

STATE OF ALABAMA
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND INDUSTRIES

APPLICATION GUIDELINES FOR:
USDA SPECIALTY CROP BLOCK GRANT – FARM BILL PROGRAM

APPLICATION DEADLINE: FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 2024
@ 5:00pm (Central Standard Time)

Grant Program Description

The Alabama Department of Agricultural & Industries (hereinafter, “ADAI”) is soliciting applications for projects that specifically address the goals that the United States Department of Agriculture (hereinafter, “USDA”) has for solely enhancing the competitiveness of US specialty crops in domestic and foreign markets.

● *Specialty crops are defined by the USDA as fruits and vegetables, dried fruit, tree nuts, horticulture (including maple syrup and honey), and nursery crops (including floriculture).*

The USDA is the funding entity and has the final approval for projects submitted to the USDA for the Specialty Crop Block Grant. Although, ADAI and a review panel of industry representatives will make the initial review and award recommendations to the USDA, the **USDA will make the final decision concerning grant awards.**

Who Can Apply/Eligibility

Commodity groups, Ag organizations, colleges and universities, municipalities, state agencies, Native American Tribal Organizations and agricultural nonprofits and profits are all eligible for this grant program, provided their proposals meet all the specifications in this Request for Applications and the USDA’s Notice of Federal Assistance.

All projects **MUST** show how they enhance the competitiveness of Alabama Grown Specialty Crops and not solely benefit the sole applicant. Research grant proposals **MUST** show how the project would specifically benefit Alabama producers.

Please refer to <http://www.agi.alabama.gov/scbqp> to view a listing of eligible and ineligible projects. An applicant’s failure to meet an eligibility criterion by the application deadline will result in ADAI’s rejection of award prior to or after application review.

Program Purpose

The purpose of the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) is to solely enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. Specialty crops are defined as “fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture).”

Legislative Authority

The SCBGP was authorized on December 21, 2004, by Section 101 of the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004. The Act authorized the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide grants to states to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. In 2008, Section 10109 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (the Farm Bill) amended the Act, which established the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – Farm Bill (SCBGP-FB).

Number of Grantees and Maximum Award

This is a competitive grant process. The minimum amount awarded is \$5,000.00. The maximum award to commodity groups, agriculture organizations, municipalities and agriculture nonprofits applicants is \$25,000; the maximum amount for colleges and universities is \$40,000.00. This is federal funding from the USDA and the amount of funding is based upon a formula analyzing specialty crop sales in the state of Alabama.

Applications from previous years, which have not been funded, can be resubmitted for review selection. However, updated information needs to be included with application for reflect the current grant cycle.

Duration of Projects

Projects cannot begin until the USDA has made their official award announcement, expected in October. A project can last up to 34 months, but the proposal must justify its timeline. Projects with shorter time frames are encouraged and will be ranked with higher priority. No extensions of any kind are allowed.

Please see Appendix C for USDA’s regulations regarding Administration of Grants.

Deadlines

Application Deadline – **March 15, 2024: 5:00 pm, Central Standard Time.**

Expected Date of Grant Approval for Alabama from USDA is October.

An applicant’s failure to meet an eligibility criterion by the application deadline will result in ADAI’s rejection of award prior to or after application review.

Submission Directions

All applications must be submitted via email to Johnny Blackmon, Johnny.Blackmon@agi.alabama.gov by close of business, 5:00pm (Central Standard Time) on **Friday, March 15, 2024.**

Late applications will not be considered. Please keep in mind there is an occasional delay with email; therefore, it is recommended you allow ample time for the email to successfully be received by ADAI.

Please visit <http://www.agi.alabama.gov/scbqp> for application preparation and submittal details.

Project Specifications

Projects must *solely* enhance the competitiveness of US specialty crops in domestic and foreign markets; specifically, in regard to the following issues specified by USDA.

- a. Increasing child and adult nutrition knowledge and consumption of Specialty Crops
- b. Participation of industry representatives at meetings of international standard setting bodies in which the U.S. government participates
- c. Improving efficiency and reducing costs of distribution systems
- d. Developing “Good Agricultural Practices”, “Good Handling Practices”, Good Manufacturing Practices”, and in cost-share arrangements for funding audits of such systems for small farmers, packers, and processors
- e. Investing in specialty crop research, including organic research to focus in conservation and environmental outcomes
- f. Enhancing food safety
- g. Developing new and improved seed varieties for specialty crops
- h. Pest and disease control
- I. Community Gardens
- j. Sustainability

Please note that projects must impact and produce measurable outcomes for the specialty crop industry and/or the public rather than a single organization, institution or individual. Single organizations, institutions, and individuals are encouraged to participate as project partners.

Projects must benefit more than one commercial product or individual, capital expenditures for general purpose equipment, buildings, and land are unallowable.

Examples of unacceptable and acceptable projects are below. Examples of unacceptable projects are based on information provided by USDA:

1. A company applied for funds to purchase starter plants or equipment used to plant, cultivate, and grow a specialty crop for the purpose of making a profit, or to expand production of a single business.
2. A proposal for funds from a specialty crop organization to promote their members' businesses.

Examples of acceptable projects; based upon information from the USDA:

1. A State requests funding to contract with a university to conduct research on the feasibility of planting, cultivating, and growing a specialty crop in a particular area, the results of which can be shared with many growers throughout the State.
2. A single grower requests funds to demonstrate the viability of organic small fruit production and partners with Cooperative Extension to publicize the working model of diversification to other regional growers.
3. A single company requests funds to provide a viable pollination alternative to specialty crop stakeholders in the region, which currently does not have one.
4. A single specialty crop organization requests funds to conduct an advertising campaign that will benefit their specialty crop members.
5. A single farmer erects high tunnels on their property to extend the growing season of tomatoes and lettuce and conducts a field day and farm tour to encourage other small family farmers to adopt the production methods.

Applications must be submitted on the Adobe Progress Profile Template found on this link or ams.usda.gov/services/scbpgp.

Application Evaluation

Applications will be evaluated by a review panel and awards will be determined based on the following requirements:

1. How well the application meets all the submission requirements
2. How the project effectively shows a timeline and strategy for implementation
3. How the project shows that it will effectively promote the competitiveness of specialty crops to the industry.
4. The breadth of the project; does the project show that it will affect a specialty crop as a whole?
5. Is there a well-constructed budget? A well-constructed budget will show in the highest detail possible how funds are to be expended.
6. Are the goals, measurable outcomes, and benchmarks clearly stated?
7. Does each application submit the appropriate Alabama Immigration Law required documentation?
8. Has the applicant received funding from this program in previous specialty crop block grant program funding cycles?

Additional Documents:

Upon being awarded, the successful applicants will be required to complete the following documents, among others:

1. Contract
2. W-9
3. E-verify enrollment
4. Vendor Form/Budget

Fund Disbursement

After the ADAI application is approved by USDA and funds have been dispersed to ADAI, awardees will be funded on a reimbursement basis.

Reporting Requirements for Approved Applications

Potential applicants are hereby notified that all successful grantees will be required to submit annual reports and final reports. Grantees are subject to site visits, phone calls and emails to check the status of their project(s) at any time for the duration of the award.

APPENDIX A

RESTRICTIONS AND LIMITATIONS ON GRANT FUNDS

Grant funds may not be used to fund political activities in accordance with provisions of the Hatch Act (5 U.S.C. 1501-1508 and 7321-7326).

Development or participation in lobbying activities pursuant to 31 U.S.C. 1352 including costs of membership in organizations substantially engaged in lobbying are unallowable. Capital expenditures for general purpose equipment, buildings, and land are unallowable as direct and indirect charges. Capital expenditures means expenditures for the acquisition cost of capital assets (equipment, buildings, land), or expenditures to make improvements to capital assets that materially increase their value or useful life.

Acquisition cost means the cost of the asset including the cost to put it in place. Acquisition cost for equipment, for example, means the net invoice price of the equipment, including the cost of any modifications, attachments, accessories, or auxiliary apparatus necessary to make it usable for the purpose for which it is acquired. Ancillary charges, such as taxes, duty, protective in transit insurance, freight, and installation may be included in, or excluded from the acquisition cost in accordance with the governmental unit's regular accounting practices. General purpose equipment means equipment, which is not limited to research, scientific or other technical activities. Examples include office equipment and furnishings, telephone networks, information technology equipment and systems, reproduction and printing equipment, and motor vehicles.

Equipment means an article of nonexpendable, tangible personal property having a useful life of more than one year and an acquisition cost which equals or exceeds \$5,000. Capital expenditures for special purpose equipment are allowable as direct costs, provided that items with a unit cost of \$5,000 or more have the prior approval of USDA.

(Note: Prior approval from USDA means that the special purpose equipment must be included in the State Plan, and the State Plan must receive approval from USDA. If special purpose equipment was not originally included in the approved State plan, then the grantee must request approval from USDA to purchase the equipment before utilizing grant funds. Special purpose equipment means equipment which is used only for research, scientific, or other technical activities.)

The special purpose equipment must solely enhance the competitiveness of eligible specialty crops and benefit the specialty crop industry. Rental costs of buildings and equipment are allowable as direct costs in accordance with the cost principles in Subpart T of 7 CFR 3015.

ALLOWABLE COSTS

All subawards are subject to those cost principles applicable to the particular organization concerned. For example, if a State government subawards to a university, the cost principles applicable to a university will apply. All costs must be associated with project activities that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops.

State and Local Governments and Indian Tribal Governments - 2 CFR 225 (OMB Circular A-87).

Colleges and Universities - 2 CFR 220 (OMB Circular A-21).

Non-Profits - 2 CFR 230 (OMB Circular A-122).

For Profits - 48 CFR Part 31.2.

APPENDIX C

ADMINISTRATION OF GRANTS

AMS applies the following federal grant uniform administrative requirements to the management of each grant award, and the State department of agriculture shall in turn apply these requirements to their subgrantees based on the type of organization through their contractual or cooperative linkages. For example, if the State subawards to a non-profit, the administrative requirements applicable to a non-profit will apply.

State and Local Governments and Indian Tribal Governments - 7 CFR 3015 and 7 CFR 3016

Colleges and Universities - 7 CFR 3015 and 7 CFR 3019

Non-Profits - 7 CFR 3015 and 7 CFR 3019

For Profits - 7 CFR 3015 and 7 CFR 3019

PROPOSAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

ADAI will select a review committee (team) of individuals who will be considered non-biased reviewers. There will be five (5) to seven (7) reviewers who will have a given time period to review all applications and score based on information in the application evaluation section of this RFP document.

Each reviewer will not be aware of the other reviewers. The process will be done electronically during a given time period, which will likely be 30-days. Reviewers will be representatives of the Alabama Agricultural Industry and non-biased to project applications. A reviewer who feels there is a conflict of interest with any proposal application can decline review.

Application Evaluation

Applications will be evaluated by a review committee and awards will be determined based on the following requirements:

1. How well the application meets all the submission requirements
2. How the project effectively shows a timeline and strategy for implementation
 - a. Short term projects (i.e. 12 to 24 months will be given higher priority)
3. How the project shows that it will effectively promote the competitiveness of specialty crops to the industry.
4. The breadth of the project; does the project show that it will affect a specialty crop as a whole?
5. Is there a well-constructed budget? A well-constructed budget will show in the highest detail possible how funds are to be expended.
6. Are the goals, **measurable outcomes**, and benchmarks clearly stated?
7. Has the applicant received funding from this program in previous specialty crop block grant program funding cycles?

Non-selected and selected proposal applications will be issued a notification letter by ADAI following the 2023 selection process. Please note, recommendations/selections will be incorporated into ADAI's 2023 State Specialty Crop Block Grant Program plan and submitted to USDA. USDA will review ADAI's state plan in July through September 2023 and respond with any questions regarding projects. Therefore, 2023 subgrantees will not be considered approved until concurrence is granted by USDA.

Alabama Immigration Law Notice:

All applicants must register with E-Verify and provide a copy of their E-verify Memorandum of Understanding to comply with Ala. Code Section 31-13-9.

Please visit the following website to learn more information regarding E-Verify:
www.dhs.gov/e-verify

All documentation shall be part of the proposal application package.