United States Department of Agriculture

Conservation Innovation Grants:

Writing a Compelling Proposal

August 2022
CIG Webinar

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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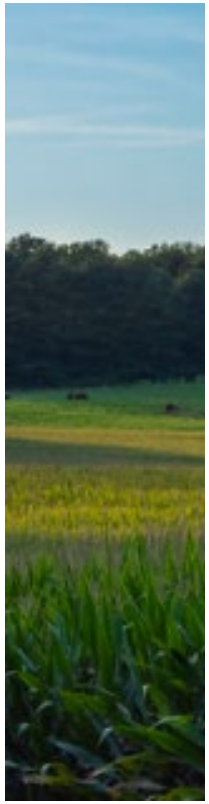
What are Conservation Innovation Grants?

- Federal grant program operating since 2004
- Awards funding annually through two programs: CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials
- The On-Farm Trials component, introduced in 2018, supports more widespread adoption of innovative approaches, practices, and systems
- Funds innovation that addresses natural resource challenges on working agricultural lands
- Priority areas change annually according to evaluation of conservation innovation needs



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What Are the Different Types of CIGs?

National CIG "Classic"

- Supports the development of new tools approaches, practices, and technologies to further natural resource conservation on private lands

On-Farm Trials:

- Supports more widespread adoption of innovative approaches, practices, and systems

State CIG:

- Similar overall goals to CIG "Classic" but posted individually by states; priorities may be different

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Who Can Apply?

CIG Classic:

All non-federal entities, including individuals. This may include:

- Colleges/universities
- Nonprofits
- For-profit entities
- Agricultural Producers
- Tribal entities

On-Farm Trials:

Private entities, *except* individuals, whose primary business is related to agriculture

Non-governmental organizations with experience working with agricultural producers

Non-federal government agencies

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Which Program Do I Apply To?

CIG Classic:

Award Ceiling: $2 million
Award Floor: $300,000

1-3 year projects

Must involve EQIP-eligible producers

1:1 match

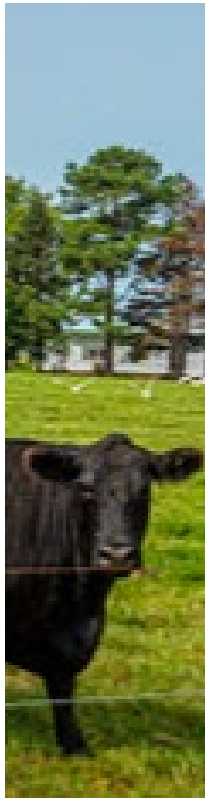
On-Farm Trials:

Award Ceiling: $5 million
Award Floor: $250,000

3-5 year projects

Must include incentive payments made to participating producers; individuals may not apply

4:1 match



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What Are We Funding in 2022?

CIG Classic:

Climate-Smart Agriculture:

1) Producer Adaptation to extreme weather events
2) Building resilience through emerging production systems for climate smart agriculture

Combating Invasive Species

Conservation in Urban Agricultural Systems

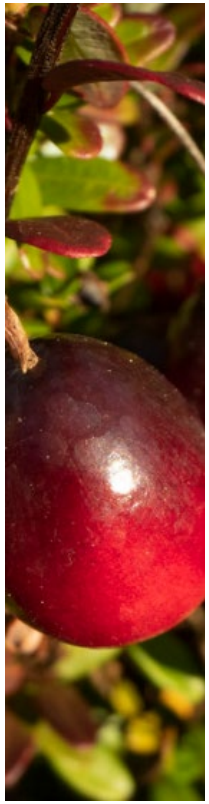
On-Farm Trials:

Irrigation Water Management Technologies

Climate Smart Agriculture Solutions (non soil health focused)

Nutrient Management

Soil Health Demonstration Trial



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Anatomy of a CIG

What we're looking for…

- Projects that are *innovative*. What can this bring to the field of conservation that is new?
- Projects *on private working land* that involve EQIP-eligible producers
- Projects that are *transferrable*. When this project is over, can NRCS and/or other producers use what was learned?
- Projects that *address a significant need in the field of conservation*. What impact will this have?
- Proposals that are well-constructed
- Projects involving partnerships with other organizations

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Evaluating CIG Applications: Merit Criteria

All CIG proposals are evaluated against technical criteria:

OFT:

Purpose, Innovation, and Scientific Approach

Project Management

Evaluation Approach

Project Outcomes

CIG Classic:

Purpose, Approach, and Goals

Innovative Technology or Approach

Project Management

Benefits and Transferability

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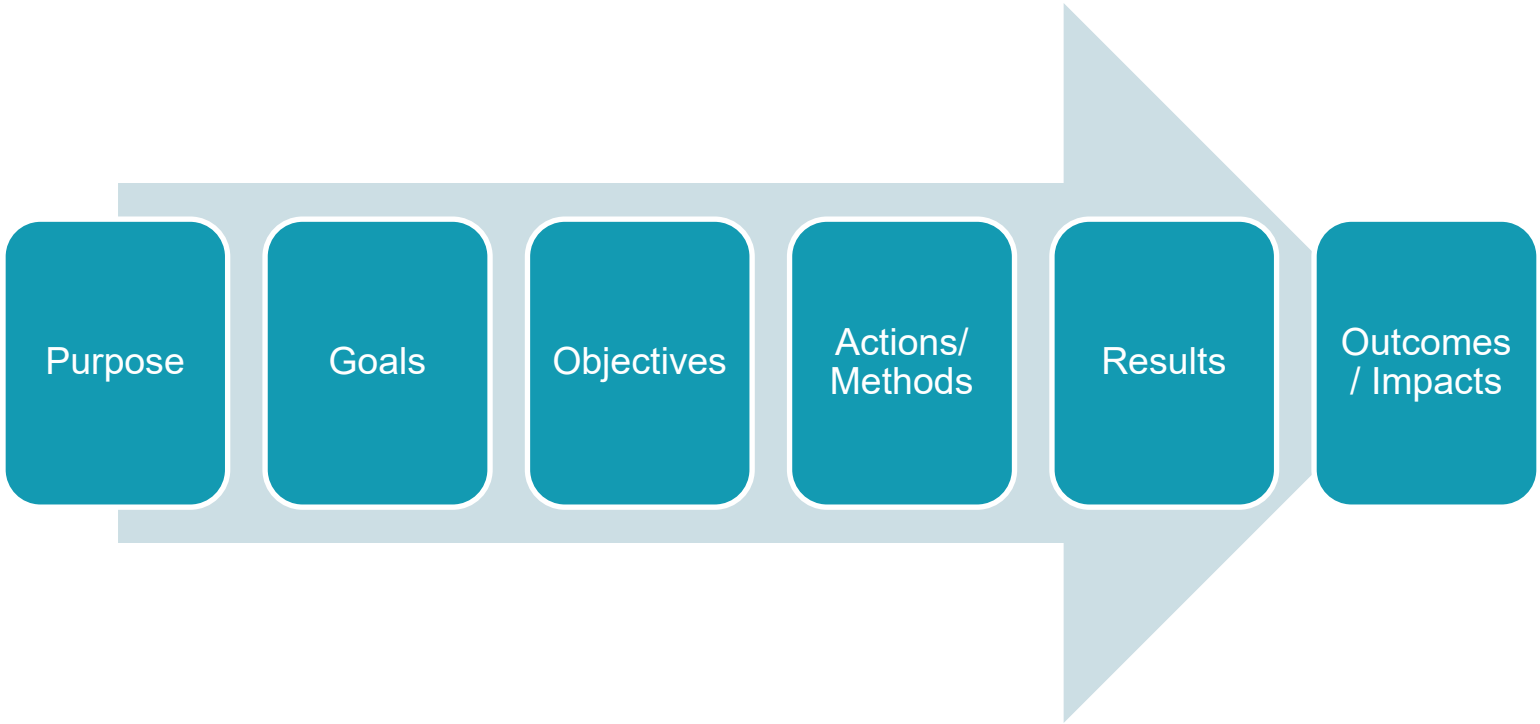
Telling the Story of Your Project

Consider a logic model or other similar approach to explaining the relationship between your goals, objectives, and anticipated outcomes



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What Is Innovation?

Is your project innovative?

- Uses technology/approach studied sufficiently to anticipate success
- Demonstrates, evaluates, and verifies the effectiveness, utility, affordability, and useability of the approach
- Adapts and transfers conservation technologies, management, practices, systems, and approaches that encourage adoption
- Introduces proven conservation technologies to a new geographic area or sector

Does the application describe the compelling need for the innovative technology or approach?

What problem are you trying to solve,
How is your approach innovative, and
Why is this innovation needed?

Writing Objectives: SMART

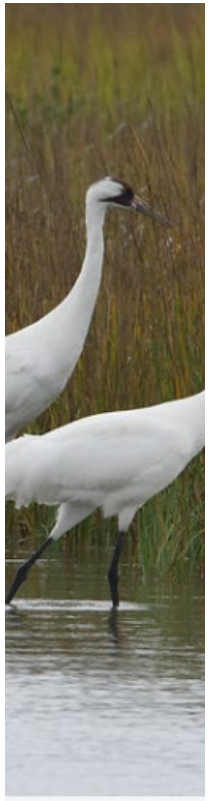
Specific: *What exactly, and concretely, is this objective meant to achieve?*

Measurable: *How will you know you have achieve this objective?*

Actionable/Attainable: *Project staff has necessary technical and administrative expertise. Budget is adequately explained and justified; expenses are allowable, allocable, and reasonable. Project includes robust partnerships with entities that can substantially assist with outcomes.*

Relevant: *Your objectives help you accomplish your goal, and are directly related to the purpose of the project.*

Time-Bound: *Timeline and milestones are clear and reasonable.*



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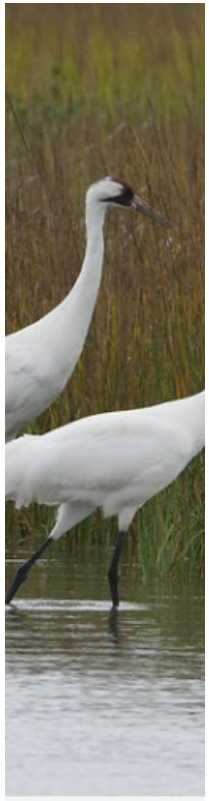
Project Management

- You should have a *clear plan* for accomplishing activities, milestones, and deliverables.
- Your milestones and deliverables should support the goal and objectives of the project.
- Your timeline should be realistic and reasonable.
- Your *budget* should be reasonable, realistic, and detailed, and include adequate match.
- Your *plan for communicating* with partners, your project team, the public, participating producers, and NRCS should be clear.



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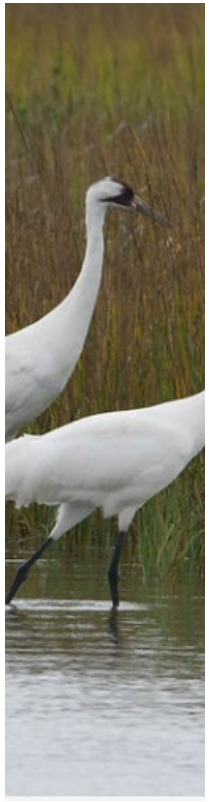
Budget

- Include a *written narrative* providing a complete description of all line items
- Also include a budget table summarizing your narrative.
- Your SF424, SF424a, budget table, and budget narrative should all agree



Sample “personnel” budget item narrative:

Tom Smith, Project Director, full time, annual salary $89,000, 70% paid by Federal funds, will advise the project team, assist with demonstration plot establishment, data collection and analysis, and participate in project field days.

Year 1: $62,300 Year 2: $64,169 Year 3: $66,094

Mary Johnson, research technician, 20% time, $55,000 annual salary, 50% paid by Federal funds. Establish the field and demonstration plots, function as the project manager, coordinate sub-award work, draft reports and publications, and participate in all project field days.

Year 1: $5,500 Year 2: $5,665 Year 3: $5,835

Total Personnel Year 1: $67,800 Year 2: $69,834 Year 3: $71,929

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Sample Budget Table

FEDERAL BUDGET					
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total	
Personnel	$86,880	$86,880	$86,880	$260,640	
Name of team member	$45,000	$45,000	$45,000	$135,000	
Name of team member	$15,000	$15,000	$15,000	$45,000	
Name of team member	$26,880	$26,880	$26,880	$80,640	
Fringe	$22,882	$22,882	$22,882	$68,645	
Faculty	$21,000	$21,000	$21,000	$63,000	
Students	$1,882	$1,882	$1,882	$5,645	
Travel	$3,360	$6,750	$6,750	$16,860	
Plot prep and data collection	$3,000	$3,000	$3,000	$9,000	
Demo plot overnight trips	$360	$360	$360	$1,080	
Conference trips	$0	$3,390	$3,390	$6,780	
Supplies	$4,000	$4,000	$3,000	$11,000	
Field Supplies	$3,000	$3,000	$2,000	$8,000	
Lab Supplies	$1,000	$1,000	$1,000	$3,000	
Contractual	$83,000	$85,500	$85,500	$254,000	
Contractor Name	$73,000	$73,000	$73,000	$219,000	
Contractor Name	$0	$2,500	$2,500	$5,000	
Contractor Name	$10,000	$10,000	$10,000	$30,000	
Other	$6,000	$7,000	$7,000	$20,000	
Testing and analysis	$5,000	$5,000	$5,000	$15,000	
Publication and copying	$1,000	$2,000	$2,000	$5,000	
Indirect	$51,243	$52,400	$52,204	$155,847	
See NICRA (X%)	$51,243	$52,400	$52,204	$155,847	
TOTAL	$257,365	$265,412	$264,216	$786,992	48%

NON-FEDERAL BUDGET					
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total	
Personnel	$60,000	$60,000	$60,000	$180,000	
Name of team member	$45,000	$45,000	$45,000	$135,000	
Name of team member	$15,000	$15,000	$15,000	$45,000	
Fringe	$21,000	$21,000	$21,000	$63,000	
Faculty	$21,000	$21,000	$21,000	$63,000	
Contractual	$105,000	$107,000	$107,000	$319,000	
Contractor Name	$50,000	$52,000	$52,000	$154,000	
Contractor Name	$10,000	$10,000	$10,000	$30,000	
Contractor Name	$45,000	$45,000	$45,000	$135,000	
Other	$46,120	$46,120	$46,120	$138,360	
General services	$5,000	$5,000	$5,000	$15,000	
Land rental	$1,120	$1,120	$1,120	$3,360	
Legal Fees	$40,000	$40,000	$40,000	$120,000	
Indirect	$47,500	$48,000	$48,000	$143,500	
See NICRA (X%)	$47,500	$48,000	$48,000	$143,500	
TOTAL	$279,620	$282,120	$282,120	$843,860	52%

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Benefits and Transferability

- You have a clear and thorough evaluation plan and can describe how the results will be transferred.
- There is potential for producers and landowners to use or participate in the innovative technology/approach
- There is potential for organizations to benefit from the innovative approach
- The approach or technology has potential to be transferred to a broader audience, including greater geographic area or agricultural sectors
- Potential transferability to historically underserved and rural producers, communities, and/or municipalities

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Required Application Components

1) Cover Page – includes key elements to help us readily understand/identify your application

2) Abstract – one-page project synopsis

3) Project Narrative – read the NFO and include ALL required elements

4) SF424 – this is your OFFICIAL application for this grant and MUST be included and signed by your AOR

5) SF424a – this is a synopsis of your budget. The total MUST match the request on your SF424

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Required Application Components

4) Budget Narrative and Table – Detailed account of how you will spend project funds and match.

5) Letters of Commitment – Signed and specific, what those providing match are committing to

6) Letters of Support

7) Certification and Disclosure Regarding Lobbying

8) NICRA/De Minimus

9) Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest (if applicable)

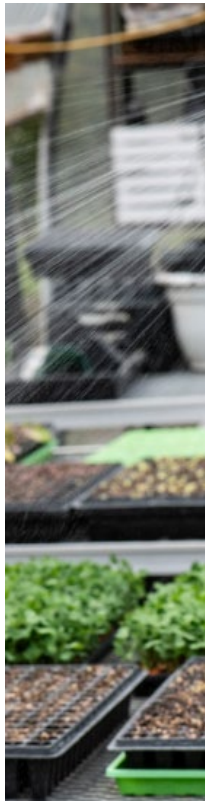
Examples of Funded CIG Classic Projects

***Ugly to Beautiful: Changing the Visual Acceptability of Cover Crops*, National Wildlife Federation.**

This project will develop and test a multi-faceted media campaign to build supportive social and visual norms around soil health practices to see if farmer attitudes about conservation shift. The project will inform on farmer perspectives and improve farmer outreach/education efforts.

***Low-Tech Process Based In-Stream Structures to Increase Climate Resiliency in the Great Plains*, Juniper Environmental, LLC**

Extreme weather in the Great Plains has led to increased stream erosion, aquifer depletion, decreased pasture quality and a reduction in quality wildlife habitat. By studying the effects of implementing low-tech process-based structures such as human-made beaver dams in the Midwest, this team will determine how best to implement these structures as a tool for producers in the Great Plains.



Examples of Funded On-Farm Trials Projects

***Climate-Smart Irrigation for Drought, Fertility, and Structural Resilience in Almond Systems*, UC Davis**

UC Davis and Fresno State will partner with growers to evaluate deep root irrigation, pressure compensated subsurface drip irrigation, and Hybrid Pb cover crops. On-farm trials will assess and extend biogeochemical, economic, and ecological benefits and tradeoffs for these practices as well as soil health outcomes.

***A Colorado Soil Health Program: Supporting Producers and Conservation Districts to Improve Drought Resilience and Water Utilization*, Colorado Department of Agriculture**

The Colorado Department of Agriculture will encourage the widespread adoption of soil health practices across Colorado to achieve water quality, water conservation and on-farm economic benefits. This on-farm trial will create healthy resilient soils through the provision of technical assistance, incentive payments and market opportunities to producers.

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CIG and HU Farmers and Ranchers

CIG projects that qualify as serving or supporting HU groups receive the following benefits:

1. Earmarked Funds

   At least 10% of the national funds available for CIG Classic and On-Farm Trials are set aside for proposals from HU producers and organizations serving HU groups

2. Reduced Matching Requirements

   - CIG recipients normally must provide a non-Federal funding match or cost-share amount from outside organizations at least equal to the amount of Federal funding requested (1:1 match)
   - Entities competing for HU funding qualify for a lower matching fund requirement. In some cases, match may be waived completely

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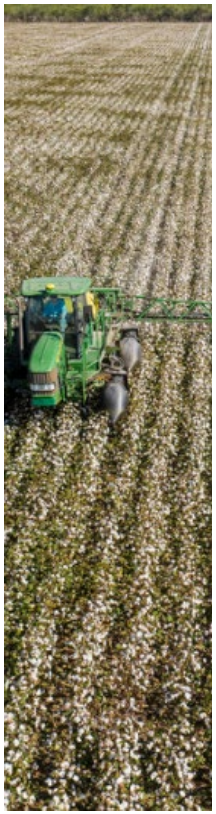
Historically Underserved Producers

Some producers are defined as “Historically Underserved” (HU) because of historic underrepresentation in and access to USDA funding and programs.

NRCS includes the following groups of farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners in its definition of Historically Underserved:

Beginning
Socially Disadvantaged
Limited Resource
Veteran



Evaluating CIG Applications: HU Criteria

Additional HU Criteria (All Proposals):

CIG Classic:

The project meaningfully includes the participation of historically underserved (HU) producers and will benefit HU producers and landowners.

On-Farm Trials:

The proposal includes a plan for the substantive participation of HU producers.

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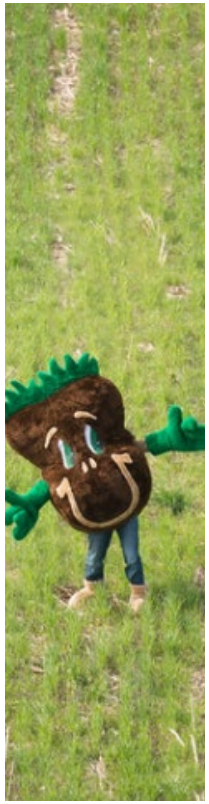
Final Notes and Tips

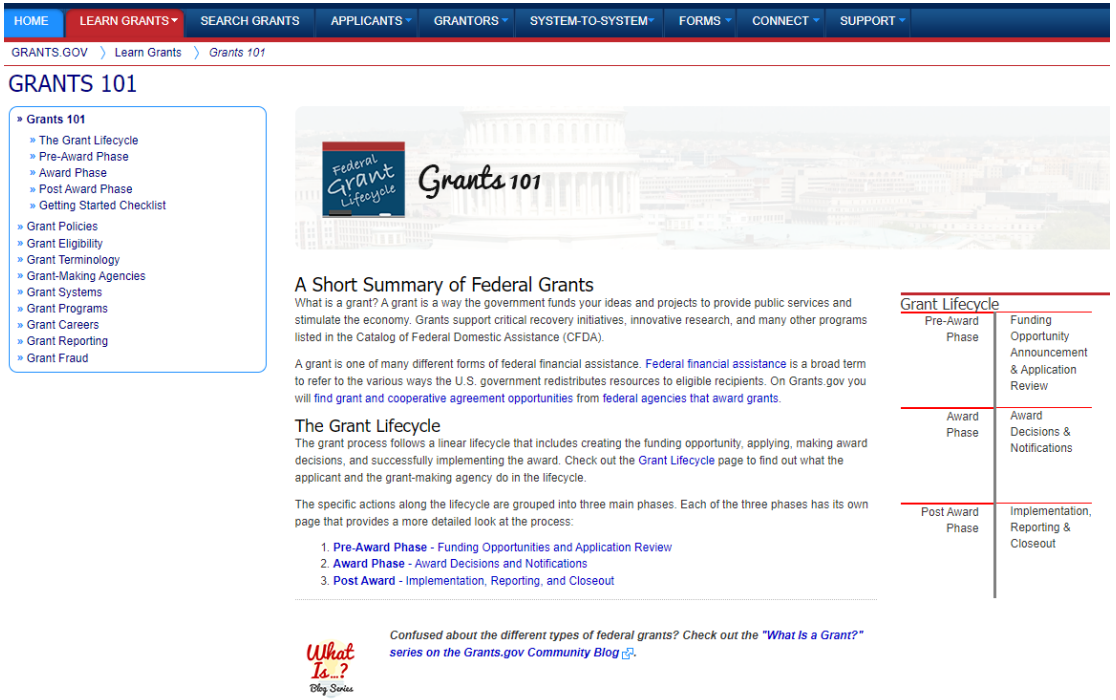
- Read the NFO! Then, read it again! All required documents and narrative section are…required!
- Set a reminder for the deadline…there are no extensions
- Make sure the connection between your project and the priority area under which you are applying is clear and persuasive
- Be realistic! Remember, your ability to manage the proposed project is a major component of our evaluation of your proposal
- Write *enough detail* that technical experts can “dig in”, but in *plain enough language* that generalists understand your proposal
- Get feedback on your proposal before submitting it and proofread carefully! Seek out an experienced grant-writer’s advice if possible



More Grant Writing Resources

- Mississippi State University, in partnership with the USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement, has a detailed Grants Writing Workshop available for those seeking federal funding opportunities. (http://srdc.msstate.edu/community-prosperity/grants-participant)

https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/learn-grants/grants-101.html



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Submitting Your Application: Resources

- All announcements will be posted on Grants.gov *and* on our NRCS program page. (http://www.grants.gov/; https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/cig/)

- The NFO is your best resource for understanding what is needed for a competitive application. Read it carefully!

- Applicant webinars are held each year to further describe the programs and this year's priorities. You can view the most recent webinars, and find announcements for any upcoming ones, on our home page.

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Contact Us!

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