

USDA, AMS
Moderator: Janise Zygmunt
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1:05 pm CT

Janise Zygmunt: Good afternoon and thank you for joining me today to learn about the new AMS Grant Program with Specialty Crop Multi-State Program.

My name is Janise Zygmunt and I've been with AMS for some time. I also manage the Federal State Marketing Improvement Program -- which is the oldest grant program AMS has -- so I have some experience with grants, but I am new to the Specialty Crop. So, this is going to be a learning experience for all of us.

Today I want to focus on the request for application. That is the document that is posted to our Web site and also available via grants.gov. This is going to be your bible when thinking about and preparing your proposals.

I want to give you a basic understanding of the program parameters because it is a new program. Some of you are maybe familiar with the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, some may be familiar with the Local Food Promotion or the Farmers Market Promotion Programs or even FSMIP, but this is a new one.

It is tied very closely to the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program in the sense that it is under the same legislation. And this new program was authorized by the Farm Bill, and my point in saying that is that therefore the definition on specialty crops for the purposes of this new grant program is the same as for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.

I want to just give you a sense of what is covered under Specialty Crops, again, for those who aren't familiar with the existing program. The Farm Bill defined specialty crops as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops including floriculture. Eligible plants must be cultivated or managed and used by people for food, medicinal purposes, and/or aesthetic gratification to be considered specialty crops. Processed products shall consist of greater than 50% of the specialty crop by weight exclusive of added water.

Now at the Web site -- the Specialty Crop Block Grant Web site and also the Specialty Crop Multi-State -- we have a link to a much more in-depth definition of what a specialty crop is as well as a list of eligible specialty crops and also what is ineligible. So if there's any question about what you are thinking about -- whether it is applicable to this program -- I urge you to take a look at that site.

I want to start with the RFA. We're not going to go through it page-by-page and line-by-line, but I want to hit the high point so that you get a good understanding of the program.

On Page 3 at the top you'll see we have stakeholder input. Because this is a new program there are going to be a lot of questions about how it works and what it covers and so on, we want your feedback on this RFA. If there are any clarifications, any questions that you think of or suggestions to make it more clear in the RFA for the next time, that would be useful to us because the program that we've just announced is covering funds that were allocated for last year (fiscal 2014) which was a million dollars and then \$2 million for fiscal 2015. For 2016 there will be an additional \$3 million available, the following year an additional \$4 million available, and finally in the last year of the program there will be an additional \$5 million. So we're starting out slow, but this is a program that's going to grow. So we want your feedback as

we go along about the RFA as you prepare your applications and work with the participating state Ag departments.

So let's get started on the RFA.

The purpose is covered in Section 1.2 is very straightforward. It is to competitively award funds to state departments of agriculture to fully enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops by funding collaborative multi-state projects that address the following regional or national level specialty crop issues -- food safety, plant pests and disease, research, crop-specific projects addressing common issues for those specific crops, and also, marketing and promotion.

The first four were specifically outlined in the law to be covered under this program. The last -- marketing and promotion -- is an element that we've added to the program under the authority given to the secretary to open the program to other purposes. So that's where it's focused, on those five areas.

Section 1.3 takes each of these categories and elaborates on possibilities of the types of projects that we anticipate will be coming in to us for this program. These projects as you see described may include, but are not limited to, these different bullets.

And I do want to say something very quickly about the first category which is the food safety projects.

We've heard from a number of people about some concerns that we too narrowly defined the references that we make to the Produce Safety Alliance and FDA with regard to food safety proposals particularly in developing materials and doing training for producers. And without going to any detail -- because we're still under discussion about that -- we are going to broaden our

discussion of the types of proposals that we would accept recognizing that food safety is an evolving area of concern and in the coming years the FDA will be approving new materials and training and we need to accommodate that in our request for proposals.

So we will handle this issue in more detail in a question-answer section that we will post to the Web site along with other questions and clarifications that we find necessary as we go along to help the applicants prepare proposals that address the objectives of the Specialty Crop-Multi State Program.

The proposal reviewers will eventually receive additional instructions when they go to evaluate the proposals with regard to food safety training. So, I just wanted to mention that we're aware of some issues and some questions and concerns and that we will be addressing those so that when you go to put your proposals together you'll have a little bit more guidance than what's in the RFA.

We have projects that address threats from pests and diseases. Again, we have bullets indicating the projects may include but are not limited to these.

The same with the research projects which is rather broad and open. And we try to cover things here the - we anticipate would be of interest to the community out there that's interested in multi-state projects.

We have crop-specific projects and an example is just if you have say a crop like asparagus it's growing in multi-states or in multiple areas of the country and they have common issues that could be addressed by research.

And then, of course, the final one I mentioned is marketing and promotions projects which cover everything you see here listed -- to sell, advertise,

promote, market, generate publicity for, attract new customers or raise customer awareness for specialty crops or a specialty crop venue.

So, moving on to some additional information about the eligible project types.

We do have some priorities. I'll talk about that a little later. So that's something to be aware of - that we are giving priority to certain types of proposals.

Highly technical proposals. We have some guidance about highly-technical proposals. These are science-based laboratory projects, but we need to see how that's going to link to a practical application for producers and processors.

The proposals involving a food safety training and education, I've already talked about, that we will be providing more guidance on this. We do give some leeway and leverage in this paragraph, but we will give you some more guidance on that.

That's all I really want to say about the types of proposals. We are, again, limited by what the law says plus the marketing and promotion which the secretary added, and so when you're developing proposals think about it in those terms.

I wanted to cover briefly - we have in Section 1.3.8 on allowed project types. That first bullet -- duplication of materials -- it doesn't mean photocopying something and using it, something that's already been developed and using it in your proposal. It means reinventing the wheel. If it's out there we don't want a research project that is going to approach an issue as if there is no information out there at all.

I'd like to move to Section 1.4 which is the development of proposals. This is really crucial for this audience because the state departments of agriculture are going to be the applicant, but when you look at the definition of a multi-state project the partners are essential. The groups that you represent are crucial to the success of this program, and in fact to the definition of what a multi-state project is.

The definition of a multi-state project is that it addresses one or more - and it can be more than one of the five areas of concentration for this program - as described under the project types.

It will define a particular geographic area such as specific state or foreign market, showing that it has more than very local impact. It defines the specific specialty crops that will be the focus of the project.

And this is very crucial. It involves at least two partner organizations or entities located in different states.

The next sentence talks about the participating state department of agriculture. Let's just go to that next section and talk about that because that is very crucial in how this program is going to work.

We realize that not all state agriculture departments have the capacity and resources to play the role of accepting applications, screening applications, getting on grants.gov and submitting them to AMS. We can't force state agriculture departments to participate and take that role.

So we have gone out and asked the states to let us know by September 30 if they are willing to accept the role of what we're calling a participating state department of agriculture. We've listed here what their roles and responsibilities are briefly.

The first is that the participating state department of agriculture is the only one, the only entity, that can send us proposals. The participating will provide us a point of contact or handle inquiries from groups like yourself and that you represent about this program.

The participating state Ag departments will establish a deadline for accepting applications and they will develop, in close concert with AMS, internal procedures to screen applications from any source submitted to them to ensure that it is a multi-state project as defined in Section 1.4.1, and that it meets the rest of the requirements outlined in this RFA.

The participating will take responsibility for submitting all applications they receive that meet both the definitions of the multi-state project and the requirements of the RFA. They accept administrative responsibility for any application they submitted to AMS that is ultimately selected for funding. And then if awarded they will handle the sub-awards and sub-agreements with the partners in the states that will actually carry out the work of the project.

It is important to know that it's not the responsibility of the participating state Ag departments to help you develop proposals in a substantive way. They will be referring you back to the RFA to tell you about the components of the application and to send you back to the RFA to make sure that you'll have a complete application before you send it to them. And we'll go over what that consists of.

So the rest of this section just talks about what - who could be the partners, who can participate as a partner in this program. And it really is open.

You see we have from examples there of acceptable partnerships, but by no means are these exhaustive. And we do have here (on the call today)

participating state Ag departments, who may themselves want a substantive role in a project. They may apply with another partner and send their application in that way. If they have a substantive role they can be counted as a partner.

The Section 1.4.3 talks a little bit more about partnerships. Section 1.4.4 covers the criteria that the participating state Ag departments will use in determining if an application is appropriate for this program.

We tie it closely - and I shouldn't say tie it closely, but I should say we don't want to duplicate any project that has been completed under a Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. If something had begun under that program, that's okay, but we need to be sure that we're not duplicating anything, and that the proposal also adheres to those other requirements we talked about whether the additional information that we've provided about is a high technical project or food safety project.

Once we establish and post on our Web site who the participating state agriculture departments will be, they are going to be your points of contact for questions about the RFA. If they can't answer them, they will send them in to me and I will provide them not only that individual participating, but all the other participatings, with the same information so that they are approaching the screening of applications and submission of the applications in the same way.

Just a couple of things about the available funding.

I did mention before that approximately \$3 million will be available. And the projects will be three years in duration.

The award size is a minimum of \$250,000 and a maximum of a million. So if you do the math we could fund under this RFA three \$1 million projects or 12 \$250,000 projects or anything in between. But our minimum is 3 and our maximum is 12.

You could send in a proposal for \$300,000, \$500,000, \$750,000, whatever is appropriate to the scope and subject matter of your proposal. But I just wanted to mention that under this RFA we will fund a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 12 given that funding level.

I would like to turn to the application package itself. On Page 16 we have a checklist for the application. All of this is applicable to you, except the information about the Standard Form 424. That will be completed by the participating state ag dept when they submit your application to AMS.

We will be looking for proposals that are consistent with the following: a cover page and the details of what goes on the cover page, a table of contents, an abstract, a narrative that outlines your goals, objectives, your work plan and some other things such as references, a budget spreadsheet, a budget narrative, etc.

We want personal qualifications for the individuals who will be doing the work on the project. We want a letter of commitment from each partner in the project saying that they will agree to do the work outlined if the project proposal is funded, and three letters of support from stakeholders or beneficiaries.

This is the checklist that the participating state agriculture departments will use in evaluating to see if this will be submitted to AMS.

And let me clarify that a little bit.

The participating ag departments are not going to set up their own criteria. They are not going to have their own proposal outlines, - in short they are going to follow the AMS RFA. This is the bible. This is what they need to follow. And if there are any questions either from potential applicants or from the participating Ag departments or other state Ag departments, they're going to funnel them to AMS.

Again, we want uniformity in the approach. We want everyone to be treated fairly. We want people to have all the right information. So as I said, we're going to post those question and answers on our Web site.

I don't want to go into the detail about each component of the application. We have a very detailed section about the type of costs that we allow and don't allow under this program. This will be your guidance in figuring out - can we ask for this in our budget or not?

I would like to turn briefly to the section about how these proposals will be evaluated.

As I've said the participating state agriculture departments, will screen proposals. They're going to make sure that the proposal is truly a multi-state project, meets the RFA requirements, has all the components of a complete application, and then they send them to AMS headquarters.

AMS will be soliciting reviewers to review these proposals once they come in. Of course we have no idea how many proposals we're going to get. We don't know how many will be in each of those five different areas to expect, so all we know now is that we will need reviewers.

The reviewers will be peer reviewers so they will be from organizations like yours - nonprofits, universities, whatever. Also other state Ag departments could be reviewers. So as we get closer to the application deadline I'll be putting out press release soliciting reviewers and there'll be an application and you will have to send in a resume so that we can evaluate your credentials to see if you can serve as a reviewer.

We will get the proposals in and we will do our own screening, that, yes, they meet all the qualifications, confirming and affirming that the participating state Ag departments has gone through the proper procedures in screening the proposals. Then we will assign reviewers and they will have a scoring paradigm.

They will look at the proposals as individuals first and then together in teams of three based on the subject matter of the proposal. They will score and comment, and they will forward their results to AMS, and we will take it from there.

The AMS deadline is January 14 of next year. In order for the participating state agriculture departments to actually look at your proposal, make sure that it meets the qualifications, and submit through grants.gov by January 14, they will have to set a deadline before January 14. That's something that I will be discussing with the participating Ag departments once they're identified, and then that information will be posted.

I'm just looking at my notes to see if I've left anything out. There is one point I'd like to make.

You must select one participating Ag departments to send your proposal to. Sending your proposal to multiple participating is not going to increase your chances of funding because the proposal can only be counted once and we

don't want to overburden the participating Ag departments by having more than one screen the same proposal.

At this point those are the remarks that I have, but I'd like to open it up for questions. So, I need to put us in question and answer mode, and then you will hear instructions from the teleconference folks about how to ask question. So I'm going to do that right now.

Operator: This conference is now in question and answer mode. To alert the speaker that you have a question, press 1 then 0. Each question will be asked in the order it was received.

Janise Zygmunt: I think that you got some instructions about how to ask a question. And I'm just going to go ahead and see if I have any questions, and we'll go from there.

Woman: Hi. I work with an organization that works in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, and I wondered if a project that works with multiple states where one state is a participating state department of Ag and another is not would be eligible for the Specialty Crop Multi-State Program.

Janise Zygmunt: There have to be two partners with substantive involvement. And the participating is there just as an administrative body to accept your application, screen it and get it into grants.gov, et cetera.

So the two partners, they have to be in different states.

Woman: So, is it - say Oregon and Washington and only Washington happens to be a participating department that you're - if we had an Oregon partner it might still be an eligible project?

Janise Zygmont: Well, if Washington was the participating and Oregon State Ag Department and a nonprofit or whatever in a different state -- one in Oregon and one in Idaho for example -- that would be a multi-state project submitted through the Washington State Department of Ag as the participating.

Let me take another question.

Woman: Hi. I have a question about the food safety requirement. I know that you said that you have gotten some comments on that and will be revisiting that. So I guess my questions are, will that if you'd be revisiting some more clarification outlined for this round of funding or something is going to be done for future rounds of funding?

Janise Zygmont: No, that will be for this round.

Woman: And then my next question is, are you still - are you soliciting or interested in folks that might have comments on this issue?

Janise Zygmont: Well, we are not really soliciting comments on that issue. We've gotten comments. And I can't stop you, go ahead, you know, that would be fine, but you might want to wait until you see the guidance that comes out. But that's up to you. You certainly can send in something on that.

Woman: Okay. Thank you.

Janise Zygmont: Okay. I'm going to take another question.

Woman: Yes, I have a question about - you didn't mention anything about budget subcontract for the partners or institutions. Is that going to be a requirement at all?

Janise Zygmont: Well, I think that would be part of it because the participating is only going to have the administrative responsibility for the grant. And they're going to have to subcontract with the two partners to complete the project. And now this is going to entail budget issues.

Woman: Is it in the RFA, the information about subcontracting?

Janise Zygmont: Yes, it's mentioned in there. Sure. And when you develop your budget spreadsheet and your narrative you're going to have to make clear where the money is going to go and to whom, to do what. But that's included in there.

Woman: And I have a second question or more like comment.

So this is basically set up pretty much like the Specialty Crop Grant Program where the Department of Ag is basically submitting and managing the grant.

Janise Zygmont: True to the extent that with the Block Grant all the state Ag departments get funds and they do their own competitive grant programs. The SCMP is different in that only a selected number of state ag depts., based on their willingness to fulfill that role as a participating, will be involved in this program.

Woman: And is there a limit to the number of partners that could max on a submission?

Janise Zygmont: No. It has to be at least two. In different states.

Let's take another question.

Man: Hi. Is there a need for evaluation or a research project dissemination scheme?
Is that something that's part of this RFA?

Janise Zygmont: Would you elaborate on your question? I'm not sure what you mean by that.

Man: So, if evaluation would be evaluation of the results -- in other words, you know, gathering data, the research - much of the research project as it is -- you know, I'm assuming that there is going to be a need for dissemination of knowledge game. Is that correct?

Janise Zygmont: Yes. And we do talk about having an outreach plan on your...

Man: I mean, are you looking for a full evaluation on that?

Janise Zygmont: You know, I'm not sure what you mean by the full evaluation. I guess are you asking are we requiring that you set aside some of the grant funds to evaluate the project?

Man: Yes, ma'am. That's what I meant.

Janise Zygmont: We didn't set it up that way. You can certainly do that though.

Man: Okay. All right. Thank you very much.

Janise Zygmont: Another question.

Woman: Hi. My organization represents several multiple states. Do the partners necessarily have to represent multiple states or say I represent Oregon and Washington, can I partner with someone that only is representing Washington -- if that makes sense? We're a commission so...do all the participants need to represent multiple states or because we're partnering and we're encompassing multiple states that fulfills the requirement?

Janise Zygmont: Well, you'd have to be located in different state.

Woman: Yes.

Janise Zygmunt: And it sounds like you would be two commissions from different states?

Woman: Yes.

Janise Zygmunt: Yes, that does sound right.

Woman: Okay. Thank you.

Janise Zygmunt: Okay. Let's take another question.

Woman: I had two different questions. One is covering the blurb about unsuccessful applicants. And so, would you filter the information from the comments to the participating Department of Agriculture to filter down to the applicants that may not have received funding? And then, two is, what are the reporting requirements if - for the Department of Agriculture and the grant recipients if they too receive the funding?

Janise Zygmunt: It is our policy, once the awards are announced to send the consensus comments and the scores to the unsuccessful applicants to give them feedback on their project. So, yes, that is definitely something that is our policy to do.

Woman: Would you send it to the applicant's themselves or would you filter that to the Department of the participating department of Agriculture, then they in turn would send it to the applicant.

Janise Zygmunt: It would go through the participating because they are the applicant.

Woman: Okay.

Janise Zygmont: And then repeat your second question, please?

Woman: The reporting requirements...

Woman: ...on a yearly basis?

Janise Zygmont: I need to look that up to make sure I'm giving you the right info.

While we would definitely have reporting requirements, I'm just not seeing it what the interval is. But, yes, there will be progress reports and financial reports during the life of the project.

And then at the end of the project, you'll prepare a final report and final financial statement. And throughout the life of the program you would submit - or I should say the participating would submit on your behalf, requests for reimbursements on your expenses. So that would be happening during the entire grant period.

Janise Zygmont: Another question.

Man: I have two questions, actually. First one is, you sort of touched on it but not to my satisfaction, anyway. I represent an association of a particular product and we have people throughout the country as members, but we don't really have a specific state where we're associated with so I'm not clear how that follow and have association with a particular state.

Janise Zygmont: Well, you have a headquarters?

Man: No we don't.

Janise Zygmunt: Oh, you don't. Okay. I think I need more information, and maybe you could send me an email and we could take it from there.

Man: Sure. Can do. And the second question on the - is there a deadline for - how do we know when to establish with the - states department of Ag have agreed to be participating?

Janise Zygmunt: Yes. As I mentioned we have a deadline of September 30 for the states to let AMS know whether or not they want to participate. Once that happens we'll have to see how many have decided to assume that role. You know, it really depends - we have to look at their workload as well.

When I conference with them we will establish a deadline that will then be available on their Web sites and on our Web site to let you know. But to me it seems reasonable that because of the holidays they would need to see the proposal sometime probably in December, but that we haven't established that and we'll have to talk about that with the participating.

And we will get that information out on the Web site and also to the non-participating state Ag departments who also have a role and interest in the program to facilitate the flow of information and questions back to us. So they can be a point of contact too. And just not necessarily from a group that's listening right now, but for the public who has questions they can ask their state Ag department and be referred to the participating state ag depts. or AMS.

Man: Thank you.

Janise Zygmunt: Okay. Let's take another question. Okay. I don't have any other questions. It is quarter to 3:00 here Eastern Time. I want to give you a couple more minutes to think of anything. If there end up not being any more questions what I'd

suggest is if after we hang up and you have any more questions you can email them to me. I prefer email rather than the phone calls as I can respond quicker. Then if we need to have a phone call we can talk. And we will be posting -- as soon as we can after September 30 -- the participating list and that will be the next steps in the whole process.

Let me check if there's any other questions.

Woman: Is there any special consideration in this project for underserved populations?

Janise Zygmunt: Well, there are no priority points for that. There are no extra incentives for that. But you did probably notice in the RFA that we have some USDA priority areas and those are included in all of our grant programs through AMS and probably throughout the rest of the USDA to affirm that these are priorities for us. To the extent they could fit in to this program, that'd be great.

Woman: Okay. Thank you.

Woman: I have another question. is there a specific form you're going to issue or do they just - or do applicants just use the information within the RFA, you know, to create their having - you know, using the bullet checklist as guideline? ...specific piece of paper they need to fill out?

Janise Zygmunt: We don't have a template. We probably will in future years, but this year we don't. So the instructions are to make sure that you submit your applications with all of the required information in the order in which it appears in the RFA.

Woman: Okay.

Janise Zygmont: The title page and the table of contents, and the abstract, etc., in that order. It facilitates the review process for the participating states and also for the reviewers once it gets to your headquarters.

Woman: Okay. Thanks.

Janise Zygmont: Okay.

Woman: Yes, I have a question. Earlier in the discussion you said you had - we're going to talk about our priority purpose later on. And I might have missed it because when you did the question and answering the automated lady talks to you for quite a bit and you miss some of the conversation. Could you repeat that if I missed it, the - you're going to talk about our priority.

Janise Zygmont: Right. And I'm just looking up where that is. Okay. That's covered under Section 5.1 Project Evaluation Criteria. And it's at the top of Page 46. It says, AMS will award five priority points to proposals where the main project activities fall under the following project types: food safety, plant pest and disease, and research as described in Sections 1.3.1, 1.3.2, and 1.3.3.

Woman: Okay.

Janise Zygmont: Those are the - those are areas that are going to get priority points.

Woman: So those three of the five?

Janise Zygmont: Yes.

Woman: Okay. Thank you.

Janise Zygmont: Okay.

Man: I've a question about the letter of support. Do they need to be from the same state or can they - each participant has to be from (each) state?

Janise Zygmont: No. It's a total of three for the application that goes to the participating department of Ag's. And those letters of support can be from any stakeholder organizations. They don't necessarily have to even be in that state.

Man: Okay.

Janise Zygmont: With some of our proposals I anticipate are going to have national implications. And so, in that way there could be stakeholders throughout the country.

Man: Thank you.

Janise Zygmont: You're welcome.

Did someone else have a question that I missed?

Suddenly I had one more question and then it didn't come through which...

Okay. Well, if there are no more questions then we can terminate this session. And I look forward to seeing your proposals. I look forward to answering your questions. It's an exciting new grant program and it's very interesting to create a new program and I look forward to working with you.

So let me check for questions one more time, and then if we're finished we'll finish.

Okay. Well, thank you all for joining us today. And, again, I look forward to seeing your proposals. Thanks.

Operator: Your conference is ending now. As requested by the host, please hang up.

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