

Q&A Session: FFAR Seeding Solutions Program

Overview of the FFAR Seeding Solutions Program

The Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR) was established in the 2014 Farm Bill to address food and agriculture challenges. Seeding Solutions is an annual grant program supporting innovative research across four Priority Areas. The program encourages bold research proposals that can lead to practical solutions in agriculture. We award approximately 10 grants ranging from \$300,000 to \$1 million, with grantees required to provide matching funds through non-federal partners. See: [2024 Seeding Solutions Request for Applications](#).

Q&A

Q1: How does FFAR ensure its research investments are unique?

A1: FFAR works to complement, not duplicate, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) research agenda. This involves identifying and filling critical knowledge gaps and focusing on applied, actionable science that involves farmers and moves research from the lab to the field.

Q2: What are the four Priority Areas of FFAR?

A2: FFAR's four broad priority areas are below. See: [What We Do](#).

1. Sustaining Vibrant Agroecosystems
2. Cultivating Thriving Production Systems
3. Bolstering Healthy Food Systems
4. Strengthening the Scientific Workforce

Q3: What are the key themes within the Vibrant Agroecosystems Priority Area?

A3: The key themes include supporting pathways to adoption, developing capacity to inform agroecosystem decisions and catalyzing sustainable solutions.

Q4: What does the Thriving Production Systems Priority Area focus on?

A4: It focuses on advanced animal systems and next generation crops, enhancing crop resilience and productivity, integrating animal health and welfare, supporting economic development and upholding environmental sustainability.

Q5: What are the objectives of the Healthy Food Systems Priority Area?

A5: The objectives include optimizing health and nutrition through agricultural systems, supporting food manufacturing and processing to meet global sustainability objectives, ensuring economic viability and addressing environmental contaminants and pollutants.

Q6: What is the goal of the Scientific Workforce Priority Area?

A6: The goal is to expand the talent pool by attracting and retaining new talent in agricultural science.

Q7: What is the timeline for the Seeding Solutions Program?

A7: The key date to remember is July 31, which is the deadline to submit full proposals. The review process will take a few months, with award decisions expected by early December.

Q8: What are the major themes for evaluating full proposals?

A8: The major themes are:

1. Novelty, innovation and originality
2. Technical merit and feasibility
3. Impacts and outcomes
4. Partnerships

Q9: Is personnel salary considered a cash match?

A9: Yes, personnel salary is considered a cash match, as are any wages or professional time compensated by salary. See: [FFAR Matching Funds Guidelines](#).

Q10: Can cash match stay within the co-PI institution?

A10: Yes, cash match can stay within the co-PI institution. The lead institution must certify that the match was spent.

Q11: Must matching funds and FFAR grant funding be spent concurrently?

A11: They do not need to be spent dollar for dollar concurrently but there should be comparable amounts spent in FFAR and match funds throughout the project duration.

Q12: Does there need to be a written budget narrative for each year of the project?

A12: Yes, a budget narrative is required for the entire project duration, focusing on the goals, milestones and objectives.

Q13: What does the review process for proposals involve?

A13: The review process involves three stages:

1. External peer review of proposals
2. Evaluation by scientific advisory committees
3. Internal evaluation to ensure alignment with FFAR's priorities

Q14: Are current and pending support documents required?

A14: Yes, these documents are required as part of the application. They should be provided where prompted in the online application form.

Q15: Can we change the PI or co-PIs for our proposal?

A15: Yes, changes to the PI or co-PIs are allowed as long as the concept stays the same. Ensure the new personnel have access to the application system.

Q16: What is the page limit for bio sketches?

A16: The page limit for bio sketches is five pages per person. If needed, prioritize relevant projects and collaborators to stay within this limit.

Q17: What is the difference between a budget narrative and a budget justification?

A17: The budget narrative explains the project's goals, milestones and why the spending is needed. The budget justification provides detailed explanations for specific budget items, ensuring they align with the project's work plan.

Q18: Is there a competitive advantage to providing a higher cost share?

A18: While exceeding the one-to-one match requirement is valued, it does not directly affect the proposal's ranking. Proposals should focus on demonstrating strong partner engagement and alignment with research objectives.

Q19: Will FFAR reach out with additional questions during the review process?

A19: It is rare, but FFAR may ask for clarifying questions if needed.

Q20: Does the review process include an evaluation of the budget?

A20: Yes, reviewers will evaluate the budget narrative to ensure it aligns with the work plan and assess the feasibility and realistic expectations of the project costs.

Q21: What are the requirements for matching funds in the FFAR application process?

A21:

1. FFAR will not give an award if the match is not confirmed.
2. FFAR does not provide one-on-one support or matchmaking opportunities to find matching funders.
3. Match verification involves three steps:
 - Initially, a non-binding match verification letter from the matching funder is required when submitting the full proposal.
 - Upon selection for funding, a binding match commitment document is needed.
 - FFAR will check annually to confirm that the match is still in place.

Q22: Can FFAR help connect applicants with matching funders?

A22: FFAR cannot promise to connect applicants with matching funders. Applicants are encouraged to reach out to the relevant FFAR scientific program director for possible connections and support.

Q23: What are organizational assurances and how are they identified?

A23: Organizational assurances refer to additional ethical oversight required for projects involving human subjects, animal subjects, NEPA review, recombinant DNA, or hazardous materials. Institutions typically have an IRB (Internal Review Board) or IACUC (Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee) to handle these matters. If ethical oversight is needed, FFAR will work with applicants to ensure compliance.

Q24: How should an application that addresses multiple Priority Areas be handled?

A24: Applicants should choose the lead contact based on the most relevant Priority Area. FFAR collaborates closely within its teams, so choosing the wrong Priority Area will not penalize the application.

Q25: If a project involves human subjects but the testing is conducted by external collaborators, does it still need to be reported?

A25: Yes, the primary institution is responsible for ensuring ethical oversight for all sub-awardees or collaborators. The project should indicate involvement of human subjects, even if testing is done externally.

Q26: What are FFAR's historic funding rates for proposals?

A26: Historically, about 50% of pre-applications are invited to submit full applications, and 15-25% of those full applications are funded.

Q27: What should be included in the project description and justification attachment?

A27: The project description and justification should include a word-for-word reproduction of earlier application text boxes, along with equations, graphs, visuals and any other detailed information. This allows for a polished final version of the proposal.

Q28: Is USDA involvement considered beneficial in an application?

A28: While collaboration with USDA experts is valued, proposals within the Seeding Solutions program will not receive higher ranking solely due to USDA collaboration.

Q29: Can the PI's host institution provide cash match, and does external partner match affect proposal ranking?

A29: Yes, the PI's host institution can provide cash match. However, proposals with contributions from external partners typically rank higher than those with university-based match.

Q30: Is a matching funds contribution letter needed for internal funds?

A30: Yes, a matching funds contribution letter is required for both internal and external matching funds.

Q31: What is the difference between project funding overlap and current and pending support documents?

A31: Project funding overlap captures other times and places the PI or team members are working with FFAR. Current and pending support documents outline all active and pending support for the PI.

Q32: Can outreach be included in a proposal, and how is it evaluated?

A32: While FFAR does not fund purely outreach or education projects, outreach activities can be included if they are part of the project's research strategy. Such activities will be evaluated as part of the overall research project.

Q33: What is the role of the grants administrator in the application process?

A33: The grants administrator supports the PI in managing all non-scientific aspects of the project, particularly budgetary and logistical tasks. This role is crucial for preparing reports and ensuring compliance with institutional and FFAR requirements.

Key Takeaways & Conclusion

- Multistakeholder Collaboration: The idea of the public-private partnership match requirement is to ensure that we are supporting applied research that is relevant to agricultural management and decision making. While university match certainly fulfills our match requirements, your proposal will be strengthened if you can bring in representation or sponsorship from the agricultural community. This can include working with producers, industry, nonprofit organizations and others who have an interest in advancing our collective goals.
- Type of Research: We can only fund hypothesis-based research. We cannot fund implementation or outreach projects, nor can we fund model applications or development. We can fund projects that, for example, compare different outreach strategies to evaluate how best to create awareness, willingness or capacity to adopt a practice. In addition, we can fund modeling projects that explore underlying assumptions and help us understand the uncertainty of the model predictions, and where additional research is needed to strengthen those models.
- We are a Resource: We often find it most helpful to have one-on-one conversations to think about how applicants can adapt or present their projects in a way where it fits within our funding criteria.

Thank you to interested applicants for their insightful questions and engagement with the FFAR Seeding Solutions program. We are here to support applicants throughout the application process and look forward to collaborating on innovative solutions in food and agriculture.

For further questions, please contact FFAR's grant management team at grants@foundationfar.org.