

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**National Institute of Food and Agriculture****Solicitation of Commodity Board Topics and Contribution of Funding Under the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program, Implementation**

AGENCY: National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of opportunity for commodity boards to submit topics and contribute funding under the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program.

SUMMARY: As part of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture's (NIFA) strategy to implement section 7404 of Public Law 113–79, the Agricultural Act of 2014, NIFA is soliciting topics from eligible commodity board entities (Federal and State-level commodity boards, as defined below) which they are willing to equally co-fund with NIFA. Such topics must relate to the established priority areas of the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program (AFRI) to be considered for inclusion in future AFRI Requests for Applications (RFAs).

Commodity boards are those entities established under a commodity promotion law (as such term is defined under section 501(a) of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (7 U.S.C. 7401(a))) or a State commodity board (or other equivalent State entity). See the **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** section of this Notice under the heading “Eligibility for Submitting Topics” for further information.

If proposed topics are accepted for inclusion in an AFRI RFA after evaluation by NIFA, they will be incorporated into AFRI competitive grants program RFAs. As a condition of funding grants in a topic, NIFA will require an agreement with the commodity board to provide funds that are equal to the amount NIFA is contributing under the agreed upon topic.

This Notice invites topic submissions from commodity boards as defined above, outlines the process NIFA will use to evaluate the appropriateness of these topics for inclusion in AFRI RFAs, and describes the commitment commodity boards will be required to make in order for NIFA to jointly fund AFRI applications competitively selected for award within a topic area submitted by the commodity boards.

DATES: Topics may be submitted by commodity boards at any time; however, all topics to be considered for the fiscal year 2016 AFRI RFAs must be received by 5:00 p.m., EDT on September 22, 2015. Topics submitted by eligible commodity board entities after this date will be considered for RFAs to be issued in future years. NIFA will hold a webinar to respond to questions from commodity boards interested in submitting topics. Details including the date and time, and access information will be posted on the NIFA Web site (<http://nifa.usda.gov/commodity-boards/>).

ADDRESSES: You may submit topics, identified by NIFA–2015–0001, by any of the following methods:

Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments.

Email: commodityboards@nifa.usda.gov. Include NIFA–2015–0001 in the subject line of the message.

Instructions: All topics received must include the agency name and reference to NIFA–2015–0001. All comments received will be posted to <http://www.regulations.gov>, including any personal information provided.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Robert Hedberg; Phone: (202) 720–5384, or Mark Miranda; Phone: (202) 401–4336, or Email: commodityboards@nifa.usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**Background and Purpose**

This Notice represents the second step in implementing section 7404 of the Agricultural Act of 2014, Public Law 113–79, which amends section 2(b) of the Competitive, Special, and Facilities Research Grant Act (7 U.S.C. 450i(b)) to require that NIFA “establish procedures, including timelines, under which an entity established under a commodity promotion law (as such term is defined under section 501(a) of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (7 U.S.C. 7401(a))) or a State commodity board (or other equivalent State entity) may directly submit to the Secretary [(NIFA)] for consideration proposals for requests for applications . . .” within the AFRI Program.

In September of 2014, NIFA took the first step toward implementing section 7404 by publishing a **Federal Register** Notice, which solicited stakeholder feedback on implementing this provision. See 79 FR 58727 (Sept. 30, 2014) (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-09-30/html/2014-23352.htm>).

Stakeholder feedback gathered as a result of the September 2014 Notice informed this second step toward

implementing section 7404. This Notice invites entities established under a commodity promotion law or State commodity boards (or other equivalent State entities) to submit topics which they are proposing for inclusion in upcoming AFRI RFAs. Topics must relate to the established AFRI priority areas, which are plant health and production and plant products; animal health and production and animal products; food safety, nutrition, and health; renewable energy, natural resources, and environment; agriculture systems and technology; and agriculture economics and rural communities. A summary statement on AFRI is included below. To learn more about AFRI programs, including program priorities, go to: <http://nifa.usda.gov/program/agriculture-and-food-research-initiative>.

AFRI Program Overview

The AFRI program is the largest agricultural competitive grants program in the United States and a primary funding source for research, education, and extension projects that bring practical solutions to some of today's most critical societal challenges. AFRI programs impact all components of agriculture, including farm and ranch efficiency and profitability, renewable energy, forestry, aquaculture, rural communities, human nutrition, food safety, biotechnology, and genetic improvement of plants and animals.

NIFA issues eight AFRI RFAs annually to solicit applications in the six statutory priority areas in AFRI (Plant health and production and plant products; Animal health and production and animal products; Food safety, nutrition, and health; Renewable energy, natural resources, and environment; Agriculture systems and technology; Agriculture economics and rural communities). These include six Challenge Area RFAs, which address the following major societal challenges: Sustainable Bioenergy; Climate Variability and Change; Water for Agriculture; Food Security; Childhood Obesity Prevention; and Food Safety. The Challenge Area RFAs solicit grant applications for focused problem-solving efforts and provide large awards (typically \$1 million or more) for periods of up to 5 years to enable collaboration among multiple organizations and the integration of research with education and extension. The seventh RFA is the Foundational Program RFA issued annually which solicits grant applications that focus predominately, but not exclusively, on fundamental scientific research that addresses statutory priorities. The final RFA is the AFRI Food, Agriculture,

Natural Resources, and Human Sciences Education and Literacy Initiative (ELI) RFA which solicits grant applications for undergraduate research and extension experiential learning fellowships, and pre- and post-doctoral fellowships.

Eligibility for Submitting Topics

Eligible commodity board entities are those established under a commodity promotion law (as such term is defined under section 501(a) of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (7 U.S.C. 7401(a))) or a State commodity board (or other equivalent State entity). Language in 7 U.S.C. 7401(a) defines a "commodity promotion law" as "a Federal law that provides for the establishment and operation of a promotion program regarding an agricultural commodity that includes a combination of promotion, research, industry information, or consumer information activities, is funded by mandatory assessments on producers or processors, and is designed to maintain or expand markets and uses for the commodity (as determined by the Secretary)." Section 7401(a) includes a list of such Federal laws.

The following Federally recognized commodity boards are currently eligible to submit topics under this provision: Beef Board, Blueberry Council, Christmas Tree Board, Cotton Board, Dairy Board, Egg Board, Fluid Milk Board, Hass Avocado Board, Honey Board, Lamb Board, Mango Board, Mushroom Council, Paper and Paper-Based Packaging Board, Peanut Board, Popcorn Board, Pork Board, Potato Board, Processed Raspberry Council, Softwood Lumber Board, Sorghum Board, Soybean Board, and the Watermelon Board, as well as the following marketing order boards: Oregon/Washington pears (fresh and processed), California olives, Georgia Vidalia onions, SE Washington/NW Oregon Walla Walla Valley sweet onions, Idaho/Oregon onions, Florida tomatoes, California almonds, Oregon/Washington hazelnuts, Riverside County, California domestic dates, and California raisins.

Additionally, entities eligible to submit topics include a State commodity board (or other equivalent State entity). This includes commodity boards authorized by State law; commodity boards that are not authorized by State law but are organized and operate within a State and meet the requirements of their authorizing statute; and commodity boards that are authorized by a State and operate within the State for

commodities that have no Federal program or oversight.

Topic Submission Guidance and Procedures

Topics may be submitted at any time and will be evaluated by NIFA on an annual basis. However, to be considered for the proposed fiscal year 2016 AFRI RFAs, topics must be received by COB (5 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time) on September 22, 2015.

Each topic proposed must be submitted as a separate PDF document that may not exceed 2 pages in length, using 12 point font. Submissions must include: A clear description of the proposed topic; the total matching contribution that will be made by the commodity board; and a justification that describes how the proposed topic supports a specific AFRI priority area. Commodity boards may propose support for multiple awards for each topic proposed. For each topic the commodity board proposes to support, the minimum amount they must provide is \$150,000 and the maximum amount is \$2.5 million total. NIFA does not intend to match funding from a single commodity board in excess of \$10 million in any year. Commodity boards should only submit topics that have a strong economic impact on their industry and U.S. agriculture as a whole. Examples of topics typically supported by AFRI can be found at <http://nifa.usda.gov/program/agriculture-and-food-research-initiative>.

If topics are accepted for funding, they will be incorporated into AFRI RFAs, and grants supporting the topic area may be awarded to AFRI eligible entities based on a competitive peer review process. As a condition of funding grants in a topic, NIFA will require an agreement to provide funds by the commodity board that is equal to the amount NIFA is contributing under the agreed upon topic. If a topic is selected for inclusion in an RFA, the commodity board submitting the topic will be required to maintain the confidentiality of the topic until the RFA is issued by NIFA. Commodity board funds will need to be made available to NIFA no later than the time awards are selected for funding. Applications submitted under topics provided by commodity boards will be required to include a letter of support from the commodity board that proposed the topic.

Evaluation and Notification Process

NIFA will screen proposed research topics to ensure they were submitted by eligible commodity boards and consult with USDA's Agricultural Marketing

Service (AMS) to determine that submissions and proposed financial contributions are consistent with commodity promotion laws and commodity boards' charters as applicable.

Commodity board topics will be reviewed by an internal panel based on evaluation criteria that were developed using stakeholder input from commodity boards and other stakeholders from government, industry, and academe. Each topic will be evaluated based on: Alignment with one or more of the statutory AFRI priority areas (six AFRI priority areas authorized in the Farm Bill and described in 7 CFR 3430.309); alignment with the President's budget proposal for NIFA, as identified in the Department of Agriculture's annual budget submission; and alignment with the priority areas in the AFRI RFAs to be released by NIFA during the fiscal year for which the commodity board is proposing a topic for funding (for example, within the AFRI Foundational Program RFA, the AFRI Animal Health and Production and Animal Product's "Animal Reproduction" priority area).

From those topics received by COB (5 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time) on September 22, 2015, NIFA will select the topic(s) that were evaluated the most favorably for inclusion in the appropriate FY 2016 AFRI RFA. NIFA will notify applicants whether their topics will be included by October 7, 2015. Based on the evaluation, NIFA reserves the right to negotiate with commodity boards should changes be required for topics and funding amounts to be accepted. Any changes to topics and funding amounts will be reviewed by USDA's AMS to determine if such changes are consistent with applicable commodity promotion laws.

NIFA will evaluate topics submitted after the September 22, 2015 deadline on an annual basis and notify commodity boards whether their topics will be included in subsequent RFAs within two weeks following the meeting of the internal evaluation panel, the date of which will be published on NIFA's Commodity Boards Web page at (<http://nifa.usda.gov/commodity-boards/>).

Done at Washington, DC this 17th day of July, 2015.

Sonny Ramaswamy,

Director, National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

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