



## **What Makes a Well-Conceived Proposal 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 favor and usually 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.

### **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 Proposal

- 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.

## Understanding Federal Programs and Meeting Them Halfway

In assessing which federal programs, if any, can help achieve your goals, recognize that few programs were 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.

- 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 whose purposes and available resources seem most suitable to your purposes.
- Get as much information as you can about past projects that programs have funded or collaborated with.
- Some questions to consider include:
  - What is a program's stated mission and objectives? What projects has it funded or collaborated with in the past? Is the form of assistance appropriate to your needs?
  - What is a program's funding pool, percent of applicants who typically get funded, average amount and duration of grants.
  - What are eligibility requirements, financial match requirements, and restrictions on a program's use? Is funding available up-front or (more typically) only on a reimbursement basis?
  - Are a program's application deadlines and funding timeframes appropriate to your project's timeline? 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 Federal Applications... an Emerging Art Form

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 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) at least three times! Pay close attention to format, deadline, nonfederal funding match and other stated requirements. Be willing to readjust your proposal for each program to which you submit it.
- Identify your central points to make, including how your proposal addresses a program's key goals.
- Be precise and accurate; don't be tempted to 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 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 by reviewers.
- Call the program staff contact if you have questions. Don't guess about what a RFP or NOFA's language applies to you. Clarify by asking.
- Make sure you understand the review process. Is it based on only a few people, or is it comprehensive? If the contact person makes funding decisions, get to know their preferences. Be pleasant and non-combative in discussing your project.
- If you've been turned down before by a program, find out why before writing another. **Don't be discouraged!!** Most successfully funded proposals are the result of some earlier failed attempts.