



What Makes a Well-Conceived Project for Federal Help?

A successful federally funded project, whether a research, conservation, marketing or other proposal, is no different from any other good project.

- It has tightly defined purposes,
- a clear strategy to accomplish them,
- on a defined and realistic timeline,
- the people, money, and other resources needed to accomplish them,
- a basis for evaluating the process when done,
- and an effective means of communicating results to any audience that needs to hear them.
- Many projects are strengthened by thoughtfully built supporting coalitions.
- Good projects use existing resources to leverage additional ones. Funders often favor or require matches of funding as an indicator of local commitment to a project. Matches usually can be "in-kind" contributions (e.g., volunteer labor, existing equipment, etc.), as well as actual dollars ("cash match").

Prerequisites to Designing a Good Project

- Include only active stakeholders in the planning process.
 - Give yourself enough time. Setting project goals, objectives, strategies, timelines, budgets, evaluation processes, especially in a group, takes time.
 - Be sure to ask the right questions and answer them carefully.
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Questions to Consider in Developing a Project

- What's the problem you seek to address?
- Have other people, locally or elsewhere, addressed this problem? If so, what have you learned from their work, and how does your effort relate to theirs?
- Who else might be concerned about your issues? Should they be involved in your project? What will they contribute?
- What is your principal strategy to resolve that problem? Why is this strategy better than other approaches you might consider?
- What's a realistic timeline, for action?
- What resources do you need to implement your project? What resources can you and other stakeholders offer for a non-federal match?
- Would others profit from knowing about your initiative? If so, are they local, regional, national? What's the best way to get the word out to that audience?
- How will you measure and evaluate your project's outcomes? Keep in mind how to assess your work impartially against both your project's goals and its measurable objectives.

Finding Potential Funding - Understanding Federal Programs and Meeting Them Halfway

In assessing which federal programs, if any, can help achieve your goals, recognize that rarely are programs designed for needs precisely like yours. Instead of wasting your time chasing programs with incompatible goals or overlooking compatible ones, take time to research how well your project fits within various programs.

Using the call for proposals (RFP, NOFA, NOSA, etc.), program webinars and websites, designated program contacts, past grantees, MFAI's Guide to Federal Programs <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=279>, the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's Grassroots Guide to Federal Farm and Food Programs, <http://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/grassrootsguide>, the federal website www.grants.gov, and other resources to inform yourself:

- Think creatively and broadly about your project's needs. Problems for which you seek help from federal resources are often complex, and often more than one type of assistance may contribute to their solution.
- Identify programs with purposes and available resources suited to your project.
- Get information about past projects that programs have funded.
- Some questions to consider include:
 - What is a program's stated mission and objectives? Can you make a strong case that your project advances them? What projects has the program funded in the past? Does its form of assistance suit your needs?
 - What is a program's funding pool, average amount and duration of grants, percent of applicants who typically get funded? Is funding available up-front or (more typically) only on a reimbursement basis?
 - What are eligibility requirements, financial match requirements, and restrictions on a program's funding use?
 - Do a program's application deadlines and funding timeframes suit your project's needs? Does the program fund multi-year projects?
 - Do past grantees feel that a program's reporting requirements are reasonable and that the program is well-administered?

Submitting Successful Federal Applications...

Once you've designed a good project, prepare your proposal for submission so it has the greatest chance of being approved. Some things to consider:

- Read the Request for Proposals (RFP or NOFA, NOSA, etc.) at least three times! Pay close attention to format, funding match and other requirements.
- Give yourself enough time. Note that electronic submissions require some extra steps (DUNS # and SAMS registration) and can logjam at the end. Start early.
- Participate in any webinars about the RFP offered by the funding agency; sign up to receive any information, e.g., frequently asked questions (FAQ)s.
- Call the program staff contact if you have questions. Don't guess whether an RFP's language applies to you. Clarify by asking.
- Don't get overwhelmed; write a section at a time, and develop an outline with thinking points for each section before writing narrative.
- Explain early how your proposal addresses the agency/program's goals.
- Be precise and accurate; don't exaggerate the need or over-promise results.
- Use clear, concise language to make your application or proposal readable.
- Have it reviewed by someone whose editing skills you trust. Is it logical? Clear? Readable? Grammatical?
- Be sure your budget is accurate, clear, and accompanied by a budget narrative if you need to clarify any points you think could be misunderstood.
- Help collaborators write strong, individually-tailored letters of support, including each supporter's commitments. Offer thinking points or drafts for the letters.
- Be sure you understand the review process. Are reviewers just a few people, or a panel? What point values are assessed for each section of the application?
- If you're turned down by a program, find out why before writing another. **Don't be discouraged!** Readjust your proposal for each program to which you submit it.