



Guidance

Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

Multi-State Project Competition

1.0 Purpose and Scope

This guidance provides information about the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, Multi-State Project Competition (SCBG-MSPC), specifically, the framework for implementing the competitive grant program. This guidance describes parameters of the program including objectives and eligibility criteria for projects and applicants. AMS will use the guidance and comments received to develop a Request for Applications that meets the requirements of section 10010 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill), which amends Section 101 of the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004 to add grants for multistate projects (7 U.S.C. 1621 note; Public Law 108-465).

2.0 Background

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) includes \$72.5 million per year in funding for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) from 2014-2017, and \$85 million for 2018 and thereafter to solely enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops defined as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, nursery crops, including floriculture. The Farm Bill also proposes a new multi-state project set-aside for projects that solely enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops involving food safety, plant pests and disease, research, crop-specific projects addressing common issues, and any other area as determined by the Secretary. USDA may use no-year funding of \$1 million in 2014, increasing \$1 million per fiscal year to \$5 million in 2018 to support multi-state projects. State departments of agriculture in the 50 States, U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia are eligible to apply directly to USDA for these funds.

3.0 Proposed Program Elements

3.1 Definition of a Multi-State Project

A multi-state project brings together a multi-state organizational team to solve national or regional specialty crop issues.

3.2 Priority Areas

The AMS SCBGP requires States to develop projects that solely enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops on a national or regional level, and pertain to one or more of several issues affecting the specialty crop industry. Applications must address one

or more of these priority areas to be considered eligible for funding, but the accompanying list of sub-priorities is not intended to be exhaustive.

3.2.1 Food safety projects that address the handling, preparation, and storage of specialty crops in ways that reduce foodborne threats

Projects may:

- Improve detection, monitoring, control, and response to potential food safety hazards in the production, processing, and handling of specialty crops;
- Develop procedures and mechanisms and provide assistance/education in implementing Good Agricultural Practices, Good Manufacturing Practices, Good Handling Practices on a national or regional level. If providing education/training opportunities, ensure the curriculum and materials align with and not duplicate that being developed by the Produce Safety Alliance;
- Conduct research focused on issues (such as die-off rates/survival rates of pathogens) related to (1) water quality; or (2) use of biological soil amendments of animal origin, on similar agro-ecological regions or localities utilizing the specific
- Apply new or improved food processing technologies to prevent and reduce foodborne pathogen loads in specialty crops;
- Strengthen national traceback systems; promoting an outbreak response system that shortens the time between outbreak detection, resolution, and recovery; and improving methods for communicating with consumers about traceback and foodborne illness outbreaks; and/or
- Improve national support and coordination of food safety programs by conducting national and regional conferences, building collaborative networks, and exchanging information about integrated food safety.

3.3.2 Projects that address threats from pests and diseases

Projects may:

- Develop safe, effective, and economical pest and disease management solutions for growers of specialty crops;
- Develop monitoring systems to enhance capabilities to predict pest and disease incidence, estimate damage, and identify valid action thresholds;
- Develop treatments for quarantine pests and diseases to maintain or open healthy markets with U.S. trading partners;

- Develop diagnostic tools, particularly new ones for plant pests, diseases and for detection of pesticide resistance in pest populations, including weeds; and/or
- Develop delivery methods, particularly new methods, designed to expand the options for integrated pest management (IPM) implementation.

3.3.3 Research Projects

Projects may:

- Conduct research in plant breeding, genetics, and genomics to improve crop characteristics;
- Develop new innovations and technologies, including mechanization;
- Improve production, processing, storage, and distribution efficiencies; and/or
- Reduce environmental impacts.

3.3.4 Crop-Specific Projects

Projects may:

Promote collaborative research on issues that affect a specific specialty crop.

3.4 Indicators of Successful Applications

SCBG-MSPC applications must bring together a multi-state organizational team and seek to develop solutions for practical problems that cross state boundaries and address the needs of specialty crop growers. Projects should also lead to measurable benefits for specialty crop growers, encourage partnerships among specialty crop organizations, and reduce duplication of effort among participating organizations.

SCBG-MSPC applications must include a detailed outreach plan that includes at least one quantifiable, measurable outcome meant to solely enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops across state borders. The plan must include a description of how the project's impact will be measured. Guidance on the development of acceptable, quantifiable, measurable outcomes will be provided in the request for applications.

3.5 Development of Proposals

A State department of agriculture must serve as the lead for preparing and submitting a SCBG-MSPC application, as well as administering the grant.

State departments of agriculture **must** consult with specialty crop growers, processors, and/or distributors before developing multi-state project priorities to ensure maximum public input and benefit. State departments of agriculture **must also** reach out to potential project partners to engage them in developing proposals that meet multi-state project priorities. These stakeholders should play an important role in development of project goals and objectives, in implementing the project plan, and in evaluating and disseminating project results and outcomes.

State departments of agriculture must use cooperative or contractual linkages as needed to carry out the proposed work to maintain control of the project objectives, set policies, and ensure that the project is carried out in accordance with all applicable Federal statutes and regulations as well as with the terms and conditions of the grant agreement.

4.0 Award Information

4.1 Available Funding

No year funding for the SCBGP-MSPC is authorized as follows:

Fiscal Year 2014 - \$1 million
Fiscal Year 2015 - \$2 million
Fiscal Year 2016 - \$3 million
Fiscal Year 2017 - \$4 million
Fiscal Year 2018 - \$5 million

Funds not awarded in a particular fiscal year will be added to the allocation for the succeeding fiscal year. The first request for applications will be released in fiscal year 2015, and a total of \$3 million (\$1 million from fiscal year 2014 + \$2 million from fiscal year 2015) will be available for multi-state specialty crop projects.

4.2 Grant Period Duration

SCBG-MSPC funds will be awarded for projects of up to 3 years in length. The grant start date and end date are determined by the applicant.

4.3 Award Size

Applicants may request no less than \$200,000 for a project, including indirect costs. Applicants must describe how these funds will be allocated in the budget narrative of the project proposal. There is no requirement to equally divide the funds requested between the involved organizations or among project years.

5.0 Eligibility Information

5.1 Eligible Applicants

State departments of agriculture in the 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the United States Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are eligible to apply directly to USDA for multi-state project funds. State department of agriculture is defined as the agency, commission, or department of a State government responsible for agriculture within the State.

Partnering organizations (non-State departments of agriculture) may collaborate with a participating State department of agriculture to access multistate project funding. In such cases, the State department of agriculture must serve as the project lead or financially responsible party for administering the awarded grant project.

5.2 Solely Enhance the Competitiveness of U.S. or U.S. Territory Grown Specialty Crops

Project(s) must solely enhance the competitiveness of U.S. or U.S. territory-grown specialty crops in either domestic or foreign markets. See the [SCBGP website](#) for a definition of specialty crops and processed products, including a list of eligible specialty crops and ineligible commodities.

5.3 Benefit More Than One Product or Organization

Applications for grant funds should describe how the project potentially impacts and produces measurable outcomes for the specialty crop industry and/or the public rather than a single organization, institution, or individual.

Grant funds will not be awarded for projects that solely benefit a particular commercial product or provide a profit to a single organization, institution, or individual. In addition, grant funds cannot be used to compete unfairly with private companies that provide equivalent products or services.

5.4 Grower-Level Projects

The AMS SCBGP-MSPC encourages State departments of agriculture to prioritize and further expand funding to projects that address the needs of and support U.S. specialty crop growers.

5.5 Projects Attempting to Disparage the Work of Another Organization

Projects where one organization specifically attempts to disparage the mission, goals, and/or actions of another organization are unallowable.

5.6 Cost Sharing

AMS SCBGP-MSPC does not require matching support for multi-state specialty crop projects.

5.7 Limited Number of Applications

A State department of agriculture applicant may submit up to three applications to the SCBGP-MSPC as the lead entity. Applicants can serve as participants on an unlimited number of MSPC applications. State departments of agriculture must ensure project participants have the capacity to fully implement all funded projects.

5.8 Subgrants and Subcontracts

Applicants are encouraged to subgrant/subcontract with specialty crop organizations and other interested organizations that are not eligible to apply, provided such partnerships are necessary for the conduct of the project. Budget for subgrants/subcontracts must be included with the corresponding budget narrative.

6.0 Application Review Information

Applications submitted to AMS for the SCBGP-MSPC will be evaluated in a three part review process.

Phase 1 – Initial Screening: Each application will be screened by AMS SCBGP staff to determine responsiveness to the program solicitation. Applications that pass Phase I will be evaluated by technical reviewers to select those with the highest technical merit.

Phase 2 – Phase II: Technical Review: AMS will use a diverse panel of reviewers during the technical review. Reviewers will be selected from a pool of recognized specialists who are uniquely qualified by training and experience in their respective fields to render expert advice on the merit of the applications received.

The technical review of the project proposals will evaluate:

- (1) OBJECTIVES – the proposal is well-justified, addresses one of the priority areas specified in Section 3.2, contains a problem statement or clearly frames the issue to be studied; the literature review supports the need for research; and aligns well with SCBG-MSPC legislative and program goals.
- (2) APPROACH –the goals, objectives, and work plan are clear, appropriate, and logical; personnel demonstrate appropriate qualifications, knowledge and experience necessary to conduct the research; research methodology is described and appropriate to answer research questions; and all budget items, are allowable, reasonable and clearly described.
- (3) IMPACT – the proposal describes the potential impact it will have on specialty crop producers and the specialty crop industry, and the potential for the proposal to provide new knowledge and lessons learned that could be applied in other States or

regions of the country; estimated economic impact is described and supported by relevant data. For long-term projects, the proposal includes a feasible plan for the project to become self-sustaining and not indefinitely dependent on grant funds. The proposal includes at least one quantitative metric to demonstrate impact.

- (4) DELIVERABLES AND OUTREACH – the proposal describes deliverables attributable to the project in addition to the final report; and outlines a plan to disseminate project results electronically and in person to the target audience, stakeholders, and interested parties beyond those directly served by the project.

Phase 3 – Administrative Review: Final decisions will be made by AMS based upon the scores assigned by the technical reviewers and consideration of other factors, which include, but are not limited to, responsiveness to budget and plan of work negotiations, compliance with Federal Assistance Regulations, prior performance, and grant program budget limitations.

7.0 Notice to Applicants

There is no commitment by AMS to fund any particular application, to support any specific number of applications in a given topic area, or to make a specific number of awards. AMS also may elect to fund several or none of the proposed projects. Funds not awarded in a fiscal year will be applied to the next fiscal year's project award cycle.