

BLC Monthly Call – January 27, 2026

Members and Liaisons

Participants (from Zoom report): Cindy Morley, Alton Thompson, Steven Lommel, Matt Peterson, Jeanette Thurston, Bret Hess, Gary Thompson, Sreekala Bajwa, Elizabeth Stulberg, Chris Smart, Shibu Jose, Anton Bekkerman, Gray Mayo, Derek McLean, Bob Mattive

Note: Federal updates from Elizabeth and Matt not included in recording/summary.

Fathom RECORDING - 39 mins (No highlights)

Key Takeaways

- **RFA Details:** Undersecretary Hutchins confirmed key RFA details: a one-project-per-institution limit, eligibility for planning grants and land acquisition, and potential match waivers for smaller institutions.
- **BLC Strategy:** The BLC will convert its existing RFA recommendation document into a formal submission for the Feb 12 deadline and will also make verbal comments at the Feb 3 listening session.
- **Timeline Pressure:** The \$125M must be encumbered by Sep 30, creating a compressed timeline. This makes "shovel-ready" projects and a broad distribution of smaller grants more likely.
- **Science Agenda:** The BLC's roadmap should align with USDA's 5 priorities: farm profitability, biosecurity, human health, land intensification, and precision nutrition.

Topics (click here for a [chronological meeting summary](#))

RFA Update from Undersecretary Hutchins

- [Alton reported on a mid-December meeting with Undersecretary Scott Hutchins and his team.](#)
- **RFA Details:**
 - **Submission Limit:** One project per institution at a time.
 - **Rationale:** This is a major concern for the BLC, as it could create internal competition at universities with multiple colleges involved in food/ag.
 - **Eligibility:** Includes planning grants, remodeling, and land acquisition.

- Match Requirement: Hutchins will encourage the Secretary to waive or reduce the 1:1 match for smaller institutions (1862s, 1890s, 1994s). Non-cash matches and deferred match payments (due before project end) are also being considered.
- Science Agenda:
 - Hutchins affirmed USDA's 5 R&D priorities: farm profitability, biosecurity, human health, land intensification, and precision nutrition.
 - Action: The BLC's roadmap should explicitly align with these priorities.
- Investment: Hutchins supports a "significant investment" in food/ag research but did not provide a specific figure.

BLC Strategy for RFA Response

- The BLC will convert its existing RFA recommendation document into a formal submission for the Feb 12 deadline.
- Key Recommendations:
 - Grant Cap: Propose a reasonable upper limit for individual grants to ensure broad distribution.
 - "Shovel-Ready" Projects: Recommend prioritizing these for the first year due to the compressed timeline.
 - Geographic & Institutional Diversity: Reiterate the need for broad distribution across states and institution types.
- Verbal Comments: The BLC will also make verbal comments at the Feb 3 listening session to reinforce its written submission.

Next Steps

- Jeanette: Consolidate all BLC feedback on the RFA recommendation document by Friday, Jan 30.
- Steve Lommel & Chandra Reddy: Prepare and deliver verbal comments at the Feb 3 listening session.
- BLC Executive Directors: Convert the recommendation document into a formal submission for the Feb 12 deadline.
- BLC Executive Directors: Invite Undersecretary Hutchins to the spring meeting.

Action Items

- **Email Scott Hutchins (REE) virtual invite for March meeting - [WATCH \(5 secs\)](#)**
- **Coordinate w/ agInnovation chair to deliver verbal comments at NOFO listening session - [WATCH \(5 secs\)](#)**
- **Collect NOFO input from BLC by Feb 3; draft recs-based submission; submit by Feb 12 - [WATCH \(5 secs\)](#)**

Chronological Summary

Update on meeting with USDA Undersecretary @ 12:15

Alton provided an update on his recent meeting with USDA Undersecretary Scott Hutchins and other USDA officials. Key points included:

- Hutchins indicated the upcoming RFA (now called a "NOFO") will allow for land acquisition and facility remodeling, in addition to research projects
- Hutchins said institutions will be limited to submitting one project at a time, but may be able to submit additional projects after the first is completed
- Hutchins mentioned the possibility of planning grants and consideration of waivers or reduced match requirements for smaller institutions like 1890s and 1994s
- Hutchins reiterated the 5 priority research areas outlined by the Secretary, and encouraged aligning the community's roadmap with those priorities

Preparing for the RFA/NOFO listening session @ 19:23

The group discussed their plans to provide written comments and potentially verbal feedback during the upcoming RFA/NOFO listening session:

- There was agreement to submit the existing document developed by the committee, reformatting it from a Q&A to a set of recommendations
- Participants raised additional questions to potentially include, such as whether there will be an upper limit on individual project funding amounts
- The group acknowledged the tight timeline, with written comments due by February 12th, and discussed the need to quickly gather any final input from the broader community

Wrap-up and next steps @ 36:00

The group concluded by confirming their plan to submit the reformatted document as the BLC's written feedback, and discussed the possibility of providing verbal comments during the listening session as well. They emphasized the need to gather any final input from the community by the end of the week to meet the February 12th deadline.