

Drivers and Environmental Impacts of Energy Transitions in Underserved Communities Request for Applications (RFA)

Informational Webinar Questions and Answers

February 10, 2022

Principal Investigators (PIs)/Applicants

- 1. Can you submit a proposal for both the regular and the early career applications? Or can you only be a PI on one total application?**

Answer: If you are eligible for the early career award, you may submit an application for both an early career and regular award, as long as each application is distinct.

- 2. On an application, can there be only one PI per university or only one PI for the project?**

Answer: There should be only one lead PI on the application. Each application can also have co-PIs from the same applicant institution or other institutions.

- 3. Can a PI be from a state agency?**

Answer: Yes, PIs from state and local governments are allowed to apply as described in Section III. A. of the RFA.

- 4. For the early-career application, can there be a co-PI that has tenure?**

Answer: The RFA does not exclude an investigator who is tenured, but as stated in the RFA summary, "It is expected that the majority of the research will be performed by early career investigators. Further, it is expected that significant resources will be allotted to early career investigators to perform the research."

- 5. Can an EPA employee be part of the project as a co-PI or advisor?**

Answer: No, EPA employee participation is not allowed.

- 6. For the regular award, is the PI required to hold a doctoral degree?**

Answer: No, the RFA does not contain any such requirement. However, please note that the qualifications of the PI and research team are part of the peer review criteria as stated in Section V.A. of the RFA.

- 7. Does only the PI need to submit the proposal if there are many universities involved?**

Answer: The lead institution on the application should submit the proposal. Please note that the lead PI must be associated with the institution submitting the proposal.

- 8. Do early career proposals require only one PI?**

Answer: No. However, there must be a single lead PI.

- 9. Are you treating all sub-awardees as Co-PIs?**

Answer: It is up to the applicant to determine whether they want to list sub-awardee employees as co-PIs or as other important research personnel.

- 10. Are Sam.gov registrations required for individual PIs or their institutions?**

Answer: Applicant institutions should be registered in Sam.gov, not individuals.

11. If non-governmental organizations are co-PIs, do they need to be registered at Sam.gov?

Answer: No, organizations of co-PIs do not have to be registered. Only the lead institution submitting the application needs to be registered at Sam.gov.

12. Are there limits to how many projects a faculty member can join?

Answer: No.

Eligibility

13. Can a university partner with a non-profit community-based organization and a for-profit utility company?

Answer: Nonprofit organizations are eligible, but any for-profit company would have to be a consultant on the project. Consultants are not to be listed as PIs. Applicants may include letters of support or intent from consultants. The RFA does not direct or prohibit applicants from mentioning the names of potential consultants. In addition, the RFA does not contain a numerical limit on funds to be directed to consultants, though applicants should make clear that the PIs can perform and direct the proposed work. Please note, the applicant must follow competitive procurement procedures as outlined in the “Budget Justification” section (Section IV.C.7.b.(6)) to include consultants in the research.

14. Can a university partner with a national lab, with the lab scientist as a co-PI or senior personnel?

Answer: Universities may partner with national labs, but certain restrictions apply. Please see Section III.A of the RFA, including:

National laboratories funded by Federal Agencies (Federally-Funded Research and Development Centers, “FFRDCs”) may not apply. FFRDC employees may cooperate or collaborate with eligible applicants within the limits imposed by applicable legislation and regulations. They may participate in planning, conducting, and analyzing the research directed by the applicant, but may not direct projects on behalf of the applicant organization. The institution, organization, or governance receiving the award may provide funds through its assistance agreement from the EPA to an FFRDC for research personnel, supplies, equipment, and other expenses directly related to the research. However, salaries for permanent FFRDC employees may not be provided through this mechanism.

Federal Agencies may not apply. Federal employees are not eligible to serve in a principal leadership role on an assistance agreement. Federal employees may not receive salaries or augment their Agency’s appropriations through awards made under this program unless authorized by law to receive such funding.

The applicant institution may enter into an agreement with a Federal Agency to purchase or utilize unique supplies or services unavailable in the private sector to the extent authorized by law. Examples are purchase of satellite data, chemical reference standards, analyses, or use of instrumentation or other facilities not available elsewhere. A written justification for federal involvement must be included in the application. In addition, an appropriate form of assurance that documents the commitment, such as a letter of intent from the Federal Agency involved, should be included.

15. Can individuals from academia partner with other consultants?

Answer: A lead institution from academia may propose consultants on their application, but the applicant must follow competitive procurement procedures as described in Section IV.C.7.b.(6) of the RFA. Consultants are not to be listed as PIs or co-PIs.

16. Can the research team have people from different organizations?

Answer: Yes.

17. Can you please clarify how a Federal Funded Research Development Center (FFRDC) can be involved?

Answer: As noted in Section III.A of the RFA, Federal Funded Research Development Center (FFRDC) employees may collaborate with eligible applicants within the limits imposed by applicable legislation and regulations. They may participate in planning, conducting, and analyzing the research directed by the applicant, but may not direct projects on behalf of the applicant organization. The institution, organization, or governance receiving the award may provide funds through its assistance agreement from the EPA to an FFRDC for research personnel, supplies, equipment, and other expenses directly related to the research. However, salaries for permanent FFRDC employees may not be provided through this mechanism.

Please email josephson.ron@epa.gov if you have specific questions about your situation.

18. Can consultants submit for this award?

Answer: No.

19. Are Postdoctoral Scholars eligible (i.e., untenured but without Professorship appointment)? Can a non-tenure track assistant professor apply?

Answer: For the early career application, the PI must be employed in a tenure track position such as an assistant professor or equivalent title. They can apply as a tenure track equivalent but must meet conditions stated in Section III.A of the RFA. Note that universities may have their own restrictions on whether post-doctoral researchers can be PIs on grant proposals.

20. Can a not-for-profit utility (e.g., coop, municipal) be a sub-awardee?

Answer: Please see Section III.A. of the RFA for definitions on what kind of nonprofit organization may apply.

21. Can a for-profit utility be an unfunded collaborator?

Answer: Applicants may include letters of support or intent from for-profit organizations. Applicants may also accept assistance from for-profit organizations, such as facility access, samples, etc. While the RFA does not describe specific limits on non-compensated corporations, please contact us if you have specific questions concerning the permitted role of such companies in the research.

22. Can a single state agency or group of agencies apply?

Answer: There are no restrictions on the number of state agencies that can apply together, but there must be one agency listed as the lead applicant.

23. Can public, not-for-profit utility providers (Community Choice Aggregators) apply?

Answer: The organization must meet the definition of a non-profit as defined in Section III.A. of the RFA.

Award Information

24. When can we expect a decision? When is the earliest and latest possible start date?

Answer: We expect to announce awards in winter 2022-2023 or spring 2023. The only restriction on the possible project start and end date is that the project period should be four years or less.

25. Is this a new RFA and does EPA have a list of projects previously funded on this topic? Or on closely related topics?

Answer: This is a new RFA. We have funded projects under RFAs with similar topics. You can search for funded grants under [research recipients](#) and [research results search](#). You can also find links to previous RFAs on our [Past Research Funding Opportunities page](#) as each RFA page provides a link to grants funded under that RFA.

26. How many grants will be awarded to early career applicants?

Answer: We estimate funding six regular and five early career awards, but this depends on the number, type, and quality of applications we receive and the availability of funding.

27. Is a letter of interest required before the application is due?

Answer: No, this is not required.

Research Areas

28. Should we try to prioritize letters of support from the energy industry? Will it improve the competitiveness of an application?

Answer: It depends on how much involvement the industry has with your research. You can have as many letters of support as you want for your research, but each letter should be less than one page.

29. Is research area #1 of the RFA given a higher priority in funding than research area #5 or are the numbers not a ranking?

Answer: No, they are not ranked. All research areas listed in the RFA are of equal interest to EPA.

30. Is it advantageous to address many different research areas vs. only 1 or 2?

Answer: There is no definitive advantage for addressing many vs. one or two research areas. Applications will be reviewed based on the criteria stated in the RFA, including the peer review (Section V.A) and relevancy review (Section V.B) criteria.

31. For research area #1, can we focus only on public health, or must we also focus on air quality?

Answer: Applications should address all parts of the chosen research areas. Air quality is included in research area #1. How well the proposed research addresses the research area is included in peer review criteria #2 (responsive criteria).

32. Can two separate applications focus on the same study area if the environmental problems, such as health effects of air pollution, are similar, but the research questions are different?

Answer: Yes, if the research questions in each application are distinct then the applications would be considered distinct.

33. Can we focus on one energy sector, or should we include all energy sectors in the application?

Answer: There is no limitation on the number of energy sectors addressed in an application. Most importantly, your proposed research must address the research area(s) you select.

34. Can a new technology development be part of the proposed project?

Answer: Yes, as long as it addresses the research area(s) you select in the RFA.

35. Is there any guidance on research proposals involving ongoing EPA civil rights probes?

Answer: We do not have restrictions in proposals that are related ongoing civil rights probes., nor do we have guidance on research proposals involving ongoing EPA civil rights probes.

Populations/Communities of Interest

36. How do you define and evaluate "underserved communities"?

Answer: This is defined in the "Synopsis of Program" section of the RFA:

For purposes of this competition and the evaluation of applications, "underserved communities" refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, including people of color, low income, rural, tribal, indigenous, and other populations that may be disproportionately impacted by environmental harms and risks."

37. Is there a programmatic focus on research focusing on domestic vs international populations?

Answer: Research should focus on U.S. populations, including Tribal nations.

38. A problem I see with the application requirements....Seems you want white collar, over educated, desensitized individuals who have been educated by institutions of higher learning that subscribe to the status quo. That and the requirement of groups that can apply, as described above, equates to big moneyed NGO's who are actually fronts for special interest and/or are anchored atop the fence. Where is the opportunity for the folks on the ground? Who are directly in harm's way?

Answer: This solicitation is only a small part of a much broader EPA effort on environmental justice. EPA does have other grants programs that provide funding to more on-the-ground efforts, such as the Environmental Justice Small Grants Program and other programs described at <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-grants-funding-and-technical-assistance>. Links to information on specific EPA grants program are also available at <https://www.epa.gov/grants/specific-epa-grant-programs>.

This solicitation is part of EPA's Science to Achieve Results (STAR) program, which is a program for research grants. The eligibility is dictated by federal laws that give EPA statutory authority to fund research grants. As part of the EPA's mission to protect human health and the environment, this particular program engages in the space of science and engineering research. As a small part of EPA's broader effort, we believe funding research that requires researchers to partner with communities, community-based organizations and/or tribes will help to advance solutions to achieve environmental justice.

As noted in Section I the RFA, EPA recognizes that it is important to engage all available minds to address the environmental challenges the Nation faces. At the same time, EPA seeks to expand

the environmental conversation by including members of communities which may have not previously participated in such dialogues to participate in EPA programs. For this reason, EPA strongly encourages all eligible applicants identified in Section III, including minority serving institutions (MSIs), to apply under this opportunity.

39. Does the RFA and your effort overall address the advantages that larger institutions who are better staffed, better resourced, and better funded may have over smaller, under-resourced community-based organizations, most of which are geographically located within these disadvantaged communities?

Answer: The purpose of the Science to Achieve Results (STAR) research grants program is to capitalize on scientific and engineering expertise of academic and nonprofit institutions to address research challenges relevant to EPA's mission by funding research projects that are chosen through a competitive process and that focus on research in environmental and human health concerns. Within the scope of the STAR program, we believe that funding research that requires researchers to partner with communities, community-based organizations and/or tribes will help to advance solutions to achieve environmental justice.

As noted in Section I the RFA, EPA recognizes that it is important to engage all available minds to address the environmental challenges the Nation faces. At the same time, EPA seeks to expand the environmental conversation by including members of communities which may have not previously participated in such dialogues to participate in EPA programs. For this reason, EPA strongly encourages all eligible applicants identified in Section III, including minority serving institutions (MSIs), to apply under this opportunity.

40. Do you prioritize certain characteristics of being an underserved community more than others?

Answer: No.

41. Are underserved communities restricted by their geographic location? For example, can the obese community or a collection of formerly redlined communities be part of the focus as underserved?

Answer: Please see the following excerpt from the "Synopsis of Program" section of the RFA:

For purposes of this competition and the evaluation of applications, "underserved communities" refers to populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, including people of color, low income, rural, tribal, indigenous, and other populations that may be disproportionately impacted by environmental harms and risks."

42. To what extent does the grant allow flexibility for research questions and plans to allow for different directions based on tribal priorities?

Answer: The tribal engagement process would be considered part of the research plan, and the research plan would be evaluated by the peer reviewers according to criteria described in Section V.A of the RFA.

Budget/Funding

43. Can some portion of the budget be for community engagement stipends?

Answer: Yes, you can include participant support costs in your budget and/or funding to community organizations through subawards.

44. Can part of the budget be used towards the purchase of renewable energy or energy efficiency equipment (e.g., heat pumps, solar panels) for a community-initiated/owned project?

Answer: Yes, provided it is necessary to the proposed research.

45. What is the correct rate for indirect costs for applicants at universities?

Answer: There is no correct rate for indirect costs. An indirect cost rate agreement is negotiated between an institution and the federal government. Please ask your institution's sponsored research program (or equivalent) office.

46. Is there a limit on the number of community organizations for the engagement portion of the project?

Answer: No, but it is based on the budget and should have a coherent research plan.

47. Can funding be for electrification and energy efficiency upgrades?

Answer: Yes, if it is part of your proposal to address one or more of the research areas listed in Section I.D of the RFA.