

Research Facilities Act Grants Program Considerations

Executive Summary

The following questions and associated recommendations for the Research Facilities Act (RFA) program were developed by members of a subcommittee of the agInnovation Budget and Legislative Committee (BLC). The subcommittee included members from all four geographic regions of agInnovation and the Association of 1890 Research Directors. The goal of this subcommittee was to create an initial set of questions and recommendations that will serve as a starting point for discussions and strategic (re-)structuring of the RFA program to ensure effective, equitable and geographically diverse investment for advancing U.S. agricultural, food and ecological systems and improving the economies and lives of all Americans.

Eligibility Considerations

Question: Will the RFA be limited to 1890, 1862, and 1994 Land-grant institutions?

Recommendations: Clarify the institutions that would be eligible to submit proposals and receive RFA funding. We recommend that eligibility be limited to Land-grant institutions receiving capacity funds. Secondly, a limited number of public institutions with established colleges of agriculture could be considered eligible.

Question: Will the RFP prioritize projects that identify state and institutional needs and goals?

Recommendations: Proposals that clearly identify and align with long-term institutional goals should be prioritized. This focus ensures that RFA projects are relevant and beneficial to the specific communities, agricultural sectors, and institutions they serve. Projects should justify investments that best serve the agricultural needs of the state and the region with the greatest return for US agriculture.

Question: Is there an institutional limit rather than a state limit on the number of applications? For example, could the 1862, 1890, and 1994 institutions in a single state each hold an RFA grant simultaneously?

Recommendations: Limits should be applied to the number proposals and total amount awarded per year at the institutional level, not at the state level. Specifically, proposals should be evaluated based on the specific needs and past awards of the institution rather than the geographical location. For example, if University A in a particular state has received multiple RFA awards totaling \$25 million, University B from the same state should not be penalized simply because the state as a whole has already received a significant amount of funding. Each institution's needs and contributions should be considered independently.

Question: Currently the USDA RFA is “one submission per institution per cycle/year” will this continue?

Recommendations: Within the same 1862 institution, Hatch, McIntire-Stennis and Animal Health capacity funds can be housed in separate colleges, creating an internally competitive environment for RFA submissions if the “one per institution per cycle/year” is maintained. One submission per institution per capacity fund, would allow a university to submit, in theory, multiple proposals per cycle if they all addressed different facilities under different capacity funds. Institutional matching may come from completely different sources. Clarify what is desired relative to the number of proposals per single institution per cycle or year.

Question: Will there be funding available for “planning grants” for architectural studies? If a planning grant is awarded, will preference be given to the project proposed in the planning grant during future competitions?

Recommendations: To increase equity across sizes and existing capacities of institutions, a "planning grant" or Phase I track should exist in the Research Infrastructure Program, allowing universities to determine the accurate scope and cost of a project before applying for full funding. In Phase II (the full award stage), institutions that received Phase I funding would likely have stronger, more competitive proposals. Additionally, having planning grants available in the next round of RFA grants would help institutions prepare for larger funding opportunities and secure some short-term project wins.

Question: How will "shovel-ready projects" be defined in the submission requirements? Should “shovel-ready projects” be prioritized?

Recommendations: Shovel-ready projects should not be prioritized because there is no uniform definition of “shovel-ready,” and these can vary significantly from state to state. In some states, regulations may require that funding be secured before any tangible planning progress can begin, aside from initial discussions. Other states may define “shovel-ready” as being ready for immediate construction. Some institutions cannot decouple the planning from the construction costs as it is all part of the same project approval process.

Prioritizing shovel-ready projects is likely to place smaller states and/or smaller institutions at a disadvantage, as they may not have a pipeline of ready-to-go projects. As such, there must be significant and transparent flexibility in how shovel-ready projects are defined and evaluated to ensure fair opportunities for all institutions (capturing the differences in state-based policies). The definition for “shovel-ready” must be clear.

Question: Must a current RFA grant be completed before applying for another one, or can institutions apply for a second grant while the first is still in progress, as long as the first is completed before the second grant is awarded?

Recommendations: Funding should not be restricted based on the existence of an ongoing RFA project. If the new proposal addresses a tangibly different infrastructure need than what the current RFA project is addressing, the institution should still be eligible to apply for additional funding. In essence, a single institution can hold multiple awards at the same time or can apply for funding if the award date is after expiration of project; however, multiple awards at same time could reduce equity in the grants process.

Question: If an institution holds an RFA grant from FY23 or FY24, does that preclude it from applying for future RFA opportunities?

Recommendations: The scope of current program and funding (FY23 and 24) will likely be dramatically different than future programs if funding as currently proposed in farm bill is secured. Institutions that hold current RFA grants should not be precluded from applying for future opportunities, provided that the new project addresses a substantial and clearly distinct need from the previous one. This would ensure that institutions with ongoing projects are not unfairly restricted from pursuing new, critical infrastructure needs.

Question: Will both major renovation and new space projects qualify for funding?

Recommendations: Both types of projects—major renovations and new constructions that clearly show how it will advance existing scientific capacity—should be eligible for funding.

Question: Will the renovation of “historic buildings” be considered, given that such projects often cost more due to the nature of the buildings?

Recommendations: Historic building renovations should not be excluded but the applicant must provide a compelling case for why RFA investment in a historic building is justified. There should also be a specific and transparent evaluation process to ensure that historic building renovation projects are fairly evaluated relative to new construction and/or less expensive (non-historic) renovation projects.

Question: Will research-adjacent projects (those that incorporate research and educational and/or Extension uses of facilities) be eligible for funding?

Recommendations: While the priority focus remains on research infrastructure, research-adjacent projects could qualify, provided there is substantial evidence that the project will lead to long-term agricultural research, education, and outreach opportunities. The potential for broader institutional or community benefits should be a key factor in determining eligibility.

Proposals should be prioritized if they can show that infrastructure improvements primarily focused on research also provide significant benefits to other aspects of the university’s

mission, such as extension services and educational programs. Projects that demonstrate these additional impacts should receive higher priority, as they contribute to a broader institutional and community outreach.

Question: Will the RFP be narrowly focused on a few areas, or will it be broadly defined to reflect the entirety of the agricultural, food, and ecological systems?

Recommendations: The RFP should be broadly defined to encompass a wide range of areas related to agricultural, food, and ecological systems. Importantly, the evaluation process should place higher priority for proposals that emphasize how the infrastructure investment will help address local priorities while aligning with long-term institutional needs. This broader scope allows for more flexibility and inclusivity in addressing different aspects of the agricultural and ecological challenges facing various regions. However, agricultural infrastructure should be well defined to avoid institutional drift in its interpretation. Language should explicitly include off-campus Experiment Station facilities and not solely projects on main campus.

Matching Requirements

Question: What does “match” mean? Can the match be in-kind or cash-equivalent?

Recommendations: Allow as much flexibility to match requirement as possible, including in-kind contributions, to enable all institutions across the spectrum of capacities to participate. In-kind contributions could include items like environmental site assessment costs, engineering and architectural design fees in preparation for a proposal, or even salary costs for university personnel directly involved in the project, such as project managers and grounds staff. Additionally, unrecovered indirect costs, such as the maintenance and upkeep of buildings, could also qualify as part of the match.

Question: What should the match level be? Should it be the same for minority-serving institutions (MSIs), insular institutions, and smaller rural institutions with limited capacity?

Recommendations: Flexibility in the matching level critical to ensure equitable access to the program and investment across geographical areas. Due to the likely large award amounts, a strict 1:1 match is impractical and restrictive for most institutions. Creating a dynamic match requirement would make it easier and more equitable for smaller schools to remain competitive. One method is to develop a transparent, formulaic approach based in a clear set of institutional characteristics, acknowledging the high cost of infrastructure, the financial limitations of smaller institutions, existing deferred maintenance needs, among others. Institutions matching more than the minimum requirement should not be given preference over an institution meeting the minimum.

Additionally, the Secretary of Agriculture should have the authority to waive all or part of the matching requirement for smaller institutions, such as those in the EPSCoR (Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research) program and MSIs. U.S. territories should be considered for lower levels of match that mirror current levels for capacity grants. Such considerations would ensure that smaller and less-resourced institutions are not unfairly burdened by the match requirement.

Question: At what point does the match need to be secured?

Recommendations: Allow institutions to provide their matching contributions by the end of the grant period rather than identify the full match at the beginning of the grant period. This would ensure that a wider range of institutions can participate, including those that may need time to gather the required resources.

Equity Considerations

Question: How will an equitable geographic distribution of funds be ensured, especially for diverse institutions, including small and mid-sized institutions?

Recommendations: Achieving geographic equity in the distribution of funds should take into account the allocation across universities within a specific region, rather than focusing solely on state-level awards. For instance, if a single university within a state or region receives multiple large awards, other institutions in that same region should not be penalized. However, if the total funding in a particular state or region has been distributed across numerous institutions, priority should then shift to underfunded states or regions to ensure a more balanced allocation of resources.

Additionally, the analysis provided by the Gordian Report, which breaks down infrastructure needs by region, could serve as a valuable guide in achieving this equitable distribution. The EPSCoR (Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research) classifications could also be used to prioritize funding for regions and institutions that have historically received fewer federal research dollars.

Question: Will grants be designated for diverse areas of study?

Recommendations: Funding decisions should take into consideration the potential to develop regional infrastructure that benefits multiple institutions within a specific area. By addressing shared needs, these projects can provide broad support for a variety of institutions and fields of study, promoting collaboration and resource-sharing across regions. However, not all institutions are in areas where regional infrastructure projects are practical.

Data Tracking and Management

Question: What tracking mechanisms will NIFA have in place at the proposal stage? What internal data will be collected to understand which institutions and states apply, their success rates, and the types of projects most likely to be funded?

Recommendations: There needs to be a strategic and well-defined approach to gather and analyze comprehensive data on which institutions and states are applying for funding, what their success rates are, and which types of projects are receiving funding. These data will help NIFA assess the effectiveness of the program and guide future decisions on resource allocation. The data management plan needs to be developed and applied retroactively to FY23 and FY24 applications and awards.

Question: Will NIFA track categories of institutions that did not apply due to the match requirement?

Recommendations: In addition to tracking applications and awards (for example, by creating new functionality in the NIFA Reporting System), it is critical to equally track data about institutions that choose *not to apply* and the reasons that applications were not submitted (e.g., unattainable match requirement, timing of RFP, etc). Understanding why some institutions are not participating—whether due to the systematic structure of the RFP or other barriers—will provide valuable insight into how the program might be inadvertently excluding certain applicants. This will help in identifying and potentially removing barriers to ensure broader and more equitable and geographically diverse participation.

NIFA could create and facilitate annual opportunities for stakeholder feedback, particularly from land-grant universities (LGUs). This feedback should be used to adapt program rules and requirements, especially in the early years of the program. Since the program has been in place for several years, gathering this input sooner rather than later would be beneficial.

Miscellaneous

Question: What steps will be taken to ensure that the timing of the RFA applications does not conflict with other similar proposals?

Recommendations: RFPs related to infrastructure should be spaced out sufficiently to allow institutions enough time and resources to prepare their applications without conflict. Specifically, deadlines should avoid the summer months when institutions may have fewer staff and resources available to support the development of strong proposals. This will help ensure that institutions can make the most of their available support and submit high-quality applications.

Question: Will the USDA seek partnerships with other federal agencies to increase the total funding available for infrastructure projects?

Recommendations: USDA NIFA should take the lead in seeking out partnerships with other federal agencies, especially those that already have infrastructure funding programs and whose missions overlap with the USDA. By collaborating across agencies, the USDA can work to increase the total pool of funding available for infrastructure projects, ensuring that more institutions have access to the resources needed for their initiatives.

Question: What will be the review criteria for awards?

Recommendations: Project evaluation criteria should be published with as much detail as possible.