Notice of Funding Opportunity
Specialty Crop Research Initiative
Pre-Applications

FUNDING YEAR:	Fiscal Year (FY) 2026
PRE-APPLICATION DEADLINE:	June 15, 2026
ANTICIPATED AVAILABLE FUNDING:	$175,000,000
ASSISTANCE LISTING NUMBER:	10.309
FUNDING OPPORTUNITY NUMBER:	USDA-NIFA-SCRI-011676

ANNOUNCEMENT
National Institute of Food and Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture

Assistance Listing. The Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) is listed in the Assistance Listings under number 10.309.

Table 1. Key Dates and Deadlines

Task Description	Deadline
Application:	5:00 P.M. Eastern Time, June 15, 2026
Letter of Intent:	Not Required
Applicants Comments:	Within six months from the issuance of this notice. (NIFA may not consider comments received after the sixth month.)

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to the extent permitted by law, will no longer make grants or otherwise fund programs or activities that improperly discriminate on the basis of race or sex, including discrimination in the name of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies. Instead, USDA will prioritize merit and efficiency. USDA recognizes programs and initiatives will have the greatest impact when these programs and initiatives put American farmers, ranchers, and foresters first by:

- solving the most pressing challenges they face;
- protecting America's food, fuel, and fiber supply to enhance national security;
- supporting production of healthy and safe food for consumers;
- expanding and developing domestic markets;
- training the next generation of agriculturalists; and
- fueling innovation to keep American farmers at the forefront of productivity.

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) is committed to advancing these principles and encourages applicants to actively engage farmers, ranchers, and foresters when applying for funding opportunities to ensure relevancy and adherence to them. NIFA also encourages agricultural leaders to engage in the peer review panel process to ensure American producers are better served through research, education, and extension activities.

Projects submitted under this Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) should align with USDA Secretary's Memorandum 1078-020 *Directive on Departmental Research and Development Priorities:*

1. Increasing Profitability of Farmers and Ranchers
2. Expanding Markets and Creating New Uses of U.S. Agricultural Products
3. Protecting the Integrity of American Agriculture from Invasive Species
4. Promoting Soil Health to Regenerate Long-Term Productivity of Land
5. Improving Human Health through Precision Nutrition and Food Quality

Stakeholder Input. NIFA considers comments to the extent possible when developing NOFOs and uses comments to help meet the requirements of Section 103(c)(2) of the Agricultural

Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 (7 U.S.C. 7613(c)(2)). Applicants may submit written comments to Policy@usda.gov using the following subject line: Response to SCRI NOFO.

Centers of Excellence. Center of Excellence designation cannot be requested during the pre-application phase of SCRI.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The amount available for support of this program in FY 2026 is approximately $175,000,000.

This notice identifies the objectives for SCRI projects, deadlines, funding information, eligibility criteria for projects and applicants, and application forms and associated instructions. NIFA requests pre-applications for the SCRI for FY 2026 to solve critical United States specialty crop issues, priorities, or problems through the integration of research and extension activities that use systems-based, transdisciplinary approaches.

The intent of the SCRI program is to address the needs of the various specialty crop industries through the promotion of collaboration, open communication, the exchange of information, and the development of resources that accelerate application of scientific discovery and technology. The priorities of SCRI reflect the needs of the specialty crops industries.

The intent of this program is not to fund start-up businesses; however, a small business may apply. Projects must address only scientific research and extension activities. A small business must not propose technical assistance, demonstration projects, classified research, or financial assistance to start, create, or expand a company or submit patent applications.

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TABLE OF KEY INFORMATION

PART I. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

A. Legislative Authority

The SCRI was reauthorized by Section 7305 of the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018, which amends Section 412 of the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act (AREERA) of 1998 (7 U.S.C. 7632). Section 412 of the AREERA of 1998 established a specialty crop research and extension initiative to address the critical needs of the specialty crop industry by developing and disseminating science-based tools to address needs of specific crops and their regions. Section 7306 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 added a requirement that, in addition to the scientific peer review NIFA regularly conducts, a panel of specialty crop industry representatives review and rank SCRI applications for merit, relevance, and impact. The regulations for SCRI may be found in Subpart F of 7 CFR part 3430.

B. Purpose and Priorities

In FY 2026, applicants will compete for the SCRI program in two stages. Applicants will be required to submit a pre-application containing a Stakeholder Relevance Statement (SRS). The content required in an SRS is described in Part IV § B of this NOFO. Panels of industry representatives from various specialty crop sectors will conduct a review of the pre-applications and submit recommendations about which applicants should be invited to apply in the full application process. NIFA will provide details of the full-application process to invitees in a separate NOFO. Review criteria for the SRS can be found in Part V § A of this NOFO.

The purpose of the SCRI program is to address the critical needs of the specialty crops industries (as defined in Appendix III) by awarding grants to support research and extension that address key challenges of national, regional, and multi-state importance in sustaining all components of food and agriculture, including conventional and organic food production systems. The program recognizes that for some specialty crops that are grown in a limited number of states, the multi-state nature of projects can be difficult to address. Except for Research and Extension Planning Projects, the SCRI program only considers projects that integrate research and extension activities. Applicants are strongly encouraged to propose a unique approach to solving problems facing the specialty crop industry using a systems approach.

The philosophy of the SCRI program is: Truly effective, long-term solutions to specialty crop industry challenges can best be achieved by understanding and treating those problems as complex systems of many interacting components. This perspective requires projects that are larger in scope and complexity, and that demand more resources than have traditionally been allocated to individual research and extension projects. In doing so, projects should focus on entire primary systems, including the production system, the processing and distribution system, and the consumer and marketing system, (as defined in Appendix III) or on areas where two or more primary systems overlap.

Meeting the challenges faced by these industries can best be handled by considering the full breadth of system components, rather than treating each component in isolation and ignoring important interactions and conflicts among components that may reduce the viability of component-specific solutions in the long term.

SCRI addresses USDA Research and Development Priority 1: Increasing Profitability of Farmers and Ranchers by creating a special emphasis on the development of automation, artificial intelligence, mechanization, and sensors (AAIMS) to reduce the amount of labor needed to propagate, plant, grow, and harvest specialty crops. NIFA intends to award no less than $20 million to projects that work directly with specialty crop growers, shippers, and processors to address these areas.

Specialty crops are defined in law as fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, and horticulture and nursery crops, including floriculture. USDA developed a detailed definition of specialty crops that is now in use by USDA agencies. Collectively, these crops face many challenges. The SCRI program seeks to address these challenges by funding systems-based, transdisciplinary approaches (as defined in Appendix III). It is anticipated that successful applications will:

1. Engage stakeholders in collaborative ways to identify priorities of greatest need;
2. Bring together multi-state, multi-institutional teams of biological, physical, and social scientists to develop strategies and actions emphasizing systems-based, transdisciplinary approaches for meeting the identified priorities;
3. Address priorities through research and extension;
4. Present plans for documenting the impacts of funded applications that include stakeholder involvement; and
5. Include explicit mechanisms to communicate results to producers and the public.

The SCRI program has five legislatively mandated focus areas to address the critical needs of the specialty crop industry by developing and disseminating science-based tools to address needs of specific crops and their regions, including the following:

1. Research in plant breeding, genetics, genomics, and other methods to improve crop characteristics, such as:
    a. Product, taste, quality, and appearance;
    b. Size-controlling rootstocks for perennial crops;
    c. Environmental responses and tolerances;
    d. Nutrient management, including plant nutrient uptake efficiency;
    e. Pest and disease management, including resistance to pests and diseases resulting in reduced application management strategies; and
    f. Enhanced phytonutrient content.
2. Efforts to identify and address threats from pests and diseases, including:
    a. Threats to specialty crop pollinators;
    b. Emerging and invasive species; and
    c. A more effective understanding and utilization of existing natural enemy complexes.
3. Efforts
    a. To improve production efficiency, handling and processing, productivity, competitiveness in trade, and profitability over the long term (including specialty crop policy and marketing); and
    b. To achieve a better understanding of
        i. The soil rhizosphere microbiome;
        ii. Pesticide application systems and certified drift-reduction technologies; and

iii. Systems to improve and extend the storage life of specialty crops.

4. New innovations, data-driven predictive tools using Artificial Intelligence, and technology, including:
    a. Mechanization and automation of labor-intensive tasks in production and processing;
    b. Technologies that delay or inhibit ripening;
    c. Decision support systems driven by phenology and environmental factors;
    d. Improved monitoring systems for agricultural pests;
    e. Effective systems for pre-harvest and postharvest management of quarantine pests; and
    f. Cybersecurityinovations to protection the data and operations of speciality crops systems.
5. Methods to prevent, detect, monitor, control, and respond to potential food safety hazards in the production and processing of specialty crops, including fresh produce.

NIFA will address all focus areas by funding projects that emphasize systems-based, transdisciplinary approaches. In addition, for the purposes of this program, NIFA interprets new innovations and technology to include, among other things, automation, robotics, sensor technology, and precision agriculture that can be made scale-appropriate for all specialty crops operations. NIFA also recognizes the importance of specialty crops in enhancing human nutrition and health.

PART II. AWARD INFORMATION

A. Available Funding

The amount available for SCRI in FY 2026 is approximately $175,000,000. The SCRI pre-application process does not result in award recommendations. However, an estimate of project costs is required. Applicants must use the information in Part II § B of this NOFO to develop the estimate.

B. Project Types

The SCRI program offers four Integrated Project types and must include Research and Extension components. All projects are expected to address one or more of the legislative priorities listed in Part I, B. Applicants should decide which project type is best suited to the objectives of their research and extension project and develop a preliminary budget that fits the objectives. Applicants are discouraged from developing a project (and selecting a project type) based on a budget request target. The four SCRI project types are:

1. *Coordinated Agricultural Projects (CAP)*
    a. Project Period – Up to five years.
    b. Budget – Normally, federal funds will not exceed $2,000,000 per year. Budgets in excess of $2,000,000 per year will be considered for projects addressing the AAIMS special emphasis.
    c. Purpose – To address specific multiple components of a primary system or multiple components of areas where primary systems overlap.
    d. Statistical analysis of previous funding (FY 2008-2024). It is anticipated that the total multi-year funding for most funded CAP awards for FY 2026 will be close to the historical median.
        i. Mean award: $5,484,204
        ii. Median award: $5,756,354
        iii. Minimum award: $1,912,178
        iv. Maximum award: $10,898,772

CAPs will be awarded to consortia or groups of qualified applicants to address multiple components of a primary system, an entire primary system or problems that cut across primary systems, with the expectation that the project will make significant contributions during the award period to the sustainability of the system or system component. CAP applications are expected to bring together complex teams in which each member has a piece of information essential to addressing a complex challenge for a specialty crop system, but no individual can have all the needed information to meet the challenge. By working together, any missing information can be developed during the award period. Applications are expected to take advantage of recent advances in biological, physical, social, and economic sciences and to translate basic discoveries and knowledge to practical applications. Applications are expected to demonstrate the potential to develop a national strategy or solution as a goal. This would include the intent to promote collaboration, open communication, the exchange of information and development of resources that accelerate the application of scientific discovery and technology to address the needs of various specialty crop industries. Such a national CAP should aim to reduce duplication of efforts and integrate activities among individuals, institutions, states, and regions.

2. *Standard Research and Extension Projects (SREP)*
    a. Project Period – Up to five years.
    b. Budget – Normally, federal funds will not exceed $1,000,000 per year. Requests less than $250,000 per project are discouraged. Budgets in excess of $1,000,000 per year will be considered for projects addressing the AAIMS special emphasis.
    c. Purpose – To support targeted problem-solving efforts that would not qualify in scope for support as a CAP.
    d. Statistical Analysis of previous funding (FY 2008-2024). It is anticipated that the total multi-year funding for most funded SREP awards for FY2026 will be close to the historical median:
        i. Mean award: $2,675,368
        ii. Median award: $2,180,834
        iii. Minimum award: $226,905
        iv. Maximum award: $6,242,957

SREP awards will support targeted problem-solving efforts that contribute to the overall sustainability of a primary system or one of its components and that would not otherwise qualify in scope and effort for support as a CAP. Applications should bring together both research and extension components of the agricultural knowledge system around a problem area or activity. For each SREP award, there is an expectation that an advisory panel will be formed to inform the project throughout its life, including the identification and prioritization of research and extension objectives.

3. *Workforce Readiness and Talent Pipeline Projects (WRTPP)*
    a. Project Period – Up to five years.
    b. Budget - $1,000,000 to $5,000,000 for the project period.
    c. Purpose – To create a workforce with the skills needed to address the labor needs of the specialty crop sector now and into the future.
    d. Statistical Analysis of previous funding – Not available. This is a new project type in FY 2026.

The long-term success of the U.S. specialty crop industry depends on the availability of a skilled, reliable, and adaptable workforce. To ensure adequate numbers of workers who meet these needs, new entrants into the job market must view opportunities in the specialty crop sector as meaningful, satisfying occupations with clear pathways for upward mobility. Specialty crops require intensive labor and increasingly involve advanced technologies, precision agriculture, and strict safety protocols. Yet producers face persistent labor shortages and high turnover, threatening productivity, profitability, and the stability of domestic food supply chains. Investing in workforce readiness and talent pipeline strengthening is essential to address these challenges, ensure continuity of operations, and to sustain the U.S. specialty crop sector's leadership in food quality, safety, and innovation.

Proposals under this category will develop and deliver research and extension programming that provides training and skill-building programs that address workforce challenges in the specialty crop industry by disseminating science-based tools. Funded projects should support the development of a modern, technically skilled workforce capable of meeting the evolving needs of specialty crop production, processing, handling, and marketing.

Activities may include apprenticeship programs, certificate programs and hands-on training in agricultural technologies, safety protocols, postharvest handling, and data-informed decision-making. Projects should emphasize practical instruction aligned with current industry requirements and engage employers to ensure training outcomes match real-world job expectations.

Applicants are required to leverage partnerships with youth organizations, community colleges, technical and vocational schools, the Cooperative Extension Service, grower organizations, and other local, regional, or national entities to increase access to training, strengthen local labor pipelines, and support career advancement. Proposals must also include strategies to recruit, promote retention, peer mentoring, and workforce mobility within the specialty crop sector. This category is intended to support the long-term competitiveness, safety, and productivity of the specialty crop industry by ensuring a reliable and capable workforce. Projects should contribute to the development of domestic markets, protect the national food supply, and help position American agriculture at the forefront of innovation and production efficiency.

The proposed program must include approaches and a plan to evaluate workforce development benefits (e.g., training design, investigative skills (research), and exceptional core competencies) through the entire continuum of training. As an integral part of the project approach, applications must include: 1) a transdisciplinary instructional experience for participants, 2) applied or fundamental research opportunities closely linked to instruction, 3) experiential learning opportunities in emerging knowledge areas, and/or 4) innovative team experiences. The plan must include opportunities, with measurable outcomes, for participation from groups traditionally not engaged in the specialty crop sector. A process for tracking participants' career choices after completion of the training must be included.

4. *Research and Extension Planning Projects*
    a. Project period – One year.
    b. Budget – Federal funds up to $100,000 per project. Budgets in excess of $100,000 per year will be considered for projects addressing the AAIMS special emphasis.
    c. Purpose – To provide assistance to applicants in the development of quality future SREP or CAP proposals (grant planning). Funds may also be requested to provide assistance to consumer, producer, or industry groups for developing strategic research and extension plans including goals, objectives, priorities, etc. (strategic planning). The expectation is that developed plans could provide the relevance bases for future SCRI grant applications.

        i. Research and Extension Planning Projects are intended to support two types of activities, either to:
            1. Provide assistance to applicants in the development of quality future SREP or CAP proposals (grant planning); or.
            2. Provide assistance to consumer, producer, or industry groups for developing strategic research and extension plans—including goals, objectives, priorities, etc. (strategic planning).

        The expectation is that developed "plans" could provide the relevance bases for

future SCRI grant applications.

ii. Priority will be given to applicants who can:
    1. Demonstrate limited resources for either submitting large grant applications or for supporting strategic planning activities on their own,
    2. Articulate benefits to be accrued from formal planning activities, and
    3. Provide evidence of a high likelihood that quality future applications would be submitted for SCRI projects (desired for grant planning) or would result in a publicly available strategic plan, which could be used to support a variety of industry-relevant research and extension activities, including development of one or more future SCRI grant applications (desired for strategic planning).

Research and Extension Planning Project grants do not support preliminary research. However, support for stakeholder survey activities may be requested, where appropriate and necessary.

C. Ethical Conduct of Funded Projects

In accordance with sections 2, 3, and 8 of 2 CFR Part 422, institutions that conduct USDA-funded extramural research must foster an atmosphere conducive to research integrity, bear primary responsibility for prevention and detection of research misconduct, and maintain and effectively communicate and train their staff regarding policies and procedures. In the event an application to NIFA results in an award, the Authorized Representative (AR) assures, through acceptance of the award, that the institution will comply with the above requirements. Award recipients must, upon request, make available to NIFA the policies, procedures, and documentation to support the conduct of the training. See Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research for further information.

PART III. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

A. Eligible Applicants

Pre-applications may only be submitted by federal agencies, national laboratories, colleges and universities, research institutions and organizations, private organizations or corporations, State Agricultural Experiment Stations, individuals, or groups consisting of two or more of these entities.

For those new to federal financial assistance, a grants overview page is available on the NIFA website. This page includes information about free Grants 101 Training and other resources that are highly recommended for those seeking an understanding of federal awards.

B. Cost Sharing or Matching

Match Required – Applicants must provide matching contributions on a dollar-for-dollar basis for all Federal funds awarded under this program.

Section 7614 of the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) repealed Subtitle P of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 (7 U.S.C. 3371) and made several conforming amendments, including adding a new paragraph to Section 412(g) of the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 (7 U.S.C. 7632(g)) that added a matching requirement to SCRI. This language requires that, for grants awarded on or after December 20, 2018, the recipient of an award from the SCRI program must provide funds, in-kind contributions, or a combination of both, from sources other than funds provided through such grant in an amount that is at least equal to the amount awarded by NIFA. Matching funds may include, but are not limited to, funds or in-kind contributions from an agricultural commodity promotion, research, and information program.

Section 738 of the Continuing Appropriations, Agriculture, Legislative Branch, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and Extensions Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-37) provides that the Secretary of Agriculture may waive the matching funds requirement under Section 412(g) of the Agricultural Research, Extension and Education Reform Act of 1998 (7 U.S.C. 7632(g)). Therefore, NIFA may waive the matching funds requirement for a grant if one of the following applies:

1. The results of the grant are of a particular benefit to a specific specialty crop, but such results are likely to be applicable to specialty crops or agricultural commodities, generally; or
2. The grant involves a minor commodity, deals with scientifically important research, and the recipient is unable to satisfy the matching funds requirement.

C. Centers of Excellence

Centers of Excellence cannot be requested in the pre-application phase.

PART IV. APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION

A. Method of Application

Applicants must apply to this NOFO electronically; no other method or response is accepted. The electronic application for this NOFO and additional resources are available on Grants.gov and Grants 101. **Table 2** provides instructions on how to obtain an electronic application. **Part III** of the NIFA Grants Application Guide contains detailed information regarding the Grants.gov registration process. The NIFA Grants Application Guide is contained in the specific funding opportunity package or a sample of the guide can be found here. When applying for a NIFA award, it is important to reference the version of the guide that is included in the specific funding opportunity application package.

Table 2. Steps to Obtain Application Materials

Steps	Action
Step One: Register	*New Users* to Grants.gov must register early with Grants.gov prior to submitting an application (Register Here).
Step Two: Download Adobe	Download and Install Adobe Reader. (see Adobe Software Compatibility for basic system requirements.)
Step Three: Find Application	Using this Funding Opportunity Number **USDA-NIFA-SCRI-011676**, search for application here: Opportunity Package.
Step Four: Assess Readiness	Contact an AR prior to starting an application to assess the organization's readiness to submit an electronic application.

Table 3. Help and Resources

Grants.gov Support	NIFA Support
Grants.gov Online Support Telephone support: 800-518-4726 Toll-Free or 606-545-5035 Email support: support@grants.gov Self-service customer-based support: Grants.gov iPortal Key Information: Business hours: Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. – 5 p.m. ET, except federal holidays.	Email: grantapplicationquestions@usda.gov Key Information: Business hours: Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. – 5 p.m. ET, except federal holidays.

If you have trouble submitting a pre-application to Grants.gov, you should FIRST contact the Grants.gov Help Desk to resolve any problems. Keep a record of any such correspondence. See Part IV. A. for Grants.gov contact information.

B. Content and Form of the Pre-Application

The NIFA Grants Application Guide is part of the corresponding application package for this NOFO. The NOFO overrides the NIFA Grants Application Guide if there is a discrepancy between the two documents. NIFA will accept subsequent submissions to an application until the application deadline. However, applicants that do not meet the application requirements, to include partial applications, risk being excluded from NIFA's review. NIFA will assign a

proposal number to all applications that meet the requirements of this NOFO. Applicants must refer to the proposal number when corresponding with NIFA. **Table 4** outlines other key instructions for applicants.

Table 4. Key Application Instructions

Instruction	References (All references are to the NIFA Grants Application Guide)
All attachments must be in a portable document format (PDF) format.	Part IV
Check the manifest of submitted files to verify attachments are in the correct format.	Part IV
Conduct an administrative review of the application before submission.	Part IV
Follow the submission instructions.	Part IV
Provide an accurate email address, where designated, on the SF-424 R&R.	Part V
Contact the Grants.gov helpdesk for technical support and keep a record of the correspondence.	N/A
Contact NIFA if applicant does not received correspondence from NIFA regarding an application within **10** days of the application deadline.	N/A

Stakeholder Relevance Statement (SRS)

SRSs are required for all SCRI project types. Citations, cover letters, detailed budgets and budget narratives ARE NOT ALLOWED in the SRS or as an attachment to the application. If included, the pre-application will be returned without review. Text must be 12-point or larger and must be left justified. Margins must be at least 1 inch on all sides.

Content of SRS for SREP and CAP Projects

1. **Executive Summary** – Two pages maximum using the SCRI Pre-application Template
    a. Project title
    b. Project type (i.e. CAP or SREP)
    c. Estimated funding request
    d. One to three key words from Appendix IV
    e. List of all known project members
    f. Outreach plan summary (Maximum 100 words)
    g. Project Transdisciplinarity (Maximum 100 words) Describe how the project fulfills the requirements for a transdisciplinary approach to systems science.
2. **Project description** – Six pages maximum
    a. Significance of the project to the target stakeholders.
    b. Potential benefit to stakeholders.
    c. How stakeholders were engaged in defining the problem
    d. How stakeholders will continue to be engaged

e. How project outcomes will be translated into actionable recommendations or products and delivered to end users
f. List of project objectives
g. Outline of methodology

3. **Appendices** – Pre-applications only allow one PDF, so appendices cannot be loaded as separate PDFs. Each appendix should begin on a separate page of the single PDF and the pages should be numbered sequentially beginning with page 1. No additional appendices are allowed.
    a. Appendix A - Title this appendix: "AppA_Logic_model" – Logic model chart – 1 page. Applicants may use this logic model template.
    b. Appendix B – Title this appendix: "AppB_ bios" - provide brief biosketches of project team members - 7 pages maximum
    c. Appendix C – Title this appendix "AppC_Ind_sup_let" – letters of support from industry stakeholders
    d. Appendix D – Title this appendix "AppD_collab_let" – letters of collaboration from project team members

Content of SRS for Workforce Readiness and Talent Pipeline Projects

1. Executive Summary **–** Two pages maximum using the SCRI Pre-application Template
    a. Title
    b. Project type – Workforce Development
    c. Estimated amount of funding to be requested
    d. One to three keywords from Appendix IV
    e. List of all know project members
    f. Outreach plan summary (Maximum 100 words)
    g. Project Transdisciplinarity (Maximum 100 words) Describe how the project fulfills the requirements for a transdisciplinary approach to systems science.
2. **Project description** – Six pages maximum
    a. How stakeholders were engaged to determine the content of the training.
    b. How stakeholders will continue to be engaged in training improvement.
    c. What focus audiences will be emphasized by the training.
    d. How participants will be recruited for the training.
    e. What placement support will be provided to participants.
    f. How the participants' success will be documented after the training is completed.
3. **Appendices** – Pre-applications only allow one PDF, so appendices cannot be loaded as separate PDFs. Each appendix should begin on a separate page of the single PDF and the pages should be numbered sequentially beginning with page 1. No additional appendices are allowed.
    a. Appendix A – title this appendix: "AppA_bios" – provide brief biosketches of project team members – seven pages maximum
    b. Appendix B – title this appendix: "AppB_Ind_sup_let" – letters of support from industry stakeholders
    c. Appendix C: title this appendix: "AppC_collab_let" – letters of collaboration from project team members

Content of SRS for Research and Extension Planning Projects

4. **Executive Summary** – Two pages maximum using the SCRI Pre-application Template
    a. Title
    b. Project type - Planning
    c. Type of planning activity (i.e. strategic planning or grant planning)
    d. Estimated amount of funding to be requested
    e. One to three keywords from Appendix IV
    f. List of all know project members
    g. Outreach plan summary (Maximum 100 words)
    h. Project Transdisciplinarity (Maximum 100 words) Describe how the project fulfills the requirements for a transdisciplinary approach to systems science.
5. **Project description** – Three pages maximum
    a. Stakeholder problem being addressed
    b. Description of planning activities
    c. Expected outcomes
    d. Benefit to growers/processors and/or consumers
    e. Documentation and evaluation of benefits
6. **Appendices** – Pre-applications only allow one PDF, so Appendices cannot be loaded as separate PDFs. Each appendix should begin on a separate page of the single PDF and the pages should be numbered sequentially beginning with page 1. No additional appendices are allowed.
    a. Appendix A – title this appendix: "AppA_bios" – provide brief biosketches of project team members – Seven pages maximum
    b. Appendix B – title this appendix: "AppB_Ind_sup_let" – letters of support from industry stakeholders
    c. Appendix C: title this appendix: "AppC_collab_let" – letters of collaboration from project team members

***SF 424 R&R Cover Sheet*. See Part V of the NIFA Grants Application Guide for the required certifications and assurances. Do not include a cover letter.** The following are additional instructions:

a. Field 1. Type of Submission. Click the "Pre-application" box.
b. Field 15. Enter Estimated Project Funding. Enter the estimated amount of funding to be requested.
c. Field 20. Pre-application. Click on "Add Attachment" to attach the SRS.

Supplemental Information Form. See **Part V** of the NIFA Grants Application Guide.

1. **Field 2**. Enter the program code name (i.e., enter "**Specialty Crop Research Initiative**") and the program code (i.e., enter "**SCRI**"). Note that accurate entry of the program code is very important for proper and timely processing of an application.
2. **Field 8. Conflict of Interest List. See Part V of the** NIFA Grants Application Guide.

C. Funding Restrictions

Section 1462(a) and (c) of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 (NARETPA), 7 U.S.C. 3310, limits indirect costs for the overall award to **30**

percent of Total Federal Funds Awarded (TFFA) under a research, education, or extension grant. The maximum allowable IDC amount recoverable under the award, including the IDC charged by the sub-awardee(s), if any, is the lesser of the following and is determined by calculating the amount of IDC using:

1) The sum of an institution's negotiated indirect cost rate and the indirect cost rate charged by sub-awardees, if any.

2) Thirty percent of TFFA (TFFA = Field K., Total Costs and Fee, on SF-424 R&R Budget).
The maximum allowable indirect cost rate under the award, including the indirect costs charged by the sub-awardee(s), if any, is the lesser of the two rates.

If the results of 1), is the lesser of the two, the grant recipient is allowed to charge the negotiated indirect cost rate on the prime award and the sub-award(s), if any. Any sub-awards would be subject to the sub-awardee's negotiated indirect cost rate. The sub-awardee may charge its negotiated indirect cost rate on its portion of the award, provided the sum of the indirect cost rate charged under the award by the prime awardee and the sub-awardee(s) does not exceed 30 percent of the TFFA.

If the result of 2), is the lesser of the two, then the maximum indirect cost rate allowed for the overall award, including any sub-award(s), is limited to 30 percent of the TFFA. That is, the indirect costs of the prime awardee plus the sum of the indirect costs charged by the sub-awardee(s), if any, may not exceed 30 percent of the TFFA.

In the event of an award, the prime awardee is responsible for ensuring the maximum indirect cost allowed for the award is not exceeded when combining indirect costs for the federal portion (i.e., prime, and sub-awardee(s)) and any applicable cost-sharing. Amounts exceeding the maximum allowable indirect cost are considered unallowable. See sections 408 and 410 of 2 CFR 200.

If the applicant does not have a negotiated rate, and NIFA is the cognizant agency, the applicant must calculate an IDC rate in order to request IDC. Applicants are not required to complete the IDC package during the application process. Applicants need only to calculate an IDC rate to serve as a basis for requesting IDC, please see NIFA Indirect Costs for additional resources. If awarded, the applicant will be required to submit a complete IDC proposal package to obtain a negotiated rate.

Organizations that do not have a current negotiated (including provisional) rate, may elect the de minimis rate (2 CFR 200.414(f)). Currently the Uniform Guidance offers the option of electing to charge a de minimis rate of 15 percent of modified total direct costs (MTDC) which may be used indefinitely. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has updated the 2 CFR allowing an indirect cost de minimis rate increase from 10 to 15 percent effective October 1, 2024. Budgets for indirect costs will be increased accordingly if the recipient selects the de minimis indirect cost recovery option. As described above and in 2 CFR 200.403, costs must be charged consistently as either indirect or direct costs but may not be double charged or inconsistently charged as both. If elected, this methodology must be used consistently for all federal awards until such time as a non-federal entity chooses to negotiate for a rate, which it may do at any time.

PART V. APPLICATION REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

A. NIFA's Evaluation Process

SCRI has instituted a two-phase review process. The first phase of the review process is the Industry Relevance Review. Each Pre-Application containing an SRS will be evaluated in a two-part process. First, each SRS will be screened to ensure that it meets the administrative requirements as in this NOFO. Administrative requirements include meeting the application deadline, meeting eligibility requirements, satisfying program intent, inclusion of all required sections of the SRS package, and adherence to guidelines. Second, an SRS that meets these requirements will be evaluated for relevance by a panel of industry reviewers representing closely allied crops. The panel will recommend which applications to invite for submission of a full application. Invited applicants will be sent instructions on how to access the full NOFO via email once the relevance review is completed. NIFA will send copies of reviews, not including the identity of reviewers, and a summary of the panel comments to the PD after the review process has been completed.

NIFA selects reviewers for the SCRI relevance review based upon the crops and/or issues represented by the pre-applications. Industry reviewers will be selected from people directly involved in the growing, handling and processing of specialty crops; or people representing those interests through trade organizations or other professional associations.

Conflicts of interest. NIFA takes extreme care to prevent any actual or perceived conflicts of interest that may influence the review or evaluation (see NIFA Peer Review Process for Competitive Grant Applications).

B. Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation criteria herein, with relative weights in parentheses, will be used to review pre-applications submitted in response to this NOFO.

Criteria for Industry Relevance Review for SREP and CAP Projects

1. The pre-application and stakeholder support letters clearly indicate that the project is of high importance to the target crop sector (or sub-sector). (20 points)
2. Information developed by the project team will be delivered to stakeholders in ways that are likely to encourage adoption and implementation of new and/or improved practices. (15 points)
3. Support letters are original and individually authored by the key stakeholders. (10 points)
4. The challenges addressed are clearly identified by relevant stakeholders. (10 points)
5. Stakeholders will continue to be a critical part of the project team throughout the life of the project, including evaluation and feedback of project success. (10 points)
6. Project outcomes will support the viability of the system being studied, with clear metrics for tracking success. (10 points)
7. Project outcomes have the potential to benefit specialty crop sectors not specifically targeted by project objectives, with clear metrics for tracking success. (10 points)
8. The challenge(s) addressed is(are) significant at a national or regional level. (5 points)

9. The project team has clearly identified the target stakeholder groups that would benefit from the project outcomes; i.e., growers, processors, wholesalers/retailers, consumers, etc. (5 points)
10. The project uses transdisciplinary approaches by intentionally integrating knowledge from appropriate biological, physical, economic, social sciences, etc. with relevant stakeholders and community members to address the challenges identified. (5 points)

Criteria for Workforce Readiness and Talent Pipeline Projects

1. The pre-application and stakeholder support letters clearly indicate that the project team worked with stakeholders to determine the knowledge and skills needed by a new/expanded specialty crop workforce. (15 points)
2. Stakeholders will be engaged throughout the life of the project to continuously ensure that training activities are responsive to developing needs. (10 points)
3. Stakeholder support letters are original and individually authored by key stakeholders. (10 points)
4. The proposed training activities will result in a pool of potential workers large enough to meet industry needs. (20 points)
5. The proposed training activities incorporate transdisciplinary approaches and will result in a workforce able to adapt to change in real time. (10 points)
6. The proposed training activities emphasize a hands-on, practical approach that will result in a workforce ready for real-world challenges. (10 points)
7. There is a plan to recruit sufficient numbers of participants to the training program. (10 points)
8. There is a plan to provide placement services for participants after completing the training program. (10 points)
9. There is a plan to track participants' career choices after completing the training program. (5 points)

Criteria for Industry Relevance Review for Planning Projects

1. The pre-application and stakeholder support letters clearly indicate that the project is of high importance to the target crop sector (or sub-sector). (20 points)
2. The project will result in a partnership between a specialty crop sector and a scientific community. (15 points)
3. Plans are in place for the resulting SREP or CAP to fully integrate research and extension. (15 points)
4. The project will result in a systems approach to ensuring the viability of the targeted specialty crop sector. (10 points)
5. Support letters are original and individually authored by the key stakeholders. (10 points)
6. The challenges addressed are clearly identified by relevant stakeholders. (10 points)
7. Stakeholders will continue to be a critical part of the project team throughout the life of the project, including evaluation and feedback of project success. (10 points)
8. The challenge(s) addressed is(are) significant at a national or regional level. (5 points)
9. The project uses transdisciplinary approaches by intentionally integrating knowledge from appropriate biological, physical, economic, social sciences, etc. with relevant stakeholders and community members to address the challenges identified. (5 points)

APPENDIX I: AGENCY CONTACTS

Program Contacts
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For administrative questions related to
1. Grants.gov, see Part IV of this RFA.
2. Other RFA or application questions, please email grantapplicationquestions@usda.gov.
3. Awards under this RFA, please email awards@usda.gov.

U.S. Postal Mailing Address:
National Institute of Food and Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
P.O. Box 419205, MS 10000
Kansas City, MO 64141-6205

Courier/Package Delivery Address:
National Institute of Food and Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
2312 East Bannister Road, MS 10000
Kansas City, MO 64141-3061

APPENDIX II: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Automation, Artificial Intelligence, Mechanization, and Sensors – AAIMS
Authorized Representative – AR
Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education reform Act of 1998 – AREERA
Coordinated Agricultural Project – CAP
Centers of Excellence – COE
Indirect Costs – IDC
Modified Total Direct Costs – MTDC
National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 – NARETPA
National Institute of Food and Agriculture – NIFA
Notice of Funding Opportunity – NOFO
Office of Management and Budget – OMB
Specialty Crop Research Initiative – SCRI
Standard Research and Extensions Project – SREP
Stakeholder Relevance Statement – SRS
Total Federal Funds Awarded – TFFA
United States Department of Agriculture – USDA
Workforce Development Project – WDP

APPENDIX III: DEFINITIONS

Refer to 7 CFR 3430 Competitive and Noncompetitive Non-formula Federal Assistance Programs – General Award Administrative Provisions for additional definitions.

Coordinated Agricultural Project (CAP):

Large-scale projects that promote collaboration, open communication, and the exchange of information; reduce duplication of effort; and coordinate activities among individuals, institutions, States, and regions. Integrated CAPs address problems through multi-function projects that incorporate at least two of the three components of the agricultural knowledge system (i.e., research, education, and extension). Participants serve as a team that conducts targeted activities in response to emerging or priority area(s) of national need and applications articulate how a CAP will complement and/or link with existing programs or projects at the national level. A CAP contains the needed science-based expertise in research, education, and/or extension, as well as expertise from principal stakeholders and partners, to accomplish project goals and objectives.

Extension Project:

Programs and activities that deliver science-based knowledge and informal educational programs to people, enabling them to make practical decisions. Delivery may range from community-based to national audiences and use communication methods from face-to-face to electronic or combinations thereof. Extension Projects may also include related matters such as certification programs, in-service training, client recruitment and services, curriculum development, instructional materials and equipment, and innovative instructional methodologies appropriate to informal educational programs. These projects should lead to measurable, documented changes in learning, actions, or conditions in an identified audience or stakeholder group. These projects should synthesize and incorporate a wide range of the latest relevant research results. Extension Projects address one or more of the following key strategic actions:

- Support informal education to increase food and agricultural literacy of youth and adults;
- Promote science-based agricultural literacy by increasing understanding and use of food and agricultural science data, information, and programs;
- Build science-based capability in people to engage audiences and enable informed decision making;
- Develop new applications of instructional tools and curriculum structures that increase technical competency and ensure global competitiveness;
- Offer non-formal learning programs that increase access of new audiences at the rate at which new ideas and technologies are tested and/or developed at the community-scale; and
- Develop programs that increase public knowledge and citizen engagement leading to actions that protect or enhance the nation's food supply, agricultural productivity, environmental quality, community vitality, and/or public health and well-being.

Integrated Project:

An Integrated Project includes at least two of the three functions of the agricultural knowledge system (i.e., research, education, and extension) within a project.

Logic Model:

A logic model is a conceptual tool for planning and evaluation which displays the sequence of actions that describes what the science-based program is and will do. Learn more on the NIFA Logic Model website.

Matching:

The process through which a grant recipient match awarded USDA funds with cash and in-kind contributions on a dollar-for-dollar basis. The matching funds must derive from non-federal sources. Matching funding must follow the same allowability guidelines as federal funds.

Multifunctional Research and Extension Activities:

Are research whose results are communicated via Extension activities to stakeholders and the public in a coordinated manner during the life of a single project.

New Application:

An application not previously submitted to a program.

Resubmitted Application:

A project application that was previously submitted to a program, but the application was not funded.

Primary System:

One of the three main sectors of the specialty crop industry: the production system; the processing and distribution system; and the consumer and marketing system.

Project Director (PD):

PD means the single individual designated by the grantee in the grant application, who is responsible for the direction and management of the project and who is approved by the Authorized Departmental Officer. By extension of this definition, then, all project personnel listed as Co-PDs on an application are assumed to be approved by the grantee institution as ready and able to fulfill the role of PD if the PD can no longer serve in that capacity. All other project personnel should be identified as Co-Investigator, Collaborator, or Other.

Research Projects:

Research Projects support fundamental or applied research conducted by individual investigators, co-investigators within the same discipline, or multidisciplinary teams. Fundamental research means research that (i) increases knowledge or understanding of the fundamental aspects of phenomena and has the potential for broad application and (ii) has an effect on agriculture, food, nutrition, or the environment. Applied research means research that includes expansion of the findings of fundamental research to uncover practical ways in which new knowledge can be advanced to benefit individuals and society. Multi-disciplinary projects are those in which investigators from two or more disciplines collaborate closely to address a common problem. These collaborations, where appropriate, may integrate the biological, physical, chemical, and/or social sciences.

Specialty Crop:

Fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, and horticulture and nursery crops (including floriculture). More information about the definition of a specialty crop can be viewed here.

Systems Approach:

Any process of estimating or inferring how local policies, actions, or changes influence the state of the neighboring universe. It is a framework that is based on the belief that the

component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation.

Transdisciplinary:

Transdisciplinary approaches intentionally integrate knowledge from different scientific disciplines with relevant stakeholders and community members to address societal challenges. The development of transdisciplinary approaches engages these multi-disciplinary teams from the onset of project conceptualization. Do not conflate transdisciplinary approaches with multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary.

APPENDIX IV: KEYWORDS

Identify up to three keywords that best fit your industry or issue(s) addressed from the following list:

1. Berries
2. Citrus
3. Cucurbits
4. Sweet corn
5. Controlled Environment/Greenhouse crops
6. Grapes
7. Nursery/Floriculture
8. Food Safety
9. Pollinators
10. Potatoes
11. Solanaceae
12. Strawberries
13. Tree fruit (not including citrus)
14. Tree nuts
15. Turfgrass
16. Beans/dry beans/pulses
17. Leafy vegetables
18. Underground vegetables (other than potatoes)
19. Emerging crops (specialty crops that are not yet widely established in the U.S.)
20. Other crop (please specify)
21. Automation, Artificial Intelligence, Mechanization, Sensors