Understanding the Review Process

Overview of the Competitive Grant Proposal Process

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

Application Process

Request for Application (RFA)

- Posted to the CSREES website
  - www.csrees.usda.gov
  - link to “Funding opportunities” page

Project Directors (PD)

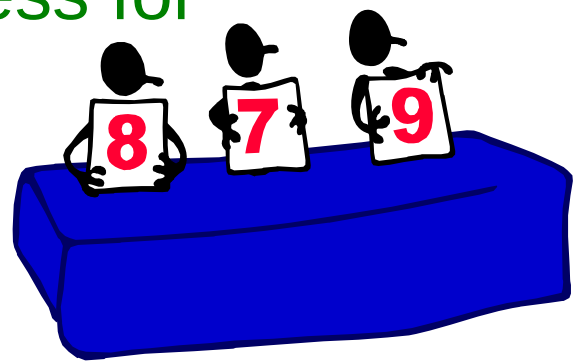
- Develop proposal in compliance with
  - Specific program goals and priorities
  - Guidelines provided in RFA
  - Submitted according to published deadlines, and electronically (if required) through www.grants.gov

Review Process

- Understanding the review process for your *specific program* helps in preparation of a more competitive proposal

- Review process is designed to be fair and unbiased

- Peer-reviewed competitive programs
  - Review by peers and other experts - provide written and/or verbal evaluations
  - Understand the review process for insight into your reviewers



- Evaluation factors are program-dependent and very important
  - Understand evaluation criteria before writing the proposal

Selection of the Panel Manager

- Active, established, scientist
- Part-time USDA employee (1-2 years)
- Duties and responsibilities:
  - Selects panelists
  - Assigns reviewers to proposals
  - Chairs the panel meeting
  - Assists NPL with budget decisions

Role of Panel Manager and National Program Leader (NPL)

- Study proposals
- Assign proposal for peer-review
  - 0 to 4 external *ad hoc* reviewers
  - 3 to 4 panelists - 1º, 2º, 3º, and ‘reader’

Role of Panel Manager and NPL (cont.)

- Assign proposals to review panelists
  - Expertise and experience to cover portfolio of applications
  - Diverse representation
- Organize and conduct review panel

Role of Panel Manager and NPL (cont.)

- Post-panel duties
  - Award administration
  - Feedback and consultation on declined proposals
  - Reporting success stories and highlights
- Program education and promotion

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

Role of Panelists

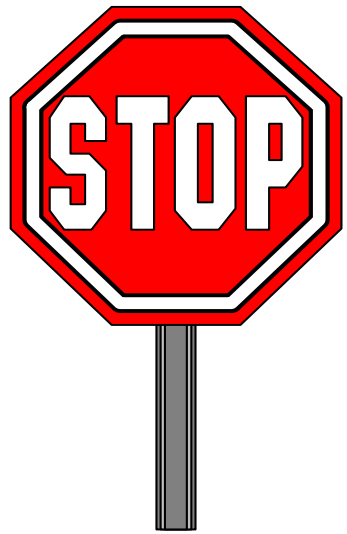
- Review 15-20 proposals
- Provide constructive and unbiased evaluation
- Protect confidentiality
- Avoid Conflict of Interests

Confidentiality

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

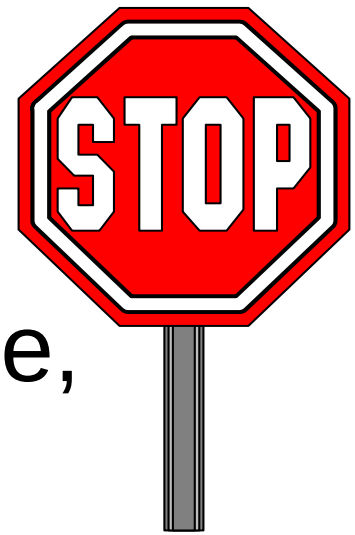
Conflicts of Interest

- Advisors and advisees (lifetime)
- Collaborators and co-authors (3 years)
- Institutional
- Anyone who stands to materially profit from an award decision



Conflicts of Interest

- 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



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

- Scientific merit
- Qualifications of project personnel, adequacy of facilities, and project management
- Relevance and importance of topic

Evaluation Criteria

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

Evaluation Criteria

Scientific merit

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

Evaluation Criteria

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

Evaluation Criteria

Project Relevance

- Relevant to program priorities in RFA

  To yield improvements in:

  - Agriculture,
  - Environment, or
  - Rural communities

Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation Criteria – will differ for:

- Integrated Project Proposals
- Postdoctoral Fellowship Proposals
- Research Career Enhancement Proposals
- Equipment Grant Proposals
- Seed Grant Proposals
- Conference Grant Proposals

Reviewer Evaluation of Proposals

Reviewers prepare written reviews

- Use evaluation criteria
- Address strengths and weaknesses
- Make suggestions for improvement

Reviewers provide summary rating

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Review Panel Meeting

During review panel meeting

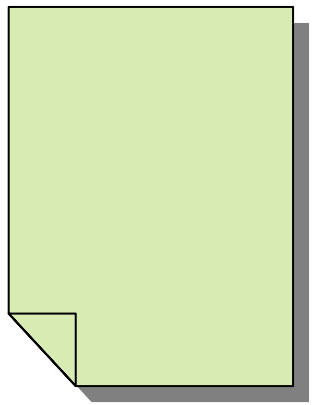
- Primary reviewer summarizes proposal
- Primary, secondary, and tertiary reviewers provide evaluation and critique in order
- *Ad hoc* reviews are summarized
- Ratings available to all panelists (except those with COI)

Review Panel Meeting

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

Review Panel Preparation of the Panel Summary

- **POSITIVE Aspects**
- **NEGATIVE Aspects**
- **SYNTHESIS**



Panel Meeting: Final Day

Re-rank of proposals:

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

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

Awards

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

Declined Proposals

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

CSREES Website:

www.csrees.usda.gov

Electronic Submission:

www.grants.gov