QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS from Teleconference

12/11/2019 12:30-1:30pm PST

Associated with

Notice of Funding Opportunity Title: California Biological Assistance

Notice of Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-NRCS-CA-MULTI-20-GEN0010588

Agency Staff present on the Call:

1. Kay Joy Barge, Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations (ASTCFO), Area 2 (Central Coast and Bay Area), CA NRCS
2. Tony Sunseri, ASTFO, Area 1 (northern CA), CA NRCS
3. Sharon Nance, ASTFO, Area 3 (Central Valley and Sierras), CA NRCS
4. Curtis Tarver, ASTFO, Area 4 (Southern CA), CA NRCS
5. Michele Devaney, Grants Specialist, FPAC-Business Center
6. Dean Kwasny, State Easement Program Manager, CA NRCS
7. Melinda Grow, Financial Resource Specialist, Management and Strategy (M&S), CA NRCS
8. Ray Tolentino, Management Analyst, M&S, CA NRCS

QUESTIONS:

1. Is there any either in the original proposal or through renewal to **propose changes to the geographic locations** identified in Attachment A and B?

   A: To be clear, this solicitation is for a new service based on current operational needs and does not reflect a renewal. If applicants are interested in suggesting changes to any of the geographic locations, they should identify those changes in their proposals. NRCS put together the list of geographic locations based on facility space and operational need.

2. On page 1 of the solicitation, under Funding Announcement Summary, it indicates, "NRCS will accept application under this notice for a **base year and up to four, one-year option periods.**" Can you please explain that a bit further?

   A: The intent of this language is to allow for variation in our budget. Because of the manner that the budget is allocated, CA NRCS anticipates only being able to fund one year at a time. This situation also provides for any adjustments due to operational needs.

3. **I**t is difficult for a partner to make staffing decisions if they are unable to determine how long the agreement will last, so **how early would a partner be notified of whether it would be extended for a year**?

A: CA NRCS' agreement practice is to award agreements for multiple year periods, normally 3-5 years, but the funding for the agreement would be for a shorter period. With any agreement, NRCS CA will extend for a maximum of 12 months and our procedures are to extend for the full 12 months to afford maximum flexibility and reduce the workload that is associated with amendment and extension processing. Any agreement and extension is subject to the NRCS' availability of funding and the performance of the partner.

4. How **far in advance** would NRCS CA know about the **availability of funding** from one year to the next?

   A: Whenever CA NRCS has an agreement that has a staffing component, CA NRCS monitors the reimbursements and the balance of the agreement carefully. If the operational need is validated, CA NRCS tries to anticipate 30-90 days ahead of time so that we can secure funding and process an amendment to prevent a break in the service. Based on the large staffing component of this agreement and the staffing needed statewide, CA NRCS expects that this agreement's funding would be among the first to be reviewed and funded each fiscal year.

5. This question refers to **Attachment A and B**. Is there a difference between "designated colocation" or "ideal office" and is there **any significance to the order** they are listed?

   A: This question referred to Column 1 and 2 on these 2 attachments. The information represented in the matrix is generally north to south based on the "Geographic Area" column. There is no priority or preference with respect to the order listed.

6. Is **Attachment C (STAR Curriculum)** provided because NRCS CA is expecting applicants to specifically reference each course in the narrative or is it provided as a reference only?

   A: This attachment was provided as reference. Applicant staff is expected to pursue conservation planner certification and these course requirements are identified in the STAR curriculum. Other training from the STAR curriculum may be necessary to bring applicant staff up to fundamental competencies. The STAR curriculum serves as a guide for applicant staff in developing training plans. Training not encompassed by the STAR curriculum should be approved by NRCS.

7. In preparation of the budget narrative and 424A, can **supervisory and administrative staff** be "bundled" with the staff requirements or should it be broken out separately?

   A: CA NRCS would look favorably upon detailed information regarding supervisory and administrative costs associated with an applicant's packet. If an applicant chooses to embed it or bundle it with the salary and fringe budget categories, the applicant should include this as a footnote. This will allow the review board to compare one proposal to another.

   Comment from Michele Devaney, Agency Grants Specialist: I think I misunderstood the question when I answered on the teleconference. Direct costs for supervisory and administrative staff should be included in the salary and fringe benefits category on the SF424A and clearly identified separately on the budget narrative.

8. Does NRCS CA expect the **50% cost share to apply to each position or budget category** or can it be essentially split at the bottom line?

   A: The cost share or match does not have to split on each position, nor does it need to be "matched" by position. The total NRCS funds need to be matched equally overall by the partner funds.

9. If an applicant is expecting a need to recruit for one of the positions listed in Attachment A and B, can **relocation costs** be included in the proposal?

   A: Please refer to 2 CFR 200.463 for more information. Here is an excerpt from 2 CFR 200.463, "…relocation costs incurred incident to recruitment of new employees, are allowable to the extent that such costs are incurred pursuant to the non-Federal entity's standard recruitment program. Please note these costs need to be identified in the budget so that NRCS CA can determine the reasonableness of the costs.

10. **Is NRCS CA willing to consider any changes to the** % FTEs as identified on Attachment A and B? For example, the Redding position is listed as 0.4 FTE and if the applicant wishes to propose a higher amount due to some matching funds, would this be acceptable?

    A: As mentioned above, a rigorous process was completed by CA NRCS staff to put together the tasks and FTE requirements for Attachment A and B. In an applicant identifies additional duties that an employee may perform above the stated FTE, the applicant is more than welcome to supplement additional work to this position from their own funds. If that is the case, this should not be represented in their proposal.

11. Are **attachments** allowed with the proposal packet and what are the guidelines or limitations surrounding these attachments or supplementary information?

    A: From a logistical standpoint, Grants.gov does have the ability to load "other attachments." To the degree that additional information needs to be loaded, applicants should have the ability to do this. The proposal limits the applicant to no more than 10 pages, not including letters of support or other necessary forms required for applicant submission.

12. Can an applicant provide **letters of verification** that they have obtained previously or do the letters of support need to specifically address this ?

    A: Letters of support or verification of match need to be specific to this .

13. An applicant noticed that a sub-task, **ecological performance monitoring**, was **not included** on the solicitation in Attachment A or B. This monitoring was completed under the predecessor agreement and was conducted on primarily ranches that also was eligible or had EQIP contracts with NRCS. Can you clarify if this task was omitted intentionally or if continuing this work would be allowed under this new agreement?

    A: The monitoring work that has been identified that is easement related (Task 2) is specific to NRCS compliance-based monitoring, so it would not include the ecological performance-based

monitoring. From a working lands perspective (Task 1) NRCS CA went through extensive discussions on what tasks that NRCS CA needed for this solicitation. The result is what is listed in Attachment A and B.

14. In preparing a work plan for the proposal and specifically the timeline for STAR courses available for partner biologists, is there any guidelines or information the NRCS CA can provide with respect to **when the courses will be offered and if they will be prioritized**?

A: Many of the courses are available on line and classroom courses are prioritized and class lists developed on an annual basis. The biologist positions from the solicitation will be considered along with NRCS staff for attendance.

15. Typically, an applicant will try to get as much money for match prior to the start of an agreement, but there is some fund raising that must occur during the year. If an applicant has verification of **less than the match amount** (e.g. 80%), and the applicant indicates that their "General Fund" will raise it, is this permissible?

A: An applicant needs to provide as much verification as possible with their proposal as this will be considered during the review process. Once an award is made, if the source of partner's cost share changes, due to additional fund raising or for other reasons, this is allowed if the change supports the agreement's objectives.

16. The solicitation mentions that a **reduction may be permissible for the applicant's match**. Is there a template for this or what kind of statement is needed?

A: There is a waiver form that is completed post-selection that includes a partner statement of financial burden. A copy of the waiver form is provided on Grants.gov. For proposal purposes, if an applicant in unable to meet the 50% match requirement, they should indicate this in their proposal. In addition to the level of match they can support (must be between 25-50%), they should provide a brief reason for the reduction.