

Synopsis of and response to AFRI Stakeholder Feedback

A) Concerns:

1) Compliance of AFRI applicant eligibility with authorizing legislation

Response -

We recognize that some stakeholders are concerned that eligibility criteria for integrated projects exclude entities beyond colleges and universities from being primary grant recipients. However, NIFA is required to adhere strictly to eligibility guidelines laid out by authorizing legislation—the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (the 2008 Farm Bill). We encourage those who are not eligible to apply on their own to apply in partnership with an eligible institution.

2) Scientifically restrictive aspects of RFA

Response -

NIFA makes critical decisions regarding the scientific reach and impact for all Request for Applications (RFA). These decisions are guided by the 2008 Farm Bill; National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board; USDA Strategic Plan; Research, Education, and Economics Action Plan; NIFA Strategic Plan; pertinent industry-related scientific reports; and stakeholder input at formal and informal listening sessions. RFAs address the collective needs of specific scientific issues that notably impact America's agricultural and food systems. Moreover, while the Challenge Program Areas address vital societal issues and may vary from year to year and priorities are set on a 3-year basis, the six Foundational Program Areas are diverse and scientifically broad in scope to address the wide range of agricultural and food sciences.

3) Funding allocation between Foundational v. Challenge Area

Response -

We allocate 30 percent of AFRI funding to support the Foundational Program Areas. This amount serves as a baseline to determine the effectiveness of program design and the allocation of funds. We anticipate that scientific benefits and data from program assessments will support future increases in Foundational Program Area funding—contingent upon whether the AFRI program receives significant increases in appropriated funds. Of course, any increase in the percentage of funds allocated to the Foundational Program will impact the availability of funds for Challenge Area grants.

B) Recommendations:

1) Define NIFA's agricultural identity among the federal agencies.

Response -

NIFA's role differs from that of other federal agencies, particularly in areas where an overlap in program scope may exist. In the area of childhood obesity prevention, for example, NIFA's role—consistent with our agricultural identity—is to emphasize the significance of food production and healthful diets and education in the prevention of chronic degenerative diseases. In contrast, the National Institutes of Health often focuses on the metabolic aspects of diet and nutrition and their impacts on human health. Successful applications to AFRI align with USDA and NIFA missions, strategic plans, and goals. Moreover, the existing REE Action Plan encourages formal and informal collaboration with other USDA and federal agencies, as well as public and private partners. These partnerships focus on a national and international level to ensure that research, education, and Extension activities are representative of current priorities and take advantage of existing knowledge.

2) Review and consider NIFA's current and future investments (e.g., Coordinated Agricultural Projects, genome sequencing, additional challenge areas, etc.)

Response -

AFRI will undergo a rigorous external evaluation conducted by the National Research Council (NRC). Over the next 2 years, the NRC will examine NIFA's program administration procedures and financial mechanisms to assess the quality of the science being supported. In addition, our science portfolios will undergo external review.

Based on evaluation and review recommendations, in combination with comments from stakeholders, we will make changes to program offerings, adjustments to award sizes, and will reconsider the distribution of funds between Challenge Areas and the Foundational Areas. The rate at which these changes occur will depend, in part, on available funding.

3) Assess and improve the RFA process (e.g., scheduling, submission time, restrictive language)

Response –

We are working strategically to establish a standard and consistent schedule for AFRI RFA publication. In fiscal year (FY) 2013, we released in October 2012 the Foundational Program Areas and Challenge Area Climate Change, Food Safety, Food Security, and Sustainable Bioenergy RFAs. We anticipate publishing the Childhood Obesity Prevention RFA in January 2013. In addition, the FY 2013 Foundational Program Areas RFA allows for the submission of application approximately 90 days after the submission of the Letter of Intent. Lastly, while the language in the RFA may appear restrictive, the purpose and design of Challenge Area RFAs differs from the Foundational Program RFA. Challenge Area RFAs focus on vital societal issues

with the goal of appropriate program/project scale to ensure the greatest impact. The Foundational Program RFA is diverse and scientifically broad in scope.

C) General Statements:

- 1) Ensure that Extension is appropriately incorporated into grant awards

Response -

We will develop review criteria that will allow for assessing and conducting an actual cost benefit analysis of Extension services. Additionally, well over half of the Challenge Area grants were funded to Integrated Programs, which included combinations of research, Extension, and education objectives.

- 2) Ensure balanced and diverse peer panels

Response -

We ensure that all peer panels have a diverse pool of members. We will continually review peer panels for diversity of scientific areas of expertise and work towards ensuring appropriate representation.

- 3) Streamline current business practices

Response -

We have established a Competitive Programs Task Force and an Infrastructure and Capacity Task Force to streamline our business practices. We will notify stakeholders about outcomes that may impact them.

- 4) Ensure alignment with regional, state, and local needs

Response -

We will educate stakeholders on the mission and purpose of formula and capacity funds how these programs relate to our support of local, state, and regional needs.