

USDA Funding Priorities for Research

When developing a proposal to submit to a federal agency it is important to understand that agency's mission and strategies. In order to be a successful grantee, your research plan must address this focus. This article will focus on the United States Department of Agriculture and its funding agency, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

USDA's mission statement is, "We provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science and efficient management." USDA's Strategic Plan for 2010-2015 is to:

- Assist rural communities to create prosperity so they are self-sustaining, re-populating, and economically thriving;
- Ensure our national forests and private working lands are conserved, restored, and made more resilient to climate change, while enhancing our water resources;
- Help America promote agricultural production and biotechnology exports as America works to increase food security; and
- Ensure that all of America's children have access to safe, nutritious, and balanced meals.

In July 2008 NIH, NSF and DOE convened a committee to examine the current state of biological research in the US. The committee produced a report entitled "New Biology for the 21st Century." The committee outlined four challenges in food, environment, energy and health that could be tackled by the New Biology:

- Generate food plants to adapt and grow sustainably in changing environments
- Understand and sustain ecosystem function and biodiversity in the face of rapid change
- Expand sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels
- Understand individual health.

USDA's approach to this report was to establish within the Department of Agriculture an agency known as the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). One of NIFA's programs, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) is charged with addressing critical societal issues such as those identified in the "New Biology" report. In order to accomplish its strategic plan, AFRI is charged with funding research, education, and extension grants and integrated research, extension, and education grants that address key problems of national, regional, and multi-state importance in sustaining all components of agriculture, including:

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Farm efficiency and profitability	Ranching
Renewable energy	Urban and agroforestry
Aquaculture	Rural communities and entrepreneurship
Human nutrition	Food safety
Biotechnology	Conventional breeding

Providing this support requires that AFRI advances fundamental sciences in support of agriculture and coordinates opportunities to build on these discoveries. This will necessitate efforts in education and extension that deliver science-based knowledge to people, allowing them to make informed practical decisions.

To address these challenges AFRI has developed 5 priority areas in which RFAs are released to provide funding. Currently these areas are:

- Food Security and Hunger - boosts domestic agricultural production, improve capacity to meet the growing global food demand, and foster innovation in fighting hunger and food insecurity in vulnerable populations;

- Climate Change – helps producers adapt to changing weather patterns and sustain economic vitality while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing carbon sequestration in agricultural and forest production systems;
- Sustainable Energy – contributes to the President's goal of energy independence with a portfolio of grant programs to develop optimum biomass, forests, and crops for bioenergy production; and produce value-added bio-based industrial products;
- Childhood Obesity – ensures that nutritious foods are affordable and that individuals and families are able to make informed, science-based decisions about their health and well-being;
- Food Safety – works to provide a safer food supply and reduce the incidence of food-borne illness by addressing the causes of microbial contamination and antimicrobial resistance, educating consumer and food safety professionals, and developing enhanced food processing technologies.

Highlights:

- USDA is increasing its emphasis on interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary team approach research.
- If you are developing a proposal to one of these programs, make sure your proposal helps NIFA advance its priorities.
- 2012 AFRI RFAs are to be released (Look for them in your email August and October).
- Other RFA's will be released outside these programs.

For further information contact Sponsored Research Services: srs@wtamu.edu, (806)651-2984