panel review. The reviewers should:

- demonstrate excellence in their field (if applicable);
- display objectivity and mature judgment;
- be free of conflicts of interest related to the applications they will view;
- work effectively in groups;
- be committed to assuring the confidentiality of applications and any discussions relating to them; and
- display an active interest in the program's mission.

In the event a reviewer is selected from the program office, i.e., the office which will administer a particular grant if awarded, the organization should take precautions to ensure that the person reviewing the application is not likely to have any of the following duties with regard to the application:

- stimulating the submission of the application;
- providing substantive technical assistance to the applicant;
- reviewing or making recommendations concerning the application in any capacity except as a member of the review panel or group of field reviewers;
- approving or disapproving the application;
- serving as the program official or otherwise monitoring or evaluating the subgrantees programmatic performance;
- serving as the grants official or performing grants management functions for the project; or
- auditing the project.

Such activities by a reviewer would present a **conflict of interest**. In addition, anyone who supervises an individual who fits the ineligibility criteria should not serve as a reviewer.



Conducting Reviews

Regardless of whether you are using field or panel reviewers, you will need to provide them with instructions covering issues such as evaluation criteria; conflicts of interest; application confidentiality; scoring or rating system; and the reviewers' responsibility with regard to each application to be reviewed.

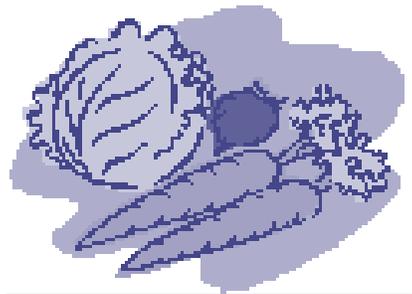
To assist reviewers, program officials overseeing reviews may wish to develop review plans. The review plan may include the following:

- panel information, including application review schedule, number and size of panels, and how applications will be assigned to panels;
- the process for selecting reviewers, including:
 - * standards and evaluation criteria for recruiting and selecting reviewers;
 - * the process for identifying and resolving conflicts of interest;
 - * reviewer orientation information;
 - * process by which reviewers will independently review applications before the group panel discussion begins;
 - * procedures for replacing a reviewer; and
 - * scoring forms to be used to evaluate applications;
- how program officials will work with the panels, including how panel meetings will be scheduled and how significant variation in application scores by reviewers will be addressed;
- the application selection process including:
 - * how applications will be selected, e.g. rank order listing,, published priorities;
 - * what happens if more than one application receives the same score; and
 - * how applications will be revised when program funds are not available to fulfill the applicant's requested amount.

Establishing Evaluation Criteria

Technical and business criteria against which you will use to evaluation applications should be spelled out in the organization's regulations or policy guidance, as well as in the program announcement. Review criteria may cover areas such as:

1. **Technical Approach**. Criteria under this category determine how the work will be performed. These criteria may reference understanding of the program requirements (i.e., responsiveness to the program announcement), including outcome measures, methodology, and technical innovations. Criteria under this category may also relate to the project's cost effectiveness.
2. **Qualifications of Staff and/or Organization**. Criteria under this category determine the quality of the personnel who will perform the programmatic activities. These criteria may reference key personnel qualifications, capabilities, or certifications.
3. **Management**. Criteria under this indicate how the project will be controlled. These criteria may reference internal controls and accounting procedures to monitor and measure outcomes and manage funds.
4. **Past Performance**. Criteria under this category indicate an applicant's proven ability to perform programmatic activities and submit required reports on time. Information collected under this evaluation criteria will be examined for age and relevance, source, data context, and general trends of the applicant's performance. The approach for evaluating past performance, including applicants with no relevant performance history should be described in the announcement.
5. **Coordination with State's Specialty Crop Priorities**. Criteria under this category measure how well the project supports the States' specialty crop stakeholders priority needs identified during outreach. You will need to describe how the level of support will be evaluated and how it will effect application scoring in the program announcement.



Ranking Applications

Applications may be ranked according to the scores assigned by the reviewers, or those scored may be considered in combination with other published selection criteria. For example, organizations may have established criteria such as:

- * geographic diversity;
- * preferences for new applicants; and
- * extent of cost-sharing.

These additional selection criteria should be objectively weighted and those scores balanced against the merit score in ranking applications.

Once the applications have been ranked, the responsible official determines which applications will be selected for awards. Any recommendation for funding out of the rank order should be clearly justified and well-documented.

Documenting Review

It is very important that the materials documenting funding decisions for all awards including both successful and unsuccessful applicants be maintained. We encourage you to automatically supply a written summary of evaluations with the notification of the decision not to fund and provide more detailed information upon request.



Shrinking Megabits to Kilobits (Compressing Images)

Since the approval of the 2008 Farm Bill, it seems that everything about the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program has gotten substantially bigger. However, this does not necessarily mean that your performance reports and State Plans need to significantly increase in file size too! This is especially true if you like to use graphic images in your proposals and reports. Images take up a lot of memory, which hinders a document's ability to be sent through email. You can maintain a smaller file size by compressing the images in your document.

One way to compress an image (or group of images) in a Microsoft Word document is to go through the short-cut menu. First right click on an image in the document, then go to "format picture". A dialog box will appear. Within this box, press compress (in the bottom left hand corner). Another dialog box will pop up. Under "Apply to" click "All pictures in this document" and then press OK. If the images have not already been compressed, then the file size will shrink.

You would be surprised the amount of memory one image can take. Please consider this option when you submit your next report or State Plan.

If you find your performance reports are too large to email even after compressing images, you may want to send your report through YouSendIt. YouSendIt is a way to send large files. The Lite account is free for individuals and allows you to send a file up to 100 MB. Go to www.yousendit.com to sign up.

Specialty Crop Block Grant Program Winter 2010

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General Application Writing Tips

Developing the Application:

- ◆ Read the **Notice to the Federal Register After Published** (Follow **ALL** Application and Deadline Instructions Provided in this Document)
- ◆ Read the **Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – Farm Bill Guidance Document** Found on www.ams.usda.gov/scbgp
- ◆ Develop and Foster Ideas that Fit Within the Program Priorities
 - * Communicate with Specialty Crop Industry and Other Interested Stakeholders
- ◆ Prepare for the Application **EARLY**
- ◆ Applications with an Internal Competitive Program are Encouraged
 - * When Reviewing a Project Consider Its Eligibility and the Allowability of Its Expenditures
 - * Consider the Relevance of the Project to the Specialty Crop Industry
 - * Summarize the Competitive and Other Projects into Individual Project Profiles

State Plan Preparation:

- ◆ Follow the Direction Provided by the **Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – Farm Bill Guidance Document** and the **Notice to the Federal Register**
- ◆ Provide a Coversheet for the State Plan
- ◆ Provide Granting Process (Outreach, Competitive Process, etc.)
- ◆ Write Individual Project Profiles, which Include: Title and Abstract; Project Purpose; Potential Impact; Expected Measurable Outcomes; Work Plan; Budget Narrative; Project Oversight; Project Commitment; Multi-State Information (if applicable)
- ◆ Repeat for all additional Projects in the State Plan
- ◆ A Good Rule for Project Profiles: Concise and Easy to Read (Short, Sweet, and To the Point)
- ◆ Complete All Paperwork Including the SF-424, SF-424A, and SF-424B
- ◆ Submit On Time Through Grants.gov

Improving the State Plans:

- ◆ Review the State Plan to Ensure that the Application's Content is Appropriate for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – Farm Bill
- ◆ Review the Grammar and the Format of the Application to Ensure that it Coincides with the Professional Integrity of the State Department of Agriculture
- ◆ Develop/Maintain an Internal Review Process for the State Plan

Good Characteristics of Specialty Crop Projects:

- ◆ Enlarge and Enhance the Specialty Crop Industry
- ◆ Encourage Change/Innovation in the Specialty Crop Industry
- ◆ Excite Stakeholders