

NIFA National Needs Graduate Fellowship (NNF) Grants Program

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Purpose of the NNF Grants

What is NIFA and what is NIFA's mission?

Established in 2009, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture is a federal science agency within the United States Department of Agriculture (www.usda.gov). Congress created NIFA through the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008.

What is the purpose of the NNF Grants Program?

The purpose of the NNF Grants Program is to support competitive grants that develop intellectual capital to ensure the preeminence of U.S. food and agricultural systems. Functioning collaboratively with eligible higher education institutions NNF awards are to train students for Master's and/or doctoral degrees in targeted expertise shortage areas (TESAs) relevant to USDA mission areas. NNF awards support, specifically: (1) Fellowships to train students for Master's and doctoral degrees in food, agricultural and natural resource sciences, and; (2) Special International Study or Thesis/Dissertation Research Travel Allowances (IRTA) **for eligible fellows supported by USDA NNF Grants**. See the Request for Applications (RFA) for details.

What are the Targeted Expertise Shortage Areas (TESAs) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010?

(1) Animal and Plant Production – specifically Animal Well-Being (Ethologists; Bioethicists; Turkey Reproductive Physiologists); Integrated fields of quantitative genetics, statistics, computational biology, and breeding for animals and for plants;

(2) Forest Resources – particularly in decision sciences; land use and landscape analysis; ecosystem processes and forest health; utilization technology; and communicating forest research results, new technologies, and scientific applications to resource managers;

(3) Agricultural Educators and Communicators – specifically related to increasing preparedness of K-12 students entering two- and four-year colleges to pursue degrees that will impact the USDA mission; advance research-based cyberlearning; and develop branding to increase public understanding that food, agricultural and related sciences are vital to U.S. participation in the global science and technology economy;

(4) Agricultural Management and Economics – specifically in agricultural trade policy, resource economics, and economics of alternative energy;

(5) Food Science and Human Nutrition – specifically in food and nutrition for health, and to reduce obesity;

(6) Sciences for Agricultural Biosecurity – particularly in animal pathology and food animal diagnostics, invasive species, and other areas impacting the security of the food systems; and

(7) Training in Integrative Biosciences for Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems (integrative training in food and agricultural, social and economic disciplines) for food, agricultural and environmental systems, particularly in sustainable ecosystems and functional integrative, environmental, and natural resources management.

How are TESAs developed?

TESAs are developed from USDA mission areas; NIFA priorities; national science education policy from the National Academy of Sciences; national education statistics from Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, SRS, and employment statistics from the Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; the Food and Agricultural Education Information System; professional societies; and other stakeholders. Grants are specifically intended to support fellowship programs that engage outstanding students in their degrees where there is a national need for the development of scientific and professional expertise in USDA mission sciences.

NNF Grant Support

What does a NNF Fellowship Include?

Stipend: NNF typically awards \$40,000 for each Master's level training [\$18,500 per year for two (2) years as student stipend] and \$78,000 for each doctoral level training [\$24,500 per year for three (3) years as student stipend].

Cost of Education Allowance: For each level of student training, there is a \$1,500 per student per year cost-of-education allowance for the institution.

IRTA: There will be \$8,000 for doctoral level NNF Fellows and \$4,500 for Master's level NNF Fellows.

See,

[\[http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_05/7cfr3402_05.html\]](http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_05/7cfr3402_05.html).

What is the Duration of the Stipend?

Master's Level: A NNF Fellow at the Master's degree level who maintains satisfactory progress is eligible to receive grant support for a maximum of **twenty-four (24) months**, during a thirty-month period.

Doctoral Level: A NNF Fellow at the doctoral degree level who maintains satisfactory progress is eligible to receive grant support for a maximum of **thirty-six (36) months**, within a forty-two-month period.

Is there a limit to the amount that can be requested per application and per institution?

The maximum funding request per application is \$258,000.00.

The maximum funding that can be awarded to a single institution is \$516,000.00 and can be made up of any combination of funded applications.

Eligibility Requirements

Who is eligible to apply for a NNF Grant?

The eligibility requirements state that applicants must be: (1) land-grant institutions including the University of the District of Columbia, (2) colleges and universities having significant minority enrollments and a demonstrable capacity to carry out the teaching of food and agricultural sciences, (3) University of the District of Columbia, and (4) other colleges and universities having a demonstrable capacity to carry out the teaching of food, and agricultural sciences. Research foundations maintained by an eligible college or university are eligible to submit graduate training proposals under this RFA. **Applicants should be institutions that confer a graduate degree in at least one of the Targeted Expertise Shortage Areas (TESA).**

Can I apply for an NNF grant to complete my graduate training?

Individuals may NOT apply for NNF grants. The eligible applicants are graduate-degree granting institutions identified in the RFA.

Who is eligible to receive NNF Support for Graduate Education?

Award Beneficiary Eligibility for Stipend Support – It is the responsibility of the grantee institution to award fellowships to students of superior academic ability. Only persons who meet the eligibility requirements provided below may hold fellowships. Persons eligible to receive Fellowship stipend support must:

- (1) Be citizens or nationals of the United States as defined in this announcement (refer to 7 CFR 3430.202 Definitions);
- (2) Have strong interest, as judged by the institution, in pursuing a degree in a national targeted expertise shortage area and in preparing for a career as a food or agricultural or natural resources scientist or professional; and
- (3) Not have –
 - a. completed two semesters or equivalent hours (one (1) year) of full-time study as defined by the institution, or
 - b. passed candidacy/qualifying examinations, whichever is later; and

c. been enrolled previously in the academic program at the same degree level.

Beneficiary Eligibility for IRTA – At the time of travel under the IRTA grant award, USDA Fellows conducting research outside the United States must:

- (1) Be supported under a USDA National Needs Graduate Fellowship grant;
- (2) Have completed one academic year of full-time study, as defined by the institution under the fellowship appointment;
- (3) Have formalized arrangements to study and/or conduct research in the foreign location(s) (see RFA Part IV, B, 3, (b));
- (4) Have sufficient time remaining in their fellowship award to complete the proposed IRTA travel or research; and
- (5) Have a completed NIFA Form 2010 – Fellowship Appointment Form with the funding agency (NIFA).

If NNF Fellow (student) receives a NNF Stipend is the same NNF Fellow still eligible to receive other NIFA support?

NNF Fellow may receive additional support from NIFA but not for the same objectives. For example, a NNF Fellow receiving a NNF stipend cannot receive other NIFA funding as stipend for the same level degree but may be supported for research or extension activities.

Application Process

How do I apply for a NNF Grant?

Applicants submit their NNF application through www.grants.gov portal. Applicants are advised to prepare their material early and pass the complete package through their institution's Grants Office for submission by 5:00 P.M (EASTERN) on the due date.

What must I submit to apply?

Application package as identified in the RFA.

Can I submit a NNF application if I never had previously?

Yes, new applicants are encouraged to submit applications that respond to the RFA.

Can I submit an application if I was not funded in a prior NNF cycle?

Yes, resubmitted applications must include a one-page response to the comments of the prior panel. The resubmitted application must respond to and be aligned with the current NNF RFA.

When are the NNF applications due to NIFA?

Applications must be received by Grants.gov by COB on May 10, 2010 (5:00 p.m. Eastern Time).

What if I miss the deadline?

You may apply when the NNF program publishes a call for application, in the next cycle. The NNF application submission deadline is adhered to rigorously.

Evaluation Process

What is the Administrative Review?

NNF grants program team conducts an initial administrative review of NNF applications to determine compliance with requirements and complete content of applications. Only complete applications that meet all eligibility requirements, project requirements, and supporting documents described in the RFA will be considered for a merit review. Applications identified as incomplete or that do not meet the eligibility or complete application package requirements will be deemed ineligible.

What is the Merit Review?

All complete and accepted NNF applications from eligible institutions undergo a peer review by a panel of scientific experts in the areas of study related to the NNF Grants Program. Panel members rate applications based on the evaluation criteria described below.

How will my fellowship application be evaluated?

Applications are evaluated by a review panel on the following criteria:

1. Applications for Graduate Training
 - (a) Potential for Advancing the Quality of Education - 25 Points
 - (b) Proposed Approach - 30 Points
 - (c) Institutional Commitment and Resources - 20 Points
 - (d) Key Personnel - 15 Points
 - (e) Broader Context Impacts - 10 points

2. Applications for Special International Study or Thesis/Dissertation Research Travel Allowances (IRTA)
 - (a) Potential for Advancing the Quality of Education - 20 Points
 - (b) Proposed Approach - 40 Points
 - (c) Institutional Commitment and Resources - 10 Points
 - (d) Key Personnel - 10 Points
 - (e) Broader Context Impacts - 20 Points

How is my NNF application scored?

Each application is reviewed by three independent panel members. A numerical score ranging from 0 to 100 is assigned to each application based on the average of the panelist's individual ratings. Ad hoc reviewers also provide input into the technical merit, that is considered by the panel.

How can I be a peer reviewer for this NNF Grants Program?

If you are not submitting an application, you may submit your curriculum vita and explain in an e-mail [NNF@nifa.usda.gov] your interest to serve as a reviewer. The selection of reviewers will be confirmed after the deadline for submission of applications.

If you have previously served as an NNF reviewer (ad hoc or panelist), please update your information in the reviewer database and send us a one-page up-to-date biosketch and a full listing of your current Conflict of Interest relationships.

Are there restrictions or conflicts that apply to serving as a reviewer?

Yes. If any of the following apply as a relationship with any of the key personnel on a proposal, you are ineligible to serve as a peer reviewer for the proposal:

- (i) Co-author on any publication (print or digital), within the past three (3) years;
- (ii) Collaborator on teaching, research and/or extension projects , within the past three (3) years, or pending/planned future collaborations;
- (iii) Consulting arrangement, financial arrangement or any other conflict or interest, within the past three (3) years;
- (iv) Advisee/advisor on thesis, or dissertation, or postdoctoral training. There is a lifetime conflict for a major professor-advisee relationship. There is a three-year conflict for service on graduate committees, or as academic or professional mentor, including postdoctoral mentor; and
- (v) Belonging to same institution. If you have moved from an institution, there is a one-year institutional conflict. Additionally, the above restrictions (i - iv) apply.

If I am an applicant, can I serve as a reviewer for FY 2010 NNF applications?

No.

Selection Process

When will I be notified with a decision?

NNF will not review applications or supporting materials received after the deadline date. Applications and materials that are received after May 10, 2010, will be deemed ineligible. NNF adheres strictly to the application deadline date.

Can I receive my scores and the review panel's comments?

Panel consensus comments are sent to each applicant after awards have been made.

How many NNF projects are selected to support Fellows as Master's and doctoral level NNF beneficiaries?

In FY 2009, based on technical merit and available funding, NNF awards supported 23 training projects for 45 Ph.D. and 23 M.S. level students.

NNF Fellowship Grantees

What happens once I am selected as a potential NNF Fellowship award recipient?

NNF Grants program staff submits an offer letter and requests responses to clarifying questions raised in the peer panel meeting. Applicants respond to all issues and queries.

What are the responsibilities of a NNF Master's or doctoral level fellow?

Beneficiaries must be engaged in a cross-section of disciplines relevant to USDA mission areas. The NNF award enables NNF Fellows to be trained in research, education and or extension that is relevant and will increase: understanding, 21st Century skills, research-based knowledge, assessment, a premier next-generation, and diverse workforce.

How can I get answers as I prepare my NNF application?

For Program Office (Programmatic Technical Issues) in National Needs Graduate Fellowship Grants Program: NNF@nifa.usda.gov, or 202-720-1973.

For NIFA (Electronic Application Process Issues) questions: call 202- 401-5048 OR electronic@nifa.usda.gov.

For Submission Issues in www.grants.gov seek assistance by e-mail: support@grants.gov or phone: 1-800-518-4726. Hours of Operation: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Other NIFA Graduate and Postgraduate Support

How can I, as a pre-doctoral student, be supported through NIFA?

For NIFA predoctoral fellowship support – visit the AFRI grant site on NIFA's website. The AFRI Fellows program may be an option for you. AFRI@nifa.usda.gov.

How can I get support for postdoctoral training through NIFA?

visit the AFRI grant site on NIFA's website. The AFRI Fellows program may be an option for you. AFRI@nifa.usda.gov.

The contents of this document do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the public in any way. This document is intended only to provide clarity to the public regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies.