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Understanding the Review Process

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Overview of the Competitive Grant Proposal Process

- Application Process
- Review Process
- Awards and Declines
- Post-Panel Administration

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Application Process

Request for Application (RFA)

- Posted to www.grants.gov
  Auto notification ?
  http://www.grants.gov/search/subscribeAdvanced.do
  (e.g. For AFRI RFA's, enter "10.310" for CFDA Number)
- Posted to NIFA website
  - ✓ www.nifa.usda.gov (link to "Grants" page)
- Project Directors submit Letter of Intent (LOI)
  - ✓ Only some programs require; if required, LOI mandatory to be able to submit full proposal; RFA for details

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Application Process

- Develop proposal following:
  - ✓ Specific program goals, priorities and published deadline
  - ✓ Guidelines provided in RFA

- Submit proposal electronically (www.grants.gov)
  - ✓ Highly recommend submitting at least 72 hr before deadline

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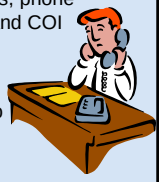
During the Review Process

- Contact NPL if you do not receive an e-mail within 4 weeks acknowledging receipt of your proposal
- Keep program updated of changes in address, phone number, status of other pending proposals, and COI status
- Wait for notification of funding decision based on initial NPL e-mail received that also overviewed anticipated timeline (contact NPL if deadline passes !)



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Competitive Peer Review Process

- Designed to be scholarly & fair:
  - → Review by peers & other experts
  - → Provide written & verbal evaluations

- Understand the review process for your specific program (research; education; extension; integrated) to prepare a competitive proposal
  - → Program-dependent evaluation factors are critical to the success of an application

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Review process is co-led by a National Program Leader (NPL) and a Panel Manager

- Organize and conduct review panel to assure fairness & rigorous evaluations
- Neither NPL nor Panel Manager influence the evaluation of any particular proposal

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Selection of the Panel Manager

- Established scientist, educator, or extension specialist
- Leader in the program's field of science, education or extension
- Knowledgeable of current trends & priorities in the scientific area
- Hired as part-time USDA employee (1-2 years)

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Role of Panel Manager & National Program Leader (NPL)

- Study proposals to evaluate expertise needs for thorough review of program applications
- Invite appropriate experts for review panel
- Assign proposals for peer-review:
  - Panelists: number depends on the program needs to cover portfolio of applications
  - External *ad hoc* reviewers (optional): number depends on program needs

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Panel Member Selection

- Active in Research, Education or Extension
- Balanced to represent breadth of proposals and applicants:
  - Discipline
  - Geography
  - Institution Size and Type
  - Professional Rank
  - Gender & Ethnicity

- Continuity: experience in the review process

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Role of Panelists

- Review up to 20 proposals; # depends on program (average ~12-15)
- Provide scientific, constructive & fair evaluation
- Protect confidentiality
- Avoid Conflict of Interest

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Protecting Confidentiality

- Proposal content and identity of applicant
- Reviewer identity
- Reviews (shared with PD only)
- Panel proceedings

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Avoiding Conflicts of Interest

- Advisors and advisees (lifetime)
- Collaborators and co-authors (3 years)
- Institutional
- Anyone who stands to materially profit from an award decision
- Other personal reasons defined by the reviewer

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Avoiding Conflicts of Interest (cont.)

- Applies to NPL, Panel Manager, panelists and *ad hoc* reviewers
- May not participate in any aspect of evaluation
- May not participate in decision regarding budget, project scope, or project duration

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Reviewer Evaluation of Proposals

Reviewers prepare written reviews
- Use evaluation criteria (from RFA)
- Address strengths and weaknesses
- Make suggestions for improvement

Reviewers provide individual summary rating
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

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Evaluation Criteria (*e.g.*, AFRI research proposals)

1. Scientific merit
2. Qualifications of project personnel, adequacy of facilities, and project management
3. Relevance and importance of topic to Agriculture and the program's priorities

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Evaluation Criteria for AFRI research

1. Scientific merit

- Novel, innovative, unique, original
- For model systems – ability to transfer knowledge to important agricultural organisms
- Conceptual adequacy of research
- Clarity, delineation of objectives

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Evaluation Criteria for AFRI research

1. Scientific merit (cont.)

- Adequacy of description and suitability / feasibility of methods
- Demonstration of feasibility through preliminary data
- Probability of success

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Evaluation Criteria for AFRI research

2. Qualifications of project personnel, adequacy of facilities, and project management

- Qualifications of PD and project team, including performance record – CV
- Awareness of previous and alternative approaches – pitfalls and limitations
- Institutional experience, competence
- Adequate facilities and instrumentation
- Planning and administration of project

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Evaluation Criteria for AFRI research

3. Project Relevance

- Relevant to program priorities in RFA

To yield improvements in:

- ✓ Agriculture,
- ✓ Human nutrition, food safety & quality,
- ✓ Environment, or
- ✓ Rural communities

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Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation Criteria for other proposal types differ:

- Integrated Projects
- Postdoctoral Fellowships
- Research Career Enhancement (Sabbaticals)
- Equipment Grants
- Seed Grants
- Conference Grants

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Review Panel Meeting

During panel meeting

- Primary reviewer summarizes proposal
- Primary, secondary, tertiary, etc. reviewers provide evaluation and critique in order
- *Ad hoc* reviews are summarized (if used)
- Response to last year's panel summary discussed for resubmissions
- Ratings available to all panelists (except those with COI)

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Review Panel Meeting

- Interactive Panel discussion
- Panel consensus and categorizing
  - Outstanding
  - High Priority
  - Medium Priority
  - Low Priority
  - Do Not Fund
  - Triage
- Prepare panel summary

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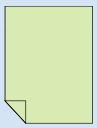
Preparation of the Panel Summary

- POSITIVE Aspects
- NEGATIVE Aspects
- SYNTHESIS



Panel Meeting: Final Day

Re-rank of proposals:

- Re-visit all categories
- Numerical ranking - usually only proposals ranked in top ~25%

Post-panel: Declined Proposals

- E-mail and/or letter from National Program Leader
- Return of:
  - Written reviews
  - Panel summary
  - Relative ranking

Post-panel: Recommended Awards

- Phone Call
- Return of:
  - reviews
  - panel summary
  - relative ranking (categorical ranking)
- Complete award paperwork

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Post-panel

- Panel Manager written report
  - → Recommendations for program enhancement
    - New topic areas; Improved review process/panel processes;
    - 'Hot topics' from awards for annual report;
    - Recommendations for future Panel Managers and panelists
- NPL
  - → Award administration
  - → Feedback and consultation on declined proposals
  - → Reporting success stories & highlights
  - → Program outreach & promotion

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THANK YOU
Very Much !