

ESCOP Budget and Legislative Committee (BLC): <http://escop.info/committee/blc/>
September 2024 Agenda (In person meeting)
Wednesday, September 25, 2024
12:15-2:00 (ET) Hanover I, Sheraton Raleigh

Committee Members:

<p>Chair: Anton Bekkerman (NERA) Past Chair: Glenda Humiston (WAAESD) Incoming Chair: Steve Lommel (SAAESD)</p> <p>Members: Alton Thompson (ARD) Vernon Jones (ARD) Gary Pierzynski (NCRA) Derek McLean (NCRA) Wendie Cohick (NERA) Steve Lommel (agInnovation South) Scott Senseman (agInnovation South) Sreekala Bajwa (agInnovation West) Shawn Donkin (agInnovation West)</p>	<p>Liaisons: Jason Henderson (ECOP) Katie Frazier (CARET) Elizabeth Stulberg (Lewis-Burke, Advocacy) Paula Geiger (NIFA) Laura Jolly (BHHS)</p> <p>Executive Vice-Chair Gary Thompson (SAAESD ED) Cindy Morley (SAAESD)</p>
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Attendees: Anton Bekkerman, Steve Lommel, Alton Thompson, Derek McLean, Scott Senseman, Sreekala Bajwa, Shawn Donkin, Elizabeth Stulberg, Gary Thompson, Cindy Morley

- Welcome – Anton
- Approval of the July 27 meeting notes – Anton
 - **Approved by acclimation**
- DC update – Elizabeth
 - What might happen after the election?
 - Both chambers flip is a likelihood.
 - We can plan by looking for bipartisan priorities as there will need to be compromises.
 - AI is a bipartisan area.
 - Colleges of agriculture seem to be more popular than higher education in general, which can be used to your benefit.
 - CARET can make the pitch to remind them how popular you are.
 - Staffers asked about AI, bioeconomy, and precision ag during recent visit. Can we pull together examples of this to share? Note: the USDA definition of bioeconomy doesn't match other institutions.
 - Multistate projects could provide resources on these topics.
 - Is this the role of the STC and outside the purview of this committee?
 - Asking multistate committees to do a 1-pager could be a good collaboration between BLC and STC. This committee can help staffers better relate.
 - AgInnovation should be a trusted resource (Research roadmap covers all technologies).

- Funding legislation to do our jobs better is the purview of this committee. Is there a place for us to advise the BAA for bringing additional funding to NSF and NIH (etc.) such as interagency programs?
 - We spend a lot of time talking to congress, but how do we influence the President's budget?
 - Through NIFA and the Office of the Chief Scientist. OMB manages the budget, yet we don't know what Director Misra or the Chief Scientist requests. Timing is important as the FY26 budget planning began in April.
 - Advice is to talk about "research". Next spring, talk to the new people about "research" in the FY27 budget.
 - NOW is the time to talk to OMB. It is a lot of work to influence a document (President's Budget Request) that may have no influence on congress.
 - NC and W regions met with ARS at this meeting, and they questioned if we could get advance knowledge of what they are requesting.
 - Only national program leaders know
 - LGUs (as a stakeholder) can identify this as a priority
 - Report language is a way to influence the process and is in this committee's purview.
 - Chief Scientists make decisions. Should have regular meetings with Chandra Jacobs-Young.
 - Chief Scientist chairs an interagency committee for those that use science. Do they still meet?
- RFA Subcommittee – Anton (see handout)
 - Document includes questions and recommendations covering six categories that was developed by the subcommittee for LBA to engage with NIFA and congressional staffers as appropriate.
 - Categories: Eligibility, Match, Equity (beyond Match), Data Tracking and Management, and Miscellaneous.
 - What is the intention of the document? What happens when RFA becomes law?
 - There may not be rule making with this program, they did that last year. We assume NIFA will get these out fast.
 - Intended to start the conversation with NIFA and ask if they need more guidance on legislation, etc. First mover advantage.
 - During a recent LBA conversation with NIFA, they are happy we are doing this!
 - There will be a match, but can we influence the report language? Staffers are open to ideas.
 - NSF has experience in structuring match and might help designing this with NIFA.
 - Staffers do not seem flexible with the match issue (LBA).
 - Maybe they can do a 1:1 OVERALL match.
 - Maybe appropriation language could be match free.
 - Maybe work on match language after the mandatory funding is passed.
 - RFA Subcommittee is paused for now. No further meetings planned.

ACTION ITEM: Review document and send recommendations to Anton, Gary, and Steve
- agInnovation Chair's charge to the BLC - Steve
 - The BLC's role in the implementation of the agInnovation Roadmap will be to develop funding strategies aligned with roadmap priorities and communicate those strategies across the other sections through the BAC and CLP.
- BLC chair and executive vice-chair transitions
 - Steve Lommel transitions to BLC chair and Anton Bekkerman to past-chair at this meeting.
 - Jeanette will be the BLC executive vice chair beginning in January.
- Adjourn

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 Policy Committee (BLC). The subcommittee included members from all four geographic regions of agInnovation and the Association of Research Directors. The goal of 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 to improve the economies and lives of all Americans.

Eligibility Considerations

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

Recommendations: Proposals that clearly identify and align with local needs and long-term institutional goals should be prioritized. This focus ensures that RFA projects are relevant and beneficial to the specific communities and institutions they serve.

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 could be applied to proposals at the institution level rather than 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: 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. However, Phase I awards should not automatically guarantee preferential treatment in Phase II. For institutions that provide architectural designs without a Phase I grant, the associated fees could be included in the institution's match contribution to help make a project shovel-ready.

Additionally, having planning grants available in the next round of RFA grants would help institutions prepare for larger funding opportunities in the near future 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.

Prioritizing shove-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).

More productively, planning grants should be prioritized in the same way that shovel-ready projects are in order to create equitable access across institutions.

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.

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

Recommendations: Institutions that hold 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: Research-adjacent projects could qualify, provided there is substantial evidence that the project will lead to long-term research, educational, 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 eco-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.

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) 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.

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. This 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.

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 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 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 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.