

Stakeholder Feedback for the FY 2015 AFRI Food, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Human Sciences Education and Literacy Initiative (AFRI ELI) RFA

AFRI Stakeholder Input

The programs described herein were developed within the context of the authorized purposes of USDA research, extension, and education projects and activities. In addition, AFRI obtains input from Congress, the NAREEEAB, as well as many university, scientific, and agricultural committees and organizations. NIFA developed a stakeholder's Web page (www.nifa.usda.gov/business/reporting/stakeholder.html) to document stakeholder input that is considered when developing and updating Program Area Descriptions and Priorities each year.

The AFRI program has undergone a rigorous external evaluation during the previous 24 months to examine a number of issues around NIFA's administration of the program and to assess the quality of the work being supported. On September 9, 2014 the National Research Council released its [report](#), "Spurring Innovation in Food and Agriculture: A Review of the USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Program (2014)." NIFA requested that the National Research Council undertake the study in 2012 to determine the research quality and value funded by AFRI and to examine its overall effectiveness in advancing science. Many of NRC's recommendations have already been implemented, among other key actions, during the past few years. NIFA remains strongly committed to ensuring that AFRI remains on firm footing and on a direct path that continues to bring practical solutions to today's critical societal challenges.

The AFRI program was significantly restructured and refocused in FY 2010 to more effectively address societal challenges while continuing to support foundational agricultural science. A public meeting was held on June 2, 2010, to seek stakeholder comment on the FY 2010 AFRI RFAs prior to revising them for FY 2011. NIFA has once again solicited stakeholder input via a public meeting and 12 program-specific webinars. The public meeting was held on February 22, 2012 and the webinars were held during the months of March and April 2012. NIFA received more than 145 comments from stakeholders, including a wide range of scientific societies, producer associations, universities and other research organizations, policy and advocacy groups, non-profit organizations, and leading scientists in the field of agriculture and food sciences. Collectively, the non-governmental organizations represent over 300,000 stakeholders of interest. A comprehensive analysis was conducted of the written and oral stakeholder input comments received. Categorically, these comments can be clustered into the following: Production Agriculture; Food Safety; Energy, Environment, Natural Resources, and Rural Communities; Bioengineering, Biochemistry, and Plant Health; Health and Obesity; Grantmaking; and Animal Agriculture and Aquaculture.

In general, the broad range of AFRI stakeholders provided overwhelming support for NIFA and the AFRI program. During the in-person stakeholder listening session, 100 percent of the speakers expressed their appreciation for the event and the opportunity to participate. It should be noted that hundreds of e-mails were received from stakeholders indicating their regrets of not being able to attend due to other commitments, the short notification, and lack of financial resources. Overall, stakeholders applauded NIFA for expending the time, effort, and resources to facilitate sessions designed to obtain their feedback, comments, and being responsive to

stakeholder input. In addition, almost ten percent of the stakeholders specifically expressed their gratitude for the Administration, USDA, and NIFA's request for an increase in funding for the AFRI program in the FY 2013 budget. Moreover, many supported full funding of the AFRI program to the level indicated in the 2008 Farm Bill. Stakeholders with current and past AFRI projects expressed their appreciation of the goals and mission of the AFRI program. The stakeholders applauded NIFA for its courage and leadership in taking on the diverse, global agricultural and food science issues. In addition, a significant proportion of the stakeholders, 40 percent, expressed in great detail the level of their gratitude of AFRI as a funding source, the competitive grants process, efforts to ensure that AFRI Challenge Area RFAs include basic research and relevant scientific disciplines. Lastly, stakeholders articulated their support for NIFA's partnership initiatives including inter-agency and public-private.

Stakeholders concern exists regarding NIFA's compliance with AFRI authorizing language, the scientifically confining aspects of the RFAs, the funding amount and allocations between the Foundational and Challenge Areas, the benefit and efficacy of Coordinated Agricultural Project (CAP) grants, and the overall AFRI program/project types that are under/not funded. Stakeholders expressed specific trepidation regarding the eligibility criteria for integrated projects that excludes entities beyond colleges and universities as primary recipients. Also, stakeholders felt that the funding level of the Foundational Program was inadequate and indicated support of an allocation level of up to 50 percent of the AFRI appropriation for that part of the program. Other stakeholders provided input regarding specific AFRI set-aside amounts for program/projects, e.g. organic, classical breeding, water, and bio-technology. Overall, 30 percent of stakeholders expressed concern that CAP grants are too large. While many of the stakeholders expressed an understanding of the concept and benefit of CAP grants to long-term, interdisciplinary, scientific research, stakeholders encouraged NIFA to reconsider and balance the portfolio and funds attributed to these types of projects. Additionally, stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the overall AFRI program as it pertains to decisions that eliminate and/or suppress investigator, hypothesis-driven scientific discovery, junior faculty award success rates, qualified and diverse panel reviewers, and a disconnect between industry and higher education scientific research.

Stakeholders provided an abundance of recommendations that are proactive and designed to have immediate, beneficial outcomes. The recommendations included the need for NIFA to define its agricultural identity among the federal agencies, improvements to the AFRI Program, current and future investments, and the development of RFAs. Some stakeholders indicated that NIFA was duplicative and/or undistinguishable in its research efforts associated with other federal agencies. However, they were supportive of the need and benefit of leveraging limited resources through inter-agency partnerships. Stakeholders expressed the need for more, smaller innovative awards in the amount of \$1 million dollars and restricting the range of CAP awards to \$10-20 million. Lastly, the recommendations regarding RFAs included expanding and/or clarifying the restrictive language, allowing adequate time to prepare a responsive, comprehensive proposal, systematic and consistent publishing, and associating the request for information to match the size of the award.

In response to the comments received, NIFA will take several actions. The AFRI program will undergo a rigorous external evaluation during the next 24 months to examine a number of issues

around NIFA's administration of the program and to assess the quality of the work being supported. Based on the recommendations of the evaluation, as well as comments from stakeholders, NIFA will make changes to program offerings, make adjustments to award sizes, and reconsider the distribution of funds between Challenge Areas and the Foundational Program. The rate at which these changes will occur will depend, in part, on available funding.

NIFA understands that some stakeholders are concerned about priority limitations identified in the AFRI RFAs. NIFA has focused on making critical but essential decisions regarding the scientific reach and impact for each RFA that is published. These decisions included the identification of six Challenge Areas that are relevant and consistent with the priority areas identified in the AFRI legislation. Moreover, these decisions are guided by the NAREEEAB, USDA Strategic Plan, Research, Education, and Economics Action Plan, NIFA Strategic Plan, pertinent industry-related scientific reports, and stakeholder input. In the end, the RFAs reflect a comprehensive, consultative document to address the collective needs of specific scientific issues that notably impact America's agricultural and food system.

Within the stakeholder community, there is a fair amount of concern regarding NIFA's agricultural identity among the federal agencies, specifically as it applies to addressing childhood obesity prevention. NIFA emphasizes the role of foods and whole diets in the prevention of chronic degenerative diseases, while the National Institute of Health, in general, addresses therapeutic aspects. Successful applications to AFRI must align with USDA and NIFA mission, Strategic Plans, and goals. Moreover, the existing REE Action Plan encourages the formal and informal collaboration with other USDA and Federal agencies, as well as public and private partners. The focus of these partnerships is on a national and international level to ensure our research, education, and extension activities are representative of current priorities and take advantage of existing knowledge.

NIFA acknowledges the level of concern that exists within a portion of the stakeholder community regarding entities eligible to submit applications for integrated projects. Eligibility for all NIFA programs is established in authorizing legislation. Eligibility to apply to the AFRI program was established in the 2008 Farm and NIFA has adhered to that requirement. Applicants not eligible to directly apply are encouraged to partner with eligible institutions. In addition, NIFA remains committed to engaging small, mid-sized and minority-serving institutions and young scientists in all of its programs. To ensure their participation in AFRI we offer Food and Agriculture Science Enhancement (FASE) grants within all program areas. FASE gives special funding consideration to applications from qualifying schools for even the largest grants, and sets aside 10 percent of AFRI funding for this purpose. FASE-eligible schools are those with enrollments of fewer than 17,500 students, minority-serving institutions, and those in USDA Experimental Program for Stimulating Competitive Research (EPSCoR) states. In addition, AFRI gives special consideration to new faculty with fewer than five years of experience, and offers pre- and post-doctoral fellowships to encourage young scientists to engage in agricultural science.

More detailed comments relevant to each Challenge Area RFA will be published in those RFAs, along with NIFA's responses to those comments.

In FY 2012, NIFA received approximately eight stakeholder comments relevant to the NIFA AFRI ELI Fellowship RFA. Three of the comments centered on eligibility for the predoctoral fellows. The requirements were kept the same as per the guidelines set forth in the Code of Federal Regulations (7 CFR 3430.303). Another comment requested that the program allow international opportunities. The program already allows international opportunities, as long as the proposed project promotes advances in U.S. agriculture and forestry.

Several of the comments were observational; there was not a specific recommendation for the program associated with the feedback. Specifically, two comments addressed the need to fund training grants that are targeted to prepare individuals for careers and funded at an adequate level. This is the purpose of the Fellowship program. A final stakeholder comment pointed out that the shortage of researchers in the food and agriculture sciences is not independent of the lack of knowledge among the generational population about food production. Again, the purpose of the Fellowship program is to strengthen science capabilities in research.