FY20 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

QUESTION: Where can I view the slide deck from the Solicitation Notice webinars?

ANSWER: The slide deck is available as a PDF on our website under the 'Resources for Applicants and Grantees' section: https://www.epa.gov/exchangenetwork/exchange-network-grant-program

QUESTION: How can I get further clarification on the Exchange Network grant program and, specifically, determine if my agency would meet the requirements to potentially qualify for funding.

ANSWER: Perhaps the best way to familiarize yourself with our program and determine if you would qualify as an applicant would be to attend one of our Solicitation Notice webinars. In support of the FY 2020 Exchange Network (EN) Grant cycle, the EPA will host four webinars to assist interested applicants. The webinars will be held on February 24th, February 26th, March 6th, and March 17th. Each webinar will include the same presentation on the following topics: a brief overview of the EN Grants Program and FY 2020 timeline, critical elements of the Solicitation Notice, notable changes from FY 2019, an overview of new guidance materials and optional templates, and common mistakes to avoid. This will be followed by a question and answers session with participants. Connection information on the webinars can be found at: https://www.epa.gov/exchangenetwork/exchange-network-grant-program.

Additionally, the Exchange Network website has some great information regarding the EN program, previously funded EN grant projects, and resources for potential applicants: https://www.epa.gov/exchangenetwork/exchange-network-grant-program

Finally, the Solicitation Notice offers the most comprehensive overview of the Exchange Network grant program, and is available on our website here: https://www.epa.gov/exchangenetwork/fy-2020-exchange-network-grant-solicitation-notice. The question of applicant eligibility is addressed in Section III-A (page 18) of the notice, and threshold criteria is described in Section III-B (page 19).

QUESTION: Can a state submit more than one proposal?

ANSWER: A state agency can submit more than one EN grant application, but please note that we generally do not award more than one grant to a single agency. Therefore, if multiple applications are submitted, they would likely be in direct competition with each other.

Please note that in recent years, due to high grant application volume, we limit successful grant applications to one per state, territory, or tribe. This is to ensure the greatest geographic distribution of grants awarded. Therefore, if multiple applications are received from the same state, territory, or tribe, the highest scoring application will be awarded the grant. In the case of a tie, the application which contains the highest incorporation of exchange network priorities will be awarded the grant.

QUESTION: Is there a limit to the amount of funding that can be awarded for each state?

ANSWER: For each applicant, there is a funding limit of $200,000 for an individual applicant and $400,000 for qualifying Exchange Network Partner Grants. In recent years, we have been receiving a high volume of grant applications and have been awarding one grant per state in order to achieve the maximum geographic distribution. Therefore, if a state's Department of Health and a state's Department of Natural Resources both submit an application, they may be in direct competition with each other. A few years ago, we actually had a single state submit 13 separate applications, of which only the highest scoring application was selected for funding. It may be beneficial for an applicant to coordinate across the state (or Tribe/territory) to determine who should apply for grant funding this year.

Please note that a state agency and a tribe located within the state's geographic boundaries would not be subject to geographic distribution, as tribes are separate governments.

QUESTION: Is the limit of four active grants by December 31, 2019 per state or per agency?

ANSWER: This limit is per agency.

QUESTION: Can a subawardees also be a partner?

ANSWER: Yes, a subawardees can also be an Exchange Network partner.

QUESTION: Can a state apply with another state, and qualify for the higher funding threshold?

ANSWER: Yes, absolutely.

QUESTION: Can the entirety of an EN grant be used to fund a contractor?

ANSWER: Yes, this is allowed under the EN grant program.

QUESTION: Does the title page of an application, listing agency, date, and amount, count as part of the ten-page limit? Should/can it be removed?

ANSWER: It depends on your definition of a 'title page'. If by 'title page', you are talking about the cover letter, this is one of your required attachments but is a separate document from your project narrative. As such, it does not count as part of the ten-page limit**.** The cover letter should be submitted with your application package using the 'other attachments' section of grants.gov, as opposed to the project narrative which comes through the 'project narrative attachment form'. However, if you are looking to add an index or outline as the first page of your project narrative, that would count against your total of ten pages.

QUESTION: You mention including key travel details, including mileage and cost per participant. What's the best way to handle travel cost estimates for the next three years (project period for the grant) when locations have often not been determined?

ANSWER: We encourage you to try your best to estimate these costs to the highest level of accuracy possible, although any discrepancy in cost will be eventually captured in a grantee's progress reports. Best practice would be to look at comparable trips that have happened in the past and base your travel estimates on this, allowing for a 10% increase per year to account for inflation.

QUESTION: Can you include a brief overview of how to properly indicate in the application particularly the budget section a partnership application between two states utilizing consultants that are the creators/maintainers of the system. The primary state is looking to customize and adopt, and the partner is looking for enhancements.

ANSWER: We can't talk directly to a specific project, but you'll need to note that this application involves partners as well as a contract (with related details). Within the budget, detail the associated costs for the contractor under the 'contractual' budget category. Similarly, anything that will be reimbursed for partners should be detailed, and these costs captured in the 'other' category as a subaward.

Please also note that, if you are working with partners and contractors, you need to detail all of that within your ten-page project narrative. Please read the solicitation notice carefully, specifically Appendix E, as this should be noted within several of the required sections of the project narrative.

Additionally, within our optional templates, we did try to include language that covers some of these scenarios – if you are working with partners, and/or contractors, and/or technology vendors. So this may also be a helpful resource to determine how best to capture the information appropriately.

As a final thought, we did have some applicants last year who had subawardees who were charging indirect costs. If you are working with partners who are charging this, this must be captured using the rate and base associated with their organization. So you would have to calculate both for yourself and for them separately, and capture that within your application.

QUESTION: I am applying as an Intertribal Consortia which directly involves 8 tribes, but also serves another 13 tribes who will be involved with the grant project. Under additional attachments, do you need me to collect a letter of approval from all our EN partners or just the eight tribes who our consortia serves?

ANSWER: Please collect a letter of approval from all our EN partners using AWQMS. The tribes that are going to be involved and/or benefit from the effort should be aware of the consortium's application and give their approval.

QUESTION: Do all ICR rates need to be good through September 30, 2020?

ANSWER: Yes, in order to successfully process the grants, applicants charging indirect costs need to include a Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate agreement that is valid through September 30, 2020, at a minimum. Tribal applicants have the option to include a draft version of the agreement, as has been submitted to DOI, as we know this process is often delayed. Alternatively, all applicants have the option to use a De Minimus rate of 10% if your current Indirect Cost Rate is expired. You can find additional guidance on this on page E-6.

QUESTION: Our organization is interested in two projects that together would total less than $200,000. Would it be possible to submit an application for two unrelated projects? If yes, do we submit one application or two separate applications?

ANSWER: EN grant applicants can apply under one or multiple Exchange Network priorities, or one or more funding opportunities, within a single application. Applicants are encouraged to specifically state which EN priorit(ies) they are applying under within the 'Project Description' section of their project narrative, as well as in their cover letter. Please note that this combined application should address all of the information outlined in Appendix E, including what is listed under each of the Project Narrative Sections, for both projects while adhering to applicable page limits and guidance.

QUESTION: In addition to providing information on previous EN grants the agency has received, Section 8 of the Optional Project Narrative Template asks for information on all non-EN EPA assistance agreements (grants, cooperative agreements, etc.) awarded to the agency since 2017. I would like clarification of the start date for "since 2017." Does this mean any grant with an award date of January 1, 2017 or later?

ANSWER: These requirements refer to Fiscal Year 2017 which began October 1, 2016. All applicants should clearly indicate in this section whether they have received a prior non-EN EPA assistance agreements (grants, cooperative agreements, etc.) awarded to the agency since October 1, 2016.

QUESTION: How can I be added to your email list and also receive information on upcoming webinars?

ANSWER: To stay connected and receive general EN updates, including our webinar schedule, please sign up for EN Alerts at https://www.exchangenetwork.net/news/. After clicking this link, click the green box near the top right of the webpage that says '*Sign up for EN Alerts*'. Each year, once we set the dates for our webinars, we use this EN Alert feature to send out the dates, times, and connection information. We also include this information on our website: https://www.epa.gov/exchangenetwork/exchange-network-grant-program.

QUESTION: My agency is designated as the state geologic survey. Like many other state surveys, we are under a university. We are non-regulatory, but we do provide basic research and data collection in collaboration with several of our state agencies. We also lead on a new law that requires that all state water data are shared and made interoperable. It seems that many of our goals align with priorities of the EN. But I'm not clear if we are an "instrumentality of the state"?

ANSWER: In order to qualify as an 'instrumentality of a state', applicants must provide a letter in their application from the appropriate state Attorney General certifying the applicant's status as an instrumentality of the state.

QUESTION: Where can we find additional information on Identity Management, page B7 of the FY2020 NEIEN Solicitation Notice?

ANSWER: Please click the link http://www.exchangenetwork.net/EN2015_files/4.3.pdf to view the Enterprise Identity Management presentation from the EE 2015 meeting , and visit the www.exchangenetwork.net for additional information.

QUESTION: We currently submit our air data to AQS through our node using OpenNode2. I was told recently that in order to upgrade our node that we would need to upgrade from .Net2 to .Net4, which would essentially require a new server. I realize that I cannot apply for funds for maintenance of an existing flow; however, we are considering applying for a grant to flow radon data through our existing node via OpenNode2. If we apply for a grant to put a new flow into operation, can we apply for funds for a new server? I was considering using VES to flow radon data, but the VES decision flow chart does not recommend using VES if we do not already have our radon data in a relational database, which we do not.

ANSWER: This is potentially an approvable request as we have funded similar projects in the past. However, we will also take into consideration your specific proposed project goals and objectives, so we encourage you to throughly read the Solicitation Notice before drafting your application.

QUESTION: Regarding the 'Project Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes' section of the Project Narrative, and more specifically the optional template of this section on pages H-1 and H-2, the suggested text describes project goals, outputs, and outcomes, followed by Table 1 which describes the same thing, just in less detail. Are both the **Project Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes Section** *and* Table 1 required, or just one or the other?

ANSWER: Section Two: Project Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes is a required section of the Project Narrative. The table, which is provided in this section's optional template, is not mandatory but it is a recommended way to display *some of the information* that should be provided in this section. Similarly, the other language found in this section's optional template is also recommended to be included, as it incorporates other subjects/details that also factor into an applicant's score.

That said, we want to stress that using the provided templates is not mandatory; rather, these are tools provided to suggest a way in which the applicant can include and detail the information that should be covered in that section. Applicants are encouraged to read the detailed Project Narrative description on pages E-3 and E-4, as well as the Evaluation Criteria on pages 24-27 and the checklist tool on page F-1, for a full understanding of what should be covered in the project narrative.

QUESTION: Instead of using the table template as shown on page H-2, can I use the following table format instead?

Table 1. Goals, Outputs, and Outcomes		
Goal 1: [Name the Goal]		
Output	Scheduled Completion Date	Output Budget
Output 1.1: [Enter Output]	[Enter Date]	$ [ ]
Output 1.2: [Enter Output]	[Enter Date]	$ [ ]
Output 1.3: [Enter Output]	[Enter Date]	$ [ ]
		Total Goal Budget: $[XX,XXX]
Outcome(s): [Enter outcome(s) from this goal/the outputs listed]		
Goal 2: [Name the Goal]		
Output	Scheduled Completion Date	Output Budget
Output 2.1: [Enter Output]	[Enter Date]	$ [ ]
Output 2.2: [Enter Output]	[Enter Date]	$ [ ]
Output 2.3: [Enter Output]	[Enter Date]	$ [ ]
		Total Goal Budget: $[XX,XXX]
Outcome(s): [Enter outcome(s) from this goal/the outputs listed]		

ANSWER: Please note that the use of the table format on Solicitation Notice Page H-2 to display the elements of the detailed work plan is not mandatory for any applicant; however, the information contained in this table does factor into an application's score. As such, we highly recommend displaying the information as clearly as possible and have provided the table template on page H-2 to suggest a way for applicants to do that. The revised table, as displayed above, also works fine, as it includes the same information and displays it clearly and in detail.

QUESTION: If a service is not registered in SSRC, how do I capture this within Project Narrative Section 5-Commitment to Reuse?

ANSWER: Within Section 5 of the project narrative, 'Commitment to Reuse', applicants are asked to list the products/services they will be reusing. The optional template on page H-4 of the Solicitation Notice also provides the following text: "*Note: If no products have been identified for reuse in this project, applicants should explain in detail why this is the case. Additionally, applicants should note the reuse of any project-appropriate tools and shared services not registered in SSRC/EECIP and explain where this schema/code/product was located."* Per the guidance, please list the product/service you intend to reuse, and explain your knowledge of the service/product given that it is not something currently registered in SSRC.

QUESTION: Can I include a figure for workflow in the narrative?

ANSWER: The inclusion of a figure for workflow in the project narrative is allowable. Please place this within Section 6 of the Project Narrative: 'Technical Understanding' (see SN pages E-4 for more details on this section). If this figure takes up too much of the 10-page limit in the project narrative, however, the figure could instead be attached in the application package as an additional attachment. Please note that if this is the case, reviewers would not look at this document during application scoring. Panel reviewers will only review and score the cover letter and project narrative.

QUESTION: We have a current rate as approved by the Department of Energy that expires June 30, 2020. My manager told me that I would need to use the new rate since the current one would expire before grant money could potentially be awarded. Can I use the current rate even though that agreement expires this June?

ANSWER: Per EPA's guidance proposed rates do not qualify as approved IDC rates, and recipients must not draw down IDCs without an approved IDC rate in place. However, if an applicant has submitted a proposed rate to its cognizant agency, EPA requires the inclusion of IDCs in the budget of the award, subject to adjustment once the proposed rate is approved. With the exception of exempt governmental agencies, applicants must demonstrate to EPA that they have submitted proposed IDC rates to their cognizant agencies prior to award, in order for IDCs to be included in the budget.

QUESTION: We are currently looking to partner with another state and were just wondering if we each need to submit a cover letter, or if we can have a joint cover letter with our partners?

ANSWER: Per the Solicitation Notice, applicant cover letters should come from the lead applicant. The cover letter should include the names of all formal partners. Please refer to the cover letter template in Appendix G for formatting and suggested language. The application package must also include a letter of support from all formal partners.

QUESTION: I am preparing a grant application for the 2020 Exchange Network Grant and am having trouble finding out whether my organization has an indirect cost rate on file, and if not, how I apply for an IDC agreement. Additionally, what happens if I don't receive my new rate by the application due date?

ANSWER: If you do not have a previously established indirect cost rate, you must prepare an indirect cost rate proposal in accordance with 2 CFR 200 Subpart E, "Special Considerations for States, Local Governments and Indian Tribes." Submit your indirect cost rate proposal to:
National Business Center
Indirect Cost Services
U.S. Department of the Interior
2180 Harvard Street, Suite 430
Sacramento, CA 95815-3317

If you choose to submit a proposal, please provide a copy of documentation showing that you have submitted an indirect cost rate proposal to your cognizant agency for approval with your application. The proposal must be for the current fiscal year. Documentation should consist of a copy of the cover letter for your submission and a copy of the page showing what rate you are proposing. You do not have to submit the entire proposal with your application.

QUESTION: I don't see a format provided for letters of support from partners. Do you have a template we can use?

ANSWER:
EPA does not have a template for the Letter of Support. You are welcome to use the format below.

[Insert Organizational Letterhead]

[Date]

[Name, Organization, and Address]

[Salutation]

The [Name of Department or Agency] supports the proposal to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that will allow [brief description of work to be accomplished].

Funding for this project will allow [brief description of project goals]. Once implemented, [brief description of outcomes].

Sincerely,
[Provide contact information]

QUESTION: On the attachment 'List of Prior EN Agreements',

(a) The content of this attachment overlaps with Section 8 of the narrative. Is it ok to be brief in the Narrative Section 8 and point to the attachment for details?

(b) Also we are listing EPA EN agreements from 2011 onwards (not from 2002 onwards) given our collective knowledge. Is that ok or do we need to look up on the EPA EN website for potential agreements we may have received from 2002-2011?

ANSWER: Per the Solicitation Notice, applicants should list and explain pertinent budgetary information in their Overview of Project Budget. You must at a minimum provided a description of cost associated with the budget items listed under the Narrative Section #7. All other cost associated with the award may be addressed in your budget narrative. All staff members who will be paid with grant funds under the Personnel cost category must be identified in your application.

QUESTION: On the attachment 'budget narrative attachment template',

(a) Given the details requested in the budget attachment, is it ok to provide a brief summary of the budget under the Narrative Section #7 and point to the budget attachment? This would be useful to meet the 10page limit.

(b) The template provided in the budget narrative attachment form requests a lot of specific details. Is the level of details by individual staff necessary to be addressed at this time? Or is a break down by goal/output adequate? If you need this for each individual staff, this will require a lot of time to pull together and take up a lot of space given that our partnership grant will likely directly fund some time for about 15 staff of different agencies/tribe plus participating of bios mainly via cost-share (e.g. the template requests information by each staff: staff position by title, current annual salary, pct of time of each staff dedicated to the project, benefit rate etc.)

ANSWER: Please provide a brief description of all past awards in the Project Narrative. There is a past performance section of the Project Narrative and also a related additional attachment. Please list a detailed description of all grant agreements as an additional attachment, as it will not count against the page limit requirements for your Project Narrative. If you have received prior Exchange Network grants you are required to provide a list of previously awarded assistance agreements since 2002. Additionally, applicants should identify any tools, resources, services and/or dataflows they have registered in RCS/ENDS/SSRC, produced by EN grant funds since 2011. Please look up on the EPA EN website for potential agreements you may have received since 2011 to ensure you have registered all applicable components.