

# **REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS**

## **Agriculture and Food Research Initiative**

### **Sustainable Agricultural Systems**

FUNDING YEAR: Fiscal Year (FY) 2025

APPLICATION DEADLINE: Thursday, May 15, 2025

ANTICIPATED PROGRAM FUNDING: \$70,000,000

AVERAGE INDIVIDUAL AWARD RANGE: \$2,500,000 – 10,000,000

FUNDING OPPORTUNITY NUMBER: USDA-NIFA-AFRI-011335

ASSISTANCE LISTING NUMBER: 10.310

## ANNOUNCEMENT

National Institute of Food and Agriculture  
United States Department of Agriculture

**Assistance Listing Number (ALN):** The Agriculture and Food and Research Initiative (AFRI) Sustainable Agricultural Systems (SAS) Request for Applications (RFA) is listed in the Assistance Listings under number 10.310.

**Table 1:** Key Dates and Deadlines

Task Description	Deadline
<b>Notification of Intent:</b>	5:00 P.M. Eastern Time, March 27, 2025
<b>Application:</b>	5:00 P.M. Eastern Time, May 15, 2025
<b>Applicant Comments:</b>	Within six months from the issuance of this notice ( <i>NIFA may not consider comments received after the sixth month</i> )

**Advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA).** The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) recognizes research, education, and extension efforts will have the greatest impacts when programs are grounded in DEIA. NIFA is committed to enhancing DEIA of programs and encourages individuals, institutions, and organizations from underserved communities to apply to funding opportunities as lead, co-lead, or subaward recipient(s), and to engage as leaders in the peer review panel process to support the development of strong networks and collaborations. NIFA encourages applications that engage diverse communities and have broad impacts through research, education, extension, and integrated activities to address current and future challenges.

**Stakeholder Input.** NIFA seeks comments on all RFAs to deliver programs efficiently, effectively, with integrity, and with a focus on customer service. NIFA considers comments to the extent possible when developing RFAs and uses comments to help meet the requirements of [Section 103\(c\)\(2\) of the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 \(7 U.S.C. 7613\(c\)\(2\)\)](#). Applicants may submit written comments to [Policy@usda.gov](mailto:Policy@usda.gov) (email is for comments only). Please use the following subject line: Response to the AFRI Sustainable Agricultural Systems RFA.

**Centers of Excellence.** Applicants are encouraged to visit the NIFA's [Centers of Excellence \(COE\)](#) webpage for information on the COE designation process, including COE criteria, and a list of programs offering COE opportunities.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This RFA is being released prior to the passage of a full appropriations act for FY 2025. Enactment of a continuing resolution, appropriations act, or other authorizing legislation may affect the availability or level of funding for this program. The amount available for new grants in this FY 2025 Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Sustainable Agricultural Systems (SAS) Request for Applications (RFA) is approximately \$70 million, for awards ranging from a minimum request of \$2.5 million up to a maximum of \$10 million each.

The Agriculture and Food Research Initiative is USDA's flagship competitive grant program that provides funding for fundamental and applied research, education, and extension projects in the food and agricultural sciences. Within AFRI, the long-term purpose of the SAS RFA is to help transform the U.S. food and agricultural system to increase agricultural production while also reducing its environmental footprint. Achieving these goals will require transdisciplinary approaches to address current and future food and agricultural challenges within the context of the economic, societal, and environmental attributes of sustainability.

There is an increasing need to foster holistic and systems approaches to mitigate the climate crisis; improve agricultural productivity; reduce food loss and waste; ensure a healthy, safe and affordable supply of food; invigorate and realize the bioeconomy; and promote development of a skilled agricultural workforce. Solving agricultural challenges will require a convergence of science, technology, workforce availability, and policy. Advances in sciences, technology, data sciences and artificial intelligence, knowledge of infrastructure, and collaborative approaches offer unprecedented opportunities for meeting the challenges of the growing population. Transformation of U.S. agricultural systems can ensure continued productivity while conserving natural resources and minimizing environmental degradation and the carbon footprint of agriculture. Transforming agricultural systems requires an investment in human capital to catalyze resilient, sustainable food and agricultural systems.

For FY 2025, applications in response to the AFRI SAS RFA must focus on systems approaches that significantly improve the supply of climate-smart, sustainable, safe, healthy, and accessible food and other agricultural products while fostering economic revitalization in America. These creative approaches must address current needs of resilient and robust food systems and anticipate future social, economic, health, and environmental impacts. Additionally, the outcomes of the proposed work should result in societal benefits, including improved rural prosperity and enhanced quality of life for those involved in food and agricultural value chains from production to use and consumption. The specific goals addressed in this RFA include: Strengthening the Bioeconomy, Food and Nutrition Security, and Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry (CSAF).

The AFRI SAS RFA solicits proposals for Coordinated Agricultural Project and Strengthening Coordinated Agricultural Project (Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement (FASE)) Grants. See [Part I § C](#) for grant and project types solicited and [Part II § C](#) for a detailed description of each individual grant type and project type.

This notice identifies the objectives for AFRI SAS projects, deadlines, funding information, eligibility criteria for projects and applicants, and application forms and associated instructions.

## **NEW in 2025:**

1. Prospective applicants are requested to email a Notification of Intent to submit an application by 5 p.m. Eastern time on Thursday, March 27, 2025, to “[AFRI-SAS@usda.gov](mailto:AFRI-SAS@usda.gov)”. This notification is not required and does not enter into the review of a subsequent application. The information it contains will be used by program staff to plan the review process. It will not be used to screen for project appropriateness or applicant eligibility, nor will feedback be offered (See [Part IV](#) for additional details).
2. Previous AFRI award outcomes will be required if the PD on the current application has previously received an AFRI award from NIFA (excluding Conference and Equipment Grants) and is listed as the PD on the prior award(s) with start date(s) within 5 years prior to the submission deadline for this program. Provide the following in the Project Narrative: 1) award number(s) and 2) significant outcome(s) from each award (maximum of 300 words per award).
3. During the application review process, the diversity of agricultural systems and long-term goals included in this RFA may be taken into consideration when making final award decisions.
4. Mentoring plan instructions have been revised from last year. For additional important details, see the “FY 2025 Sustainable Agricultural Systems (SAS) RFA Additional Information for Part IV, C” on the [AFRI RFA Resources](#) webpage.

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## PART I. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

### A. Legislative Authority

Section 2(b) of the Competitive, Special, and Facilities Research Grant Act (hereafter referred to as the Act) ([7 U.S.C. 3157](#)), as amended, authorizes the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), a competitive grant program to provide funding for fundamental and applied research, education, and extension to address food and agricultural sciences in the following six 2018 Farm Bill priority areas:

1. Plant health and production and plant products;
2. Animal health and production and animal products;
3. Food safety, nutrition, and health;
4. Bioenergy, natural resources, and environment;
5. Agriculture systems and technology; and
6. Agriculture economics and rural communities.

To the maximum extent practicable, NIFA, in coordination with the Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics (REE), will make grants for high priority research, education, and extension, taking into consideration, when available, the determinations made by the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board (NAREEEAB) pursuant to the Competitive, Special, and Facilities Research Grant Act ([7 U.S.C. 3157](#)). The Secretary delegates the authority to the Under Secretary in [7 CFR 2.21](#), and the Under Secretary delegates that authority to NIFA.

### B. Purpose and Priorities

The purpose of AFRI is to invest in research, education, and extension work by awarding grants to solve key problems of local, regional, national, and global importance in sustaining conventional, organic, and urban agricultural systems. The projects supported by AFRI address topics such as farm/ranch production efficiency, profitability and sustainability; bioenergy and biobased products; forestry; aquaculture; rural communities and entrepreneurship; human nutrition; biotic and abiotic constraints on food production; food safety; reducing food loss and waste; physical and social sciences; family and consumer sciences and rural human ecology; development of circular economies, and genetic improvement of plants and animals. Through this support, AFRI advances knowledge in both fundamental and applied sciences important to agriculture and forestry. Additionally, AFRI supports work in education and extension activities that deliver science-based knowledge to end users, allowing them to make informed, practical decisions. The AFRI Sustainable Agricultural Systems (SAS) Request for Applications (RFA) provides funding for integrated research, education, and extension projects.

Food and agricultural systems are becoming increasingly constrained by a growing global population, limited natural resource availability, climate change, and complex demands of ensuring food and nutrition security and food safety in a global economy. Addressing these constraints requires integration of research, education, and extension programs using approaches that increase agricultural and natural resource sustainability. The term "sustainable agriculture" ([7 U.S.C. 3103](#)) means a combined system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long-term, achieve the following goals: 1) satisfy human food and fiber needs; 2) enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base

upon which the agricultural economy depends; 3) make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; 4) sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and 5) enhance the quality of life for farmers and society. AFRI encourages projects addressing enhancement of sustainability of agricultural systems.

## **Background**

AFRI is NIFA's flagship competitive grants program for food and agricultural sciences. These funds are allocated to support single function and integrated projects and programs that address critical societal issues through the AFRI Foundational and Applied Science, Sustainable Agricultural Systems, and Education and Workforce Development RFAs.

This AFRI SAS RFA will support the following [USDA priorities](#):

1. Addressing climate change via climate smart agriculture and forestry;
2. Advancing justice, equity, and opportunity for rural underserved communities and communities with environmental justice concerns;
3. Creating more and better market opportunities; and
4. Tackling food and nutrition insecurity.

The AFRI SAS RFA is aligned with the following [USDA Strategic Plan FY 2022-2026](#) Goals:

1. Strategic Goal 1: Combat Climate Change to Support America's Working Lands, Natural Resources and Communities;
2. Strategic Goal 2: Ensure American's Agricultural System is Equitable, Resilient, and Prosperous;
3. Strategic Goal 3: Foster an Equitable and Competitive Marketplace for All Agricultural Producers;
4. Strategic Goal 4: Provide All American's Safe, Nutritious Food;
5. Strategic Goal 5: Expand Opportunities for Economic Development and Improve Quality of Life in Rural and Tribal Communities.

The AFRI SAS RFA is aligned with the following [USDA Science and Research Strategy, 2023–2026](#) priorities:

1. Priority 1: Accelerating Innovative Technologies & Practices
2. Priority 2: Driving Climate-Smart Solutions
3. Priority 3: Bolstering Nutrition Security & Health

**Global Engagement.** NIFA supports global engagement that addresses the USDA Strategic Plan goals and USDA Science and Research Strategy priorities that are emphasized in this RFA. NIFA recognizes that collaboration with international partners may be necessary to attain the agency's goals for U.S. agriculture; develop Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry practices; support national development of the bioeconomy; promote global competence of our nation's future agricultural workforce; promote safe and nutritious food security in a growing world; and reduce food loss and waste by 50% by 2030. Therefore, although application to this RFA is limited to eligible U.S. institutions, applicants may collaborate with international partners, to include subcontracts to international partners or other institutions. Applications must clearly demonstrate benefits to the United States (see [AFRI International Partnerships](#)).



Traditional ecological knowledge is considered an acceptable topic of research, education, and extension for projects funded by this RFA, in pursuit of the aforementioned priorities, goals, and objectives.

For a program informational webinar, please visit the [NIFA calendar](#) for dates, event registration, and link. If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate in any of the informational webinars listed, please contact the event host listed no later than 10 days prior to the event.

**Table 2: Program Key Information**

Title	Description
<b>Program Code:</b>	A9201
<b>Program Code Name:</b>	Sustainable Agricultural Systems
<b>ALN:</b>	10.310
<b>Project Type:</b>	Integrated Projects <u>only</u> (must include Research, Education, and Extension components within project)
<b>Grant Type:</b>	Coordinated Agricultural Project and FASE (Strengthening Coordinated Agricultural Project) Grants <u>only</u>
<b>Notification of Intent Deadline</b>	Thursday, March 27, 2025
<b>Application Deadline</b>	Thursday, May 15, 2025
<b>Grant Duration:</b>	Up to 60 Months
<b>Anticipated # of Awards:</b>	7 to 10
<b>Minimum Award Amount</b>	\$2,500,000
<b>Maximum Award Amount:</b>	\$10,000,000
<b>Program Area Priority Contact(s):</b>	Dr. Lydia Kaume Dr. Bisoodat “Mac” Macoon Dr. William “Bill” Goldner Dr. Ashley Mueller <a href="mailto:AFRI-SAS@usda.gov">AFRI-SAS@usda.gov</a>

**C. Program Area Description**

The purpose of the AFRI SAS program area is to enable a sustainable supply of accessible, healthy, safe, and affordable food and other agricultural products, while reducing food loss and waste, enhancing rural economic development, employment, and economic opportunities, and improving the long-term health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Applicants may propose CAP projects with minimum budget of \$2,500,000 and maximum budget of \$10,000,000.

The following are integral components of a SAS project.

1. **Sustainability:** Sustainability is core to this program. Sustainable Agriculture as defined in [7 U.S.C. 3103](#) is: “an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will over the long-term: satisfy human food and fiber needs; enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends; make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole.” This program uses this definition, and the three pillars of sustainability - economic, environmental, and social considerations as its framework.
2. **Full Integration:** This program solicits visionary integrated **research, extension, and education** projects that use transdisciplinary, systems approaches to promote the blending of science, technology, and societal considerations to solve challenges to current and future food and agricultural systems. Applicants must carefully review the general characteristics of all grant types and project types. Applicants must also review the NIFA definitions of

Research, Education, and Extension found in the documents labeled “**AFRI Grant Types**” and “**AFRI Project Types**” in the attachments list on [AFRI RFA Resources page](#). Key points to consider:

- a. Extension and other outreach activities should produce significant behavioral changes leading to impacts such as sustainable production and consumption practices and improving public health and well-being.
  - b. Stakeholder communities must be engaged in project activities directly affecting them, (e.g., the design, approach, implementation, evaluation, and feedback loops).
  - c. Involvement of underserved communities is highly recommended.
  - d. Projects including curriculum development must be led by or include key personnel with curriculum development credentials or who have demonstrated expertise in curriculum development to ensure materials produced comply with the most appropriate pedagogy, teaching standards, and other applicable institutional, state, and national accreditation requirements.
  - e. Educational activities should develop human capital skilled for the sustainable agricultural systems of the future and must meet the NIFA definition of education. In addition, educational components should make use of innovative approaches such as stackable credential frameworks, novel experiential learning opportunities, on-the-job training, development of leadership skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, communication), online educational resources, mobile apps, or educational games. Investigators should engage a diverse population of education professionals and students in these activities, including underserved and nontraditional students. Applications strengthening community college level education are welcome.
  - f. Extension activities must meet the NIFA definition of extension. In addition, extension components must include approaches that consider the factors that impact decision making (e.g., assess individual, stakeholder group, or community needs; develop strategies that incentivize changes in practices to manage lands, crops and/or systems; promote adoption of new technologies and other interventions based on knowledge of user preferences); and innovatively disseminate project results and/or best management practices.
  - g. Each integrated activity should be represented by one or more objectives within the application, with no more than two-thirds of a project’s budget being allocated to any single function of research, education, or extension.
3. **Systems Approach:** Projects must use a systems approach that applies rapidly advancing science and technologies to ensure the economic, environmental, equitable, and social goals of sustainable agriculture. Agricultural systems are inclusive of local and regional supply chains from production to consumption of food and other agricultural products, and from traditional open-field farms, ranches, and managed forests to controlled production in built environments across the rural-urban continuum. Applications must:
- a. Present a clear scope and explanation of the system(s) chosen; the associated problems to be addressed through research, extension, and education; and expected impacts to be attained. Provide justification for why the system(s), scope, and components, were selected. Describe the prioritization process used to determine which system(s) and components require investigation in terms of the food and

- agricultural production practices, supply chain components, consumption, end uses, and impacts on people and communities.
- b. Describe how new strategies or other technical interventions may alter existing systems and the future implications of unintended effects.
  - c. Demonstrate that the changes resulting from the proposed efforts will enhance the viability of the food and agricultural value chain.
  - d. Describe expected solutions or improvements and how these will be assessed and measured.
  - e. Address the potential costs of the proposed solutions and describe how solutions can be scaled to be used in the short- and long-term based on technical, economic, and social feasibility.
  - f. Applications must also explain how the project will strengthen agricultural and food production systems and how results will be adopted or applied at a local, regional, or national level.
4. **Transdisciplinary:** Applications must include a clear description of how transdisciplinary approaches will be deployed to achieve the goals of the project as defined in [Appendix III](#). Applications must demonstrate transdisciplinary linkages necessary to address the complex challenges in developing sustainable agricultural systems. A high degree of engagement is expected among researchers, educators, extension staff or other engagement personnel, and relevant stakeholders, from inception through implementation of the project.
  5. **Workforce Integration:** Projects must enhance the availability of a skilled workforce through development and deployment of formal and non-formal learning activities to train the current and next generation of the food and agriculture workforce. This includes training or retraining current and future farmers, foresters, engineers, data managers, workers, students, youth, and scientists who must be equipped to find and implement solutions to global food and agricultural challenges. Educational activities should include broad types of learning and engagement (e.g., hands-on learning, experiential, and other newer methods of teaching and disseminating information, including virtual options, as appropriate), emphasizing development of interpersonal and team skills. Partnering with 4-H and other positive youth development programs and experts/practitioners to achieve project goals, where appropriate, is welcome.
  6. **Metrics:** Projects must plan to employ meaningful performance metrics that measure progress during the grant period toward the long-term goals described below. These metrics can include how the proposed system and its components contribute to productivity and profitability, reduced environmental footprint, enhanced natural resources, food safety and quality, food and nutrition security, human health and well-being, a skilled workforce, more sustainable jobs in the food and agricultural sector, or discernable benefits to underserved communities.
  7. **SAS Long-term Goals and Subgoals:** Applicants must explicitly link their project goals and objectives to at least ONE of the long-term goals and subgoals described below. Applicants should include the goal and subgoal in the project summary/abstract.

## SAS LONG-TERM GOALS & SUBGOALS

The SAS program area will fund projects that **significantly advance** previously established foundational and applied sciences for the following USDA priority outcomes, and address one or more of the following **long-term goals and subgoals**:

1. **STRENGTHENING THE BIOECONOMY:** This goal focuses on developing or enhancing systems to produce sources of **biofuels, biomaterials, biobased chemical intermediates, and high-value biobased products** from agricultural and forestry feedstocks to foster economic development and prosperity, with an emphasis toward generating benefits to underserved communities. The development and implementation of a sustainable and resilient bioeconomy is limited, especially among underserved communities, by access to economically viable technologies, infrastructure susceptibility to climate shocks, and increasing costs for transportation and energy. New or improved production systems need to be developed to create cost-competitive and sustainable biobased products and supply chains that strengthen the American rural economy. For example, economic gains may be generated while alleviating pressure on the environment through recycling materials and capturing value (e.g., zero-waste, carbon neutral) along the supply chain. Assessments of the system(s) economic, environmental, and social **sustainability** should examine system elements including feedstock production, storage, transportation, preprocessing, processing, labor supply and training, and effects on communities, particularly underserved or overburdened communities. Applications should identify opportunities to use agricultural, forest, and food unfit for human and animal consumption or residuals for the production of biofuels and biobased products and materials. Utilization of sustainable emerging purpose-grown biomass feedstock crops (e.g., lignocellulosic and intermediate oilseed crops) is also encouraged. Projects should focus on engaging communities to develop new or improved production and distribution systems that are inclusive of promoting economic equity, lowering environmental impacts, and the development of more effective formal and non-formal education/training methods and programs to strengthen the workforce pipeline for the bioeconomy.

Projects addressing this goal must also address **at least one** of the following subgoals:

- a. **Sustainable Bioenergy and Biobased Products:** Develop new and/or improved systems for the production and manufacturing of biofuels (particularly sustainable aviation fuels) or sustainable biobased products (e.g., domestically sourced natural rubber, wood/lignocellulosic bioproducts). Proposals should include a description of the cost savings relative to products currently on the market (including product specifications and pricing) and environmental benefits of the approach (such as greenhouse gas emission reductions, waste management benefits, or other relevant benefits, including tangible benefits to communities with environmental justice concerns).
- b. **Resilience and Robustness of Bioeconomies:** Develop innovative systems that increase resiliency to climate change impacts affecting supply chains. Assessment of

local and regional community assets and potential innovative collaborations are encouraged. Funded projects may entail use of modeling or assessment techniques to determine short- and long-term sustainability benchmarks, impacts, and outcomes of new or improved production systems compared to existing energy and bioproduct production systems. Models and analytic tools should be capable of estimating the value and impact of products and byproducts at each point, from manufacture to disposal, in local and regional contexts.

- c. **Regional Biomass Resource Hub (RBRH) Initiative:** USDA-NIFA is collaborating with the U.S. Department of Energy's Regional Biomass Resource Hubs Initiative (RBRH) to advance development and commercialization of low-carbon intensity biomass, bioenergy and biobased products. The RBRH supports research, development, and deployment of purpose grown energy crops that will contribute to decarbonizing the fuel and chemical industry through alternative sources of carbon to advance cost-effective technologies with a minimum of 85% less greenhouse gas emissions by 2035. SAS projects selected under this subgoal will gain access to regional and national data and collaboration to further advance their individual goals and objectives and will contribute field trial results, including carbon intensity metrics, to the RBRH network to serve as a reference for stakeholders across the bioeconomy. Applicants interested in partnering with the RBRH should include a letter of support from the RBRH host organization. Letters of support may be requested at [rbrh@inl.gov](mailto:rbrh@inl.gov).

2. **FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY:** This goal focuses on increasing resilient local and regional food systems, adoption and application of new or existing technologies, tools, education, and other resources to ensure consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, and affordable foods essential to optimal health and well-being and reduction in food loss and waste.

Overcoming challenges associated with food and nutrition security requires a thorough examination of the intersections of climate change, national, local, and regional food systems, and nutrition security with an eye to ensuring the quality and safety of food while reducing food loss and waste. Effective food and nutrition security projects will address the concerns of populations of special interest that have a disproportionate risk of food insecurity, diet-related diseases, and climate change impacts. Populations include but are not limited to tribal communities, communities of color, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+) communities, individuals with disabilities, Veterans, rural and remote communities, and insular areas.

Additionally, this goal supports efforts to ensure food produced in the United States is not lost or wasted at any point along the food supply chain. Currently, an estimated 30%-40% of food produced in the United States is lost or wasted, contributing to excess methane emissions among other negative impacts. Reducing food loss and waste would improve food

and nutrition security, increase farmer income and rural prosperity, reduce pressure on natural resources, and achieve greenhouse gas emission reduction targets.

Projects addressing this goal must also address **at least one** of the following subgoals:

- a. **Reducing Food Loss and Waste (FLW):** Support one or more of the four objectives outlined in the [National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics](#); and develop coordinated science-based solutions and resources to reduce food loss and waste and improve nutrition security. Projects are to consider new or improved innovative technologies and solutions to food loss and waste across the entire food supply chain, including production, processing, transportation, retail, etc. Projects may also prioritize novel or improved food recovery models that ensure food safety across the food supply chain. Projects may improve capacity and commercialization of innovations designed to prevent food loss and waste, and improve understanding of food loss and waste volumes, drivers, and climate impacts, such as CO<sub>2</sub> and methane emissions.
  - b. **Food and Nutrition Security:** Maximize impacts or scale proven nutrition interventions and/or programs with the goal to improve human health, prevent and/or control diet-related chronic diseases along the life cycle (i.e., pregnancy, birth, lactation, early childhood, children, teenagers, young adults, adults to older adults). Proposals should include evidence based and culturally and contextually inclusive approaches (e.g., extension Policy Systems and Environmental (PSE) change interventions, precision/personalized nutrition, etc.). Food systems may include those focused on early childhood, K-12 schools, colleges, partnerships of schools with community and health systems, and senior/older adult communities.
  - c. **Strengthening Local and Regional Food Systems (LRFS):** Improve or develop innovative solutions within local and regional food systems to increase resiliency to withstand supply shocks and support long-term sustainability of community economic engines. Projects may focus on systems approaches to strengthen food safety in LRFS. Projects should boost partnerships across the food system from farm to fork, increase community engagement, prevent food loss and waste, and support farms and food businesses. Applicants are encouraged to seek collaboration with relevant USDA Regional Food Business Centers for localized assistance to access local and regional supply chains, including linking producers to wholesalers and distributors. “Local and regional foods” are foods produced and sold within a certain distance or geographic boundary to consumers ([See Definitions](#)).
3. **CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY (CSAF):** This long-term goal aims to improve mitigation, adaptation, and resilience of agricultural and forestry production systems to climate change.

Agricultural, rangeland, aquaculture, and forestry systems are increasingly threatened by climate change and extreme weather events while also being relied upon to mitigate

greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon. Climate-smart agriculture and forestry systems must be developed to tackle these challenges. Socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable CSAF must overcome diminishing natural resources, reduce inequities experienced by underserved and overburdened communities, reduce loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, support sustainable agricultural intensification, and meet accelerating demands for food and other agricultural products. Agricultural and forestry systems must demonstrate environmental sustainability, including but not limited to soil health, nutrient management, minimalization of greenhouse gas emissions, and resilience to climate variabilities. In addition, food production systems should ensure optimal nutrient density/composition. Effective CSAF approaches will consider regenerative principles, improvements to climate models and measurements, technological advancements, availability of a skilled workforce, socioeconomic opportunities and barriers to adoption of CSAF systems. Innovations should consider profitability, production, and the sustainable use of the natural resource base.

Projects addressing this goal must also address **at least one** of the following subgoals:

- a. **Greenhouse Gas Mitigation:** Reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 50% of current rates by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions from agriculture and forestry by 2050. Reducing greenhouse gases that have relatively short atmospheric residence times (such as methane), increasing carbon sequestration, and reducing risk of wildfires are important priorities to address.
- b. **Markets and Socioeconomics:** Improve market opportunities for CSAF. Opportunities exist to create CSAF supply chains and products, develop carbon and other ecosystem service markets. Improving greenhouse gas measurements and climate modeling will underpin efficient markets.
- c. **Regionally Appropriate Climate Adaptation and Resilience:** Develop resilient agricultural, rangeland, aquaculture, or forestry systems that can adapt to climate change while considering incremental climate changes and extreme weather events. Enhanced prediction of climate-related stressors; advancing appropriate management, tools, and technologies; and translating climate knowledge for stakeholders are essential for CSAF systems.

Descriptions and examples of the three goals given above are meant to be guidance for project development, rather than being prescriptive. The project teams are expected to define the scope of their system(s), system components, and detailed metrics that are directed at achieving one or more of the three long-term goals in this RFA.

#### **Program Area Additional Information**

1. Requests exceeding budgetary guidelines will not be reviewed.
2. Unless otherwise stated, grants are issued for a period of up to 5 years and are not renewable after completion of the performance period.



3. Applications from and collaborations with small to mid-sized institutions, minority-serving institutions, and/or institutions within the Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) states are welcome.
4. Review additional application requirements from the document titled AFRI-SAS-RFA-Additional-Information-for-Part-IV-C on the [AFRI RFA Resources](#) page.
5. Applicants must address at least one or more of the three long-term goal areas described previously in this RFA. Goal areas for this RFA are, *Strengthening the Bioeconomy*; *Food and Nutrition Security*; and *Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry (CSAF)*.
6. Projects must provide evidence that the project is aligned with the goal area and the AFRI priorities established by the Farm Bill, as listed in [Part I § A](#) of this RFA.
7. **NEW:** Applicants are requested to email a Notification of Intent to submit an application by 5:00 p.m. Eastern time on March 27, 2025.
8. NIFA welcomes projects that incorporate traditional ecological knowledge.
9. Projects focusing on plant or animal species or foods that are important to underserved communities, farmers, or ranchers, small- or medium-sized farms or ranches and can provide measurable benefits to these communities are welcome.
10. Applicants are encouraged to consult the definitions and examples of the food and agricultural systems in the National Academy of Sciences report on “[A Framework for Assessing Effects of the Food System](#).”
11. Coordination and collaboration with USDA Nutrition Hub awardees is encouraged. Learn more on [NIFA’s Food and Nutrition Security Topic Page](#).
12. NIFA welcomes applicants to consider educational components of integrated projects that (1) address training or retraining workforce for careers as nutrition educators, to support Food and Nutrition programs particularly in historically underserved populations or (2) develop evidence-based program interventions and materials responsive to local and regional workforce needs while addressing barriers to career pathways including access to equipment, technology, broadband, instructors, mentors, childcare, eldercare, and transportation.
13. NIFA encourages proposals that connect with or inform Federal programs that support food and nutrition security, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition education, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed), the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), etc., and elevating MyPlate for Educators.
14. Applications focusing on integrated projects that improve women’s health outcomes are welcome.
15. Leveraging artificial intelligence and data science methods not limited to data visualization, machine learning, natural language processing, or predictive decision making is welcome.
16. A Data Management Plan is required and must include making data publicly available with persistent identifiers or compatible with other open databases and sources. A reasonable budget allocation for data management is allowed as a direct cost.

## PART II. AWARD INFORMATION

### A. Available Funding

This RFA is being released prior to the passage of a full appropriations act for FY 2025. Enactment of a continuing resolution, appropriations act, or other authorizing legislation may affect the availability or level of funding for this program. The amount available for the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Sustainable Agricultural Systems (SAS) RFA in FY 2025 is approximately \$70,000,000 for integrated projects. USDA is not committed to fund any application or to make a specific number of awards.

The [Automated Standard Application for Payments](#), operated by the Department of Treasury, Bureau of Fiscal Service, is the designated payment system for awards resulting from this RFA.

### B. Application Restrictions

NIFA will evaluate applications using the criteria described in [Part V](#) of this RFA. Application for FY 2025 is limited to the following application types:

1. *New application*: New applications will be evaluated using the criteria described in [Part V](#) of this RFA and are subject to the due dates herein (see [Appendix III](#) for definition).
2. *Resubmitted application*: Resubmitted applications must include a response to the previous review and are subject to the same criteria and due dates herein. Resubmitted applicants must enter the NIFA-assigned proposal number of the previously submitted application in the Federal Field (Field 4) on the application form (see [Appendix III](#) for definition).

### C. Project and Grant Types

The following describes the types of *projects* or *grants* that are eligible for funding:

1. Project Types. Applicants must propose Integrated Projects only (must include Research, Education, and Extension components within project) as described in [Part I § C](#) of this RFA. A detailed description of the project types available across AFRI is located on the AFRI RFA Resources page (“AFRI Project Types” in the attachments list).
2. Grant Types. Applicants must select the appropriate AFRI grant type. For this RFA which are, **Coordinated Agricultural Project and FASE (Strengthening Coordinated Agricultural Project) Grants only**. This is specified within the relevant Program Area Descriptions in [Part I § C](#) of this RFA. A detailed description of the grant types (Standard Grants, Coordinated Agricultural Projects, Conference Grants, Collaborative Grants, and FASE Grants) available across AFRI is located on the AFRI RFA Resources page (“AFRI Grant Types” in the attachments list).

### D. Ethical Conduct of Funded Projects

In accordance with sections [2, 3, and 8 of 2 CFR Part 422](#), institutions that conduct USDA-funded extramural research must foster an atmosphere conducive to research integrity, bear primary responsibility for prevention and detection of research misconduct, and maintain and effectively communicate and train their staff regarding policies and procedures. In the event an application to NIFA results in an award, the Authorized Representative (AR) assures, through acceptance of the award that the institution will comply with the above requirements. Award

recipients must, upon request, make available to NIFA the policies, procedures, and documentation to support the conduct of the training. See NIFA's guidelines on [Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research](#) for further information.

## PART III. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

### A. Eligibility Requirements

Applicants for the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Sustainable Agricultural Systems (SAS) RFA must meet all the requirements discussed in this RFA. Failure to meet the eligibility criteria by the application deadline may result in exclusion from consideration or, preclude NIFA from making an award. For those new to Federal financial assistance, NIFA's [Grants Overview](#) provides highly recommended information about grants and other resources to help understand the Federal awards process.

#### 1. Integrated Projects

Eligible applicants for Integrated Projects include:

- a) Colleges and universities;
- b) 1994 Land-Grant Institutions; and
- c) Hispanic-serving agricultural colleges and universities (see [NIFA's Hispanic-Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities page](#)).

For item a) under Integrated Projects, the terms "college" and "university" means an educational institution in the United States that:

- i) admits as regular students only persons having a certificate of graduation from a school providing secondary education, or the recognized equivalent of such a certificate;
- ii) is legally authorized to provide a program of education beyond secondary education;
- iii) provides an educational program for which a bachelor's degree or any other higher degree is awarded;
- iv) is a public or other nonprofit institution; and
- v) is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association.

A research foundation maintained by a college or university is eligible to receive an award under this program.

#### 2. Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement Grants

[Part II § C.2](#) of this RFA contains the eligibility details for Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement (FASE) Grants. Note that under FASE program, Strengthening Coordinated Agricultural Project and Strengthening Standard Grants are solicited in this RFA.

Applicants must respond to the program area priorities and deadlines found in [Part I § C](#) of this RFA. Grant recipients may subcontract to organizations not eligible to apply provided such organizations are necessary for the conduct of the project. Failure to meet an eligibility criterion by the application deadline may result in the application being excluded from consideration or, even though an application may be reviewed, will preclude NIFA from making an award (see [Part III § B](#)).

***Duplicate or Multiple Submissions*** – submission of duplicate or predominantly overlapping applications is not allowed. NIFA will disqualify both applications if an applicant submits multiple applications that are duplicative or substantially overlapping to NIFA programs within the same fiscal year. For those new to Federal financial assistance, NIFA's [Grants Overview](#) provides highly recommended information about grants and other resources to help understand

the Federal awards process.

## **B. Request for Determination of Status**

### **1. Minority-Serving Institution**

If an institution is applying for a Strengthening Grant (see [Part II § C. 2](#)) and wants the Secretary to consider a group, beyond one included in the minority definition (See [Appendix III](#), then documentation (see below) must be submitted as part of the requestor's full application package (Part IV. C.) by the applicable program area or program area priority deadline. The Secretary of Agriculture (or designated individual) will use the information in the documentation to determine whether the group or groups identified are qualified as a minority group for the purpose of receiving a Strengthening Grant under the FASE program (for Strengthening Grants information, refer to the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#), "AFRI Grant Types" in the attachments list).

Documentation for the request for determination as a minority-serving institution must include the following and be provided in the order specified below:

- a) A description of each minority group being submitted for determination;
- b) Data or studies supporting this group's designation as a minority group; and
- c) Data indicating that enrollment of the minority group(s) exceeds 50 percent of the total enrollment at the academic institution, including graduate and undergraduate and full-and part-time students.

### **2. Multi-Campus Institution**

All institutions grouped under one main campus as listed in "Table 1 Most Successful Institutions" in the attachments list in the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#), unless located in an Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) state (See "AFRI Grant Types" in the attachments list in the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#), are excluded from eligibility for all strengthening funds. However, if any campus within a multi-campus listing can provide information demonstrating that it is administratively independent or has an independent accreditation, then the institution may petition for an exemption to this rule and request eligibility for strengthening funds. The application must include a letter indicating how the institution is independent of the main campus, either through accreditation or administration, how the institution is eligible as a small and mid-sized or minority-serving institution due to enrollment, and total federal funds received for science and engineering research and development. The letter must be signed by the Authorized Representative (AR).

## **C. Cost Sharing or Matching**

Applicants MUST provide matching contributions on a dollar-for-dollar basis for all Federal funds awarded under AFRI for applied research grants unless a waiver applies. Matching funds requirements for AFRI programs included in this RFA may be found at [7 U.S.C. 3157 \(b\)\(9\) \(A-C\)](#).

For Applied Research Grants:

Match Required – If an applied Research (see [Appendix III](#)) or Integrated Project with an applied research component is commodity-specific and not of national scope, the grant recipient is

required to match the USDA funds awarded on a dollar-for-dollar basis from non-federal sources with cash and/or in-kind contributions([7 U.S.C. 3157\(9\)C](#))

1. **Match is not required** - If the **applied research or integrated project** with an applied research component is **not commodity specific** or **is national in scope**, then **no match is required**.
2. Match is required for the USDA funds awarded on a dollar-for-dollar basis from non-federal sources with cash and/or in-kind contributions for applications with an **applied research component** that **are commodity specific** and **not national in scope** ([7 U.S.C. 3157\(b\)\(9\)C](#)).

#### **D. Centers of Excellence**

Pursuant to Section 7214 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 ([7 U.S.C. 5926](#)), NIFA will recognize and prioritize COE applicants that carry out research, extension, and education activities that relate to the food and agricultural sciences. A COE is composed of one or more of the following entities that provide financial or in-kind support to the COE:

1. State agricultural experiment stations.
2. Colleges and universities.
3. University research foundations.
4. Other research institutions and organizations.
5. Federal agencies.
6. National laboratories.
7. Private organizations, foundations, or corporations.
8. Individuals; or
9. Any group consisting of two or more of the entities described in (1) through (8).

COE recognition and priority is available only for the **Standard Grant and the Coordinated Agricultural Project (CAP) Grant** applications submitted to the Program Area priorities in the Education and Workforce Development, Foundational and Applied Science, and Sustainable Agricultural Systems RFAs. If applicable, [Part IV C](#), of the RFA contains additional requirements for COE consideration.

## PART IV. APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION

### A. Notification of Intent to Submit an Application

Prospective applicants are asked to email a Notification of Intent to apply by 5 p.m. Eastern time by Thursday March 27, 2025, to “AFRI-SAS@usda.gov”. This notification is **not a letter of intent and is not required**. The notification does not enter into the review of a subsequent application and will only be used by program staff to plan for the review process. It will not be used to screen for project appropriateness or applicant eligibility, nor will feedback be offered.

This email should include the following information:

1. Descriptive (draft) title
2. Name of the Project Director and Applicant Institution name
3. Names of other potential co-Project Directors/Investigators and their affiliations, if applicable
4. Long-term goal area(s) addressed
5. Subject line of email should read: AFRI-SAS – Intent to Submit
6. E-mail should be sent to [AFRI-SAS@usda.gov](mailto:AFRI-SAS@usda.gov)

Notification of intent should be succinct. **Please do not include abstract, bios, or information other than what is requested.**

### B. Method of Application

Applicants must apply to this RFA electronically; no other method or response is accepted. The electronic application for this RFA and additional resources are available on [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) and [Grants 101](#). **Table 4** provides instructions on how to obtain an electronic application. *Part III* of the NIFA Grants Application Guide contains detailed information regarding the [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) registration process. The NIFA Grants Application Guide is contained in the specific funding opportunity package or a sample of the guide can be found [here](#). When applying for a NIFA award, it is important to reference the version of the guide that is included in the specific funding opportunity application package.

**Table 3: Steps to Obtain Application Materials**

Steps	Action
<b>Step One: Register</b>	<i>New Users</i> to <a href="https://www.grants.gov">Grants.gov</a> must register early with <a href="https://www.grants.gov">Grants.gov</a> prior to submitting an application ( <a href="#">Register Here</a> ).
<b>Step Two: Download Adobe</b>	Download and Install <a href="#">Adobe Reader</a> (see <a href="#">Adobe Software Compatibility</a> for basic system requirements).
<b>Step Three: Find Application</b>	Using this funding opportunity number <b>USDA-NIFA-AFRI-011335</b> , search for application here: <a href="#">Opportunity Package</a> .
<b>Step Four: Assess Readiness</b>	Contact an AR prior to starting an application to assess the organization’s readiness to submit an electronic application.

**Table 4: Help and Resources**

Grants.gov Support	NIFA Support
<a href="#">Grants.gov Online Support</a>	Email: <a href="mailto:grantapplicationquestions@usda.gov">grantapplicationquestions@usda.gov</a>

Telephone support: 800-518-4726 Toll-Free or 606-545-5035 Email support: <a href="mailto:support@grants.gov">support@grants.gov</a> Self-service customer-based support: <a href="#">Grants.gov iPortal</a> Key Information: Customer service business Hours 24/7, except <a href="#">federal holidays.</a>	Key Information: Business hours: Monday thru Friday, 7a.m. – 5p.m. ET, except <a href="#">federal holidays.</a>
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### C. Content and Form of the Application

The [NIFA Grants Application Guide](#) is part of the corresponding application package for this RFA. The RFA overrides the [NIFA Grants Application Guide](#) if there is a discrepancy between the two documents. Applicants that do not meet the application requirements, to include partial applications, risk being excluded from NIFA’s review. NIFA will assign a proposal number to all applications that meet the requirements of this RFA. Applicants must refer to the proposal number when corresponding with NIFA. **Table 6** outlines other key instructions for applicants.

**Table 5:** Key Application Instructions

Instruction	References (All references are to the <a href="#">NIFA Grants Application Guide</a> )
Attachments must be in a portable document format (PDF) format.	Part IV
Check the manifest of submitted files to verify attachments are in the correct format.	Part IV
Conduct an administrative review of the application before submission.	Part IV
Follow the submission instructions.	Part IV
Provide an accurate email address, where designated, on the SF-424 R&R.	Part V
Contact the <a href="#">Grants.gov helpdesk</a> for technical support and keep a record of the correspondence.	N/A
Contact NIFA if applicant does not received correspondence from NIFA regarding an application within 30 days of the application deadline.	N/A

**AFRI Specific Application Instructions.** Application and submission information including page limits and narrative font sizes for AFRI Sustainable Agricultural Systems RFA applications are available in the “2025 Sustainable Agricultural Systems RFA Additional Information for *Part IV § C*” PDF in the attachment labelled “AFRI-FAS-RFA-Additional-Information-for-Part-IV-C-FY24” list on the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).



We recommend that you conduct an administrative review of the application prior to submitting the package via Grants.gov to ensure that it complies with all preparation instructions. An application checklist is included in [Part VII](#) of the NIFA Grants.gov [Application Guide](#) to assist with this review.

You should check the application for completeness. The application must include:

1. Project Summary (PS)/Abstract; The PS must show how the project goals align with the AFRI-SAS Long-term Goals and Subgoals. See **Part V** of the NIFA Grants Application Guide for instructions and suggested templates.
2. Project Narrative.
3. Bibliography & References Cited.
4. Logic Model. A logic model must include elements detailing the activities, outputs, and outcomes of the proposed project. The logic model planning process is a tool that should be used to develop a project before writing the application. This information may be provided as a narrative or formatted into a logic model chart. For more information and resources, see [Logic Model Planning Process](#) located on the NIFA website.
5. Management Plan: A Management Plan is required and must include project governance, a stakeholder advisory board, involvement of an evaluator, and progress reporting. The plan must clearly articulate with an organizational chart how the project will be governed. A well-thought-out strategy must be put in place to enhance coordination, collaboration, communication, data sharing and reporting among members of the project team and stakeholder groups. The management plan must include an advisory group of principal stakeholders, partners, evaluators and professionals to assess and evaluate the quality, expected measurable outcomes, and potential impacts for the proposed research, education and extension.
6. Data Management Plan; A DMP is required for this program. Applicants should clearly articulate how the project director (PD) and co-PDs plan to manage and disseminate the data generated by the project. The DMP will be considered during the merit review process (see [Part V, B](#) of this RFA). A Data Management Plan must include making data publicly available with persistent identifiers or compatible with other open databases and sources. Machine readable data management plans produced using tools such as the [DMP Tool](#) are strongly recommended. A reasonable budget allocation for data management is allowed as a direct cost.
7. Mentoring plan. A plan is required for all projects that involve any type of education, training or mentoring of students or other individuals including high school students, undergraduate students, graduate students, professional degree students, postdoctoral scholars, other professionals or any other individual receiving any type of formal, or non-formal or vocational training on the project. For additional important details, see the "AFRI-FAS-RFA-Additional-Information-for-Part-IV-C-FY25" list on the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).
8. Facilities & Other Resources
9. Curriculum Vitae
10. Conflict of Interest Lists
11. Current and pending support
12. Budget

### 13. Budget Justification

This is not an exhaustive list of required items; it only serves to highlight items that may be overlooked. Failure to include any of the three critical required documents of Project Summary/Abstract, Project Narrative, or Bibliography & References Cited sections as PDF attachment will result in the application not being reviewed or considered for funding by NIFA.

We send email correspondence to the PD and AR regarding the status of submitted applications. We strongly encourage you to provide accurate email addresses, where designated, on the SF-424 R&R Application for Federal Assistance.

If the PD and AR have not received correspondence from NIFA regarding a submitted application within 30 days of the established deadline, contact the Agency Contact identified in *Appendix I of the RFA and request the proposal number assigned to the application*. Failure to do so may result in the application not being considered for funding by the peer review panel. Once the application has been assigned a proposal number, you should cite this number on all future correspondence.

#### **D. Funding Restrictions**

***Indirect Cost (IDC) not to exceed 30 percent of Total Federal Funds Awarded (TFFA) of the recipient.*** Section 1462(a) and (c) of the ([7 U.S.C. 3310\(a\) and \(c\)](#)) limits IDC for the overall award to 30 percent of Total Federal Funds Awarded (TFFA) under a research, education, or extension grant. The maximum IDC rate allowed under the award is determined by calculating the amount of IDC using:

1. the sum of an institution's negotiated IDC rate and the IDC rate charged by sub-awardees, if any; or
2. 30 percent of TFFA.

The maximum allowable IDC rate under the award, including the IDC charged by the sub-awardee(s), if any, is the lesser of the two rates above.

If the result of number one above is the lesser of the two rates, the grant recipient is allowed to charge the negotiated IDC rate on the prime award and the sub-award(s), if any. Any sub-awards would be subject to the sub-awardee's negotiated IDC rate. The sub-awardee may charge its negotiated IDC rate on its portion of the award, provided the sum of the IDC rate charged under the award by the prime awardee and the sub-awardee(s) does not exceed 30 percent of the TFFA.

If number two above is the lesser of the two rates, then the maximum IDC rate allowed for the overall award, including any sub-award(s), is limited to 30 percent of the TFFA. That is, the IDC of the prime awardee plus the sum of the IDC charged by the sub-awardee(s), if any, may not exceed 30 percent of the TFFA.

In the event of an award, the prime awardee is responsible for ensuring the maximum IDC allowed for the award is not exceeded when combining IDC for the Federal portion (i.e., prime and sub-awardee(s)) and any applicable cost-sharing. Amounts exceeding the maximum allowable IDC are considered unallowable. See sections [408](#) and [410](#) of [2 CFR 200](#).

If the applicant does not have a negotiated rate and NIFA is the cognizant agency, the applicant may request an IDC rate. Applicants are not required to complete the IDC package during the application process and need only to calculate a rate to serve as a basis for requesting IDC. If awarded, the applicant will be required to submit a complete IDC proposal package to obtain a negotiated rate.

Organizations that do not have a current negotiated (including provisional) rate, may elect the De Minimis rate ([2 CFR 200.414](#)). The Uniform Guidance offers the option of electing to charge a de Minimis rate of 15 percent of modified total indirect costs (MTDC) which may be used indefinitely. As described above and in [2 CFR 200.403](#), costs must be charged consistently as either indirect or direct costs but may not be double charged or inconsistently charged as both. If elected, this methodology must be used consistently for all Federal awards until such time as a non-Federal entity chooses to negotiate for a rate, which it may do at any time.

Successful applicants must not use grant funds awarded under the authority of this RFA to renovate or refurbish research, education, or extension space; purchase or install fixed equipment in such space; or to plan, repair, rehabilitate, acquire, or construct buildings or facilities.

See [NIFA Indirect Costs](#) for information including [additional resources](#) and [NIFA Indirect Cost Guidance Chart](#).

#### **E. Domestic Travel**

Project Director (PD) meetings are required during the period of performance as a condition of the award. The purpose of the meeting will be to discuss projects, opportunities for collaborative efforts, and enhance dissemination of exemplary end products/results. These PD meetings may alternate between in-person and virtual meetings. In either case, attendance is required. Project Directors are to budget for in-person travel for all years that federal funding is requested, and the award remains active. If funds are not used in any year due to NIFA hosting a virtual PD meeting, NIFA may allow rebudgeting of travel funds to a different budgetary category, as needed.

## PART V. APPLICATION REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

### A. NIFA's Evaluation Process

NIFA evaluates each application in a two-part process. First, we screen each application to ensure that it meets the administrative requirements set forth in this RFA. All administrative requirements must be met in order for the application to proceed to the next level of review. Second, a scientific peer-review process will be used to technically evaluate applications that have met the administrative requirements using a review panel (see [NIFA Peer Review Process](#)).

#### Scientific Peer Review Process:

NIFA selects reviewers for the review panel based upon their training and experience in relevant scientific, extension, or education fields, taking into account the following factors:

1. The level of relevant formal scientific, technical education, or extension experience of the individual, as well as the extent to which an individual is engaged in relevant research, education, or extension activities.
2. The need to include experts from areas of specialization within relevant scientific, education, or extension fields.
3. The need to include other experts (e.g., producers, range or forest managers/operators, researchers, public health practitioners, educators, consumers, and commercial reviews) who can assess relevance of the applications to targeted audiences and to program needs.
4. The need to include experts from a variety of organizational types (e.g., colleges, universities, industry, state and Federal agencies, and private profit and non-profit organizations) and geographic locations.
5. The need to maintain a balanced composition with regard to race, ethnicity, gender representation, and an equitable age distribution.
6. The need to include reviewers who can judge the effective usefulness of each application to producers and the general public.

A reviewer's written evaluation entails two levels of assessment. First, the reviewer summarizes how well the application addressed each evaluation criterion. After the application has been assessed for strengths and weaknesses of each criterion, the reviewer then evaluates the overall likelihood that the project will have significant outcome and impact. The written reviews are used to begin panel discussions with other reviewers serving on the peer review panel. Through these discussions, peer review panelists come to consensus on the final ranking of the applications. A complete description of NIFA's peer review process can be found at the [NIFA Peer Review Process for Competitive Grant Applications page](#).

After each peer review panel has completed its deliberations, the responsible program staff of NIFA will recommend that your project is either approved for support from currently available funds or declined due to insufficient funds or unfavorable review.

NIFA reserves the right to negotiate with the PD/PI and/or the submitting organization or institution regarding project revisions (e.g., reductions in the scope of work, funding level, period, or method of support) prior to recommending any project for funding.

After the review process has been completed, NIFA sends copies of reviews, *not* including the identity of reviewers, and a summary (if applicable) of the review panel comments to the PD.

***Conflicts of interest.*** NIFA takes extreme care to prevent any actual or perceived conflicts of interest that may influence the review or evaluation (see [NIFA Peer Review Process for Competitive Grant Applications](#)).

## **B. SAS Evaluation Criteria**

**AFRI Integrated Project Criteria:** The SAS detailed evaluation criteria is under Integrated Project Applications and Centers of Excellence (COE) standards on **Pages 6-8** of the PDF labeled “[AFRI-Review Criteria](#)” on the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).

**Centers of Excellence (COE) standards:** In addition to the “AFRI Review Criteria” NIFA will use the COE standards described in this RFA to evaluate applications that rank highly meritorious and requested to be considered as a COE. In instances where applications are found to be equally meritorious, NIFA will prioritize the COE application meeting the COE criteria as a “tie breaker.” Applications that rank highly meritorious but did not request consideration as a COE or who are not deemed to have met the COE standards may still receive funding.

Applicants that meet the COE requirements will have the COE designation in their notice of award. Entities recognized as COE will maintain that distinction for the duration of their period of performance or as identified in the terms and conditions of that award.

## **C. Organizational Management Information**

Applicants must submit specific management information prior to an award and update the information as needed. Applicants may only need to provide an update if there was a change in previously provided information under this or another NIFA program. NIFA provides the requisite forms during the pre-award process. Although an applicant may be eligible for award under this program, there are factors that may exclude an applicant from receiving federal financial and nonfinancial assistance and benefits under this program (e.g., debarment or suspension of an individual, or a determination that an applicant is not responsible).

## **D. Application Disposition**

Applicants may withdraw at any time before NIFA makes a final funding decision. NIFA will retain all applications, including withdrawn applications and unfunded applications.

## PART VI. AWARD ADMINISTRATION

### A. General

Within the limit of funds authorized, the NIFA awarding official will make grants to responsible and eligible applicants whose applications are judged most meritorious under the procedures set forth in this RFA. The date specified by the NIFA awarding official as the effective date of the grant must be no later than September 30 of the federal fiscal year in which the project is approved for support and funds are appropriated for such purpose, unless otherwise permitted by law. The project need not be initiated on the grant effective date, but as soon thereafter as practical so that project goals may be attained within the funded project period. All funds granted by NIFA under this RFA may be used only for the purpose for which they are granted in accordance with the approved application and budget, regulations, terms and conditions of the award, applicable federal cost principles, USDA assistance regulations, and [NIFA General Awards Administration Provisions, 7 CFR Part 3430, subparts A through E](#).

*Award Notice.* The award document will provide pertinent instructions and information as described in [2 CFR 200.211](#) (see [NIFA's Terms and Conditions](#)).

### B. Administrative and National Policy Requirements

Several federal statutes and regulations apply to grant applications and the projects outlined in this RFA (some are listed here: [Federal Regulations](#)). Unless specifically noted by statute or award-specific requirements, [NIFA Federal Assistance Policy Guide](#) applies to all NIFA awards.

### C. Expected Program Outputs and Reporting Requirements

Output and reporting requirements are included in the [award terms and conditions](#). If there are any program or award-specific award terms, they will be identified in the Award Notice.

## PART VII. OTHER INFORMATION

### A. Use of Funds and Changes in Budget

**Delegation of fiscal responsibility.** Unless the terms and conditions of the award state otherwise, awardees may not in whole or in part delegate or transfer to another person, institution, or organization the responsibility for use or expenditure of award funds.

**Changes in Budget or Project Plans.** In accordance with [2 CFR 200.308](#), awardees must request prior approval from NIFA for the following program or budget-related reasons (the awardee is subject to the terms and conditions identified in the award):

1. Change in the scope or the objective of the project or program without prior written approval (even if there is no associated budget revision requiring).
2. Change in a key person specified in the application or the federal award.
3. Disengagement from the project for more than three months, or a 25 percent reduction in time devoted to the project.
4. Inclusion of costs that require prior approval in accordance with [2 CFR 200 Subpart E \(Cost Principles\)](#), or [45 CFR Part 75 Appendix IX, \(Principles for Determining Costs Applicable to Research and Development under Awards and Contracts with Hospitals\)](#), or [48 CFR](#), unless waived by the federal awarding agency,
5. [48 CFR Part 31, Contract Cost Principles and Procedures](#);
6. Transfer of funds budgeted for participant support costs to other categories of expense ([2 CFR 200.456 Participant support costs](#));
7. Sub-awarding, transferring or contracting out of any work under a federal award, including fixed amount sub-awards (see [2 CFR 200.333, Fixed Amount Sub-awards](#)), unless described in the application and funded in the approved federal awards. This provision does not apply to the acquisition of supplies, material, equipment, or general support services.
8. Changes in the approved cost-sharing or matching provided by the non-federal entity; and
9. The need for additional federal funds to complete the project.

### B. Confidential Aspects of Applications and Awards

When an application results in an award, it becomes a part of NIFA transaction records, which are available to the public. Information that the Secretary of Agriculture determines to be confidential, privileged, or proprietary in nature will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Therefore, applicants should clearly mark any information within the application they wish to have considered as confidential, privileged, or proprietary. NIFA will retain a copy of an application that does not result in an award for three years. Such an application will be released only with the consent of the applicant or to the extent required by law. An applicant may withdraw at any time prior to the final action thereon.

### C. Regulatory Information

This program is not subject to the provisions of Executive Order 12372, which requires intergovernmental consultation with state and local officials. Under the provisions of the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 ([44 U.S.C. Chapter 35](#)), the collection of information requirements contained in this notice have been approved under [OMB Document No. 0524-0039](#).



**D. Limited English Proficiency**

NIFA offers language access services, such as interpretation and translation of vital information, free of charge. If you need interpretation or translation services, please visit [NIFA Language Access Services](#) or contact Lois Tuttle, Equal Opportunity Specialist, at [Lois.Tuttle@usda.gov](mailto:Lois.Tuttle@usda.gov) or (443) 386-9488.

## APPENDIX I: AGENCY CONTACT

### Program Contacts

AFRI Program Office:

- Dr. Dionne Toombs, Associate Director, National Institute of Food and Agriculture
  - Dr. Venugopal Kalavacharla, Deputy Director, Institute of Food Production and Sustainability
  - Dr. Kevin Kephart, Deputy Director, Institute of Bioenergy, Climate, and Environment
  - Dr. Rubella Goswami, Deputy Director, Institute of Youth, Family, and Community
  - Dr. Shoushan (Steve) Zeng, Acting Deputy Director, Institute of Food Safety and Nutrition
- E-mail: [AFRI@usda.gov](mailto:AFRI@usda.gov)

Specific questions pertaining to technical matters may be directed to the Program Area Priority Contact(s):

- Dr. Lydia Kaume
  - Dr. Bisoodat “Mac” Macoon
  - Dr. William “Bill” Goldner
  - Dr. Ashley Mueller
- E-mail: [AFRI-SAS@usda.gov](mailto:AFRI-SAS@usda.gov)

For administrative questions related to

1. Grants.gov, see [Part IV](#) of this RFA
2. Other RFA or application questions, please email [grantapplicationquestions@usda.gov](mailto:grantapplicationquestions@usda.gov)
3. Awards under this RFA, please email [awards@usda.gov](mailto:awards@usda.gov)

### U.S. Postal Mailing Address:

National Institute of Food and Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
P.O. Box 419205, MS 10000  
Kansas City, MO 64141-6205

### Courier/Package Delivery Address:

National Institute of Food and Agriculture  
United States Department of Agriculture  
2312 East Bannister Road, MS 10000  
Kansas City, MO 64141-3061

## APPENDIX II: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### Glossary of Terms

Agriculture and Food Research Initiative – AFRI  
Assistance Listing Number – ALN  
Authorized Representative – AR  
Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 – AREERA  
Coordinated Agricultural Project – CAP  
Centers of Excellence – COE  
Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry – CSAF  
Co-Project Director – Co-PD  
Data Management Plan – DMP  
Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research – EPSCoR  
Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement – FASE  
Indirect costs – IDC  
National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board – NAREEEAB  
National Agricultural Research, Extension, Teaching and Policy Act of 1977 – NARETPA  
National Institute of Food and Agriculture – NIFA  
Project Director – PD  
Research, Education, and Economics – REE  
Request for Application – RFA  
Regional Resource Hub – RRH  
Sustainable Agricultural Systems – SAS  
Total Federal Funds Awarded – TFFA  
United States Department of Agriculture – USDA

## APPENDIX III: DEFINITIONS

Refer to [7 CFR 3430 Competitive and Noncompetitive Non-formula Federal Assistance Programs – General Award Administrative Provisions](#) for additional definitions.

### Definitions

#### Applied Research:

Research that includes expansion of the findings of fundamental research to uncover practical ways in which new knowledge can be advanced to benefit individuals and society.

#### Bioeconomy:

The bioeconomy presents an opportunity to expand and enable new agriculture and forest markets while also improving the sustainability of the broader modern economy and environment. New biobased technologies and products promise to create new possibilities for renewable product supply-chains, jobs, and economic opportunities.

#### Circular Economy:

A circular economy offers a conceptual framework for using and conserving renewable natural resources to transform and sustainably manage our land, food, health and industrial systems.

#### Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry:

Climate-smart agriculture and forestry is an approach to transform production systems under climate change through practices that can result in sustainable intensification, climate change adaptation, and/or greenhouse gas mitigation.

#### Co-Project Director:

Someone who would assume the project director's responsibilities if the project director steps out of that role prior to the completion of the project term. For those that do not meet these criteria they should use the terms co-investigator or co-collaborator.

#### Education Component:

The proposed Education (teaching and teaching-related) component of an Integrated Project should develop human capital relevant to overall program goals for U.S. agriculture. An education or teaching activity is formal classroom instruction, laboratory instruction, and practicum experience in the food and agricultural sciences and other related matters such as faculty development, student recruitment and services, curriculum development, instructional materials and equipment, and innovative teaching methodologies. Educational activities may include any of the following: conducting classroom and laboratory instruction and practicum experience; faculty research internships for curricula development; cutting-edge agricultural science and technology curriculum development; innovative teaching methodologies; instructional materials development; education delivery systems; student experiential learning (student led-research; internships; externships; clinics); student learning styles and student-centered instruction; student recruitment and retention efforts; career planning materials and counseling; pedagogy; faculty development programs; development of modules for on-the-job training; providing knowledge and skills for professionals creating policy or transferring to the agriculture workforce; faculty and student exchanges; and student study abroad and international research opportunities relevant to overall program goals for U.S. agriculture. Educational activities must show direct alignment with increasing technical competency in AFRI priority area(s) to ensure that U.S. agriculture remains

globally competitive in the knowledge age. Educational components must address one or two of the following key strategic actions:

- a) Train students for Associate, Baccalaureate, Master's, or Doctoral degrees; and/or
- b) Prepare K-12 teachers and higher education faculty to understand and present food and agricultural sciences.

Education activities should synthesize and incorporate a wide range of the latest relevant research results. Note that routine use of graduate students and postdoctoral personnel to conduct research is not considered education for the purposes of the AFRI program.

More information is available in the "AFRI Project Types" PDF in the attachments list on the AFRI RFA Resources page.

#### Extension Component:

The proposed Extension component of an Integrated Project should conduct programs and activities that deliver science-based knowledge and informal educational programs to people, enabling them to make practical decisions. Program delivery may range from community-based to national audiences and use communication methods from face-to-face to electronic or combinations thereof. Extension Projects may also include related matters such as certification programs, in-service training, client recruitment and services, curriculum development, instructional materials and equipment, and innovative instructional methodologies appropriate to informal educational programs.

Extension activities may address, but are not limited to, the following key strategic actions:

- a) Support informal education to increase food, agricultural, and health literacy of youth and adults;
- b) Promote science-based agricultural literacy by increasing understanding and use of food and agricultural science data, information, and programs;
- c) Build science-based capability in people to engage audiences and
- d) Enable informed decision making;
- e) Develop new applications of instructional tools and curriculum structures that increase technical competency and ensure global competitiveness;
- f) Offer non-formal learning programs that increase accessibility to new audiences at the rate at which new ideas and technologies are tested and/or developed at the community-scale; and
- g) Develop programs that increase public knowledge and citizen engagement leading to actions that protect or enhance the nation's food supply, agricultural productivity, environmental quality, community vitality, food security and/or public health and well-being.

Extension activities should synthesize and incorporate a wide range of the latest relevant research results. Note that research-related activities such as publication of papers or speaking at scientific meetings are not considered extension for this purpose.

More information is available under "AFRI Project Types" in the attachments list in the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).

#### FASE Grants:

Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement (FASE) Grants mean funding awarded to eligible applicants to strengthen science capabilities of Project Directors, to help institutions develop competitive scientific programs, and to attract new scientists into careers in high-priority areas of National need in agriculture, food, and environmental sciences. FASE awards may apply to any of the three agricultural knowledge components (i.e., research, education, and extension). FASE awards include Pre- and Postdoctoral Fellowships, New Investigator grants, and Strengthening grants.

#### Food Security:

Food security for a household means access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum 1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods; and 2) assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

#### Food Systems:

A range of sectors or subsystems and activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and parts of the broader economic, societal, and natural environments in which they are embedded. A sustainable food system is one that delivers food and nutrition security equitably in such a way that the economic, social, and environmental bases to generate food and nutrition security for future generations are not compromised.

#### Fundamental Research:

Fundamental research means research that (i) increases knowledge or understanding of the fundamental aspects of phenomena and has the potential for broad application; and (ii) has an effect on agriculture, food, nutrition, or the environment.

#### Integrated Research, Education, and Extension Projects:

An Integrated Project includes at least two of the three functions of the agricultural knowledge system (i.e., research, education, and extension) within a project. Note: AFRI SAS requires that Integrated Project applications include all three components of the agricultural knowledge system. More information is available under “AFRI Project Types” in the attachments list in the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).

#### Limited Institutional Success:

Limited institutional success means institutions that are not among the most successful universities and colleges for receiving Federal funds for science and engineering research. A list of successful institutions is provided in the “Table 2 Least Successful Institutions” PDF in the attachments list on the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).

#### Local:

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, there is no consensus on a definition of “local” or “local food systems” in terms of the geographic distance between production and consumption. Nevertheless, local and regional foods are increasingly being recognized as an important component to efforts to create more sustainable, resilient, healthier, and equitable food systems. Applicants should define their “local/regional” food system in the application.

#### Matching:

The process through which a grant recipient match awarded USDA funds with cash and in-kind contributions on a dollar-for-dollar basis. The matching funds must derive from non-Federal sources.

**Mentoring Plan:**

A mentoring plan is required for all grant applications submitted in response to this RFA. Specifically, for any project that involves any type of education, training or mentoring of students or other individuals including high school students, undergraduate students, graduate students, professional degree students, postdoctoral scholars, other professionals or any other individual receiving any type of formal, or non-formal or vocational training on the project. For additional important details see Part IV, C on the [AFRI RFA Resources](#) webpage.

**Minority:**

Minority means Alaskan Native, American Indian, Asian-American, African-American, Hispanic American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander. The Secretary will determine on a case-by-case basis whether additional groups qualify under this definition, either at the Secretary's initiative, or in response to a written request with supporting explanation.

**Minority-Serving Institution:**

Minority-serving institution means an accredited academic institution whose enrollment of a single minority or a combination of minorities exceeds fifty percent of the total enrollment, including graduate and undergraduate and full- and part-time students. An institution in this instance is an organization that is independently accredited as determined by reference to the current version of the Higher Education Directory, published by Higher Education Publications, Inc., 6400 Arlington Boulevard, Suite 648, Falls Church, Virginia 22042 (703-532-2300).

**New Application:**

An application not previously submitted to a program.

**Nutrition Security:**

Nutrition security means having consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent (and if needed, treat) disease, particularly among racial/ethnic minority populations, populations living under the Federal poverty line, and rural and remote populations. Nutrition security builds on and complements food security by recognizing not all Americans are all maintaining an active, health life, and emphasizing and using an equity lens for ensuring access, availability, and affordability to foods and beverages.

**Project Director:**

The principal from a NIFA-funded organization, who is responsible for managing a grant project.

**Research Component:**

The proposed Research component of an integrated project should address knowledge gaps that are critical to the development of practices and programs to address the stated problem. More information is available under "AFRI Project Types" in the attachments list in the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).

**Resubmitted Application:**

A project application that was previously submitted to a program, but the application was not funded.

**Small and Mid-Sized Institutions:**

Small and mid-sized institutions are academic institutions with a current total enrollment of 17,500 or less including graduate and undergraduate and full- and part-time students. An institution, in this instance, is an organization that possesses a significant degree of autonomy. Significant degree of autonomy is defined by being independently accredited as determined by reference to the current version of the Higher Education Directory, published by Higher Education Publications, Inc., 6400 Arlington Boulevard, Suite 648, Falls Church, Virginia 22042 (703-532-2300).

**Social Determinants of Health:**

[Social Determinants of Health](#) are the conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that can affect health risks and outcomes.

**Stakeholder:**

Anyone (individual, group, etc.) who has interest in or potential influence on the success of a project. In the context of NIFA integrated projects, stakeholders can be viewed as those impacted by the work that is being proposed.

**Strengthening Grants:**

Strengthening Grants mean funds awarded to institutions eligible for FASE Grants to enhance institutional capacity, with the goal of leading to future funding in the project area, as well as strengthening the competitiveness of the investigator's research, education, and/or extension activities. Strengthening grants consist of Standard, Coordinated Agricultural Project and Conference Grant types as well as Seed Grants, Equipment Grants, and Sabbatical Grants.

**Sustainability:**

An integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will over the long-term: satisfy human food and fiber needs, enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends, make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls, sustain the economic viability of farm operations, and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole.

**Transdisciplinary Approach:**

Transdisciplinary approaches intentionally integrate knowledge from different scientific disciplines with relevant stakeholders and community members to address societal challenges. The development of transdisciplinary approaches engages these diverse teams from the onset of project conceptualization.

**USDA EPSCoR States:**

USDA Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research EPSCoR States mean States which have been less successful in receiving funding from AFRI, having a funding level no higher than the 38th percentile of all States based on a 3-year average of AFRI funding levels, excluding FASE Strengthening funds granted to state agricultural experiment stations and degree-granting institutions in EPSCoR States and small, mid-sized, and minority-serving degree-granting institutions. The most recent list of USDA EPSCoR States is provided under "AFRI Grant Types" in the attachments list in the AFRI RFA Resources page.



## APPENDIX IV: OTHER AFRI RESOURCES

AFRI program information is available on the [NIFA AFRI website](#). The following are among the materials available:

1. [Requests for Applications](#)
2. [AFRI Annual Review](#)
3. [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
4. [Interagency Programs](#)
5. [AFRI RFA Resources](#)
  - a. ***Most Successful Universities and Colleges.*** Any institution listed on this list, Most Successful Universities and Colleges Receiving Federal Funds, is not eligible for Strengthening Grants from the FASE program unless they are located in an EPSCoR state. See “Table 1 Most Successful Institutions” in the attachments list in the [AFRI RFA Resources page](#).
  - b. ***Lowest One Third of Universities and Colleges Receiving Federal Funds.*** The lowest one third of universities and colleges receiving Federal funds is used to determine eligibility for possible waiver of matching funds requirement for Equipment Grants (see “Table 2 Least Successful Institutions” in the attachments list).
  - c. ***Flow Chart for Strengthening Grant Eligibility.*** The Flow Chart for Strengthening Grant Eligibility will help to determine your eligibility to apply for strengthening grants (see “FASE Strengthening Grant Eligibility Flow Chart” in the attachments list).
6. [AFRI Deadlines](#)