

National Priorities: Evaluation of Pollutants in Biosolids Request for Application (RFA) Informational Webinar

Questions and Answers

Oct. 27, 2020

Question: Are state environmental agency/department employees allowed to provide letters of support on applications?

Answer: Yes, state employees can provide letters of support; however, US EPA employees cannot participate in an application or provide any letters of support or intent.

Question: Is the RFA focus more on 1) literature review and analysis, 2) lab/field experiments, or 3) lab analysis?

Answer: Given the research questions, we would expect a combination of lab and field experiments. Literature reviews may be useful as part of submitted applications; however, we would not expect them to be the only thing that is conducted.

Question: If EPA does analysis, is that cost deducted from the award amount?

Answer: No, EPA assistance under a cooperative agreement would enhance what has already been proposed by the grantee. That said, applicants should develop projects that are not dependent on EPA (e.g., data, expertise, specialized equipment). EPA collaboration and involvement would enhance what is currently proposed by applicants.

Question: How much engagement from EPA labs can we assume?

Answer: Given the specific needs of each grantee project and the uncertainty surrounding availability of EPA resources (e.g., data, expertise, specialized equipment), applicants should propose research that is not dependent on EPA involvement. Specific information on how EPA will collaborate will be negotiated between EPA and grantees after the awards are selected and EPA resources will enhance what has already been proposed by grantees.

Question: What happens when that lab responds and says they cannot help or do not have the time?

Answer: Applicants should design their research under the assumption that EPA will not be helping with the research projects. EPA resources under a cooperative agreement will enhance research that applicants are already conducting and will depend on EPA resource and personnel availability.

Question: Is the intent to try to provide data for chemicals other than PFAS, given the number of PFAS projects EPA has funded recently?

Answer: Yes, we are expecting applicants to focus on pollutants other than PFAS, given the lack of information on these pollutants. However, proposals including PFAS as part of the research are welcome as long as the proposed research does not duplicate efforts with current/ongoing research in this area (either inside or outside of EPA). EPA research PFAS grants can be found on [water research grants](#) web page. Summaries of in-house EPA research topics can be found in the Office of Research and Development (ORD) Safe and Sustainable Water Research [\(SSWR\) Strategic Research Action Plan](#).

Question: Can you elaborate a bit more on the "national" scope? Does this mean the applicants need to cover different wastewater plants across the country or different soil types for the land application of biosolids, etc.?

Answer: Conducting research across all areas of the US, including having representative wastewater plants in all areas may not be feasible given the budget; however, proposed research should describe how the proposed research, approaches, and technologies are applicable throughout the nation.

Question: In the RFA, the human subject-related research has been discussed. How important is that part? Is human subjects related research expected to be a necessary or important component for the potentially funded project?

Answer: Human subjects is mentioned in all our RFAs. We do not expect that human subjects research would be a major part of the work given the research questions in the RFA; however, there may be cases where it may make a valuable contribution to a project and could be included.

Question: Can a single person work on more than one proposal? If so, what roles are restricted in duplicating?

Answer: Yes. You must ensure that the research proposed in each application is significantly different from any other that has been submitted to the EPA or from any other financial assistance you are currently receiving from the EPA or other federal government agency.

Question: Concerning foreign collaborators, should we include individuals (researchers) or institutions? Could the funds be used to perform some analysis in foreign labs and for comparative studies?

Answer: Yes, you may include foreign researchers as co-Principal Investigators or key personnel. In addition, you may perform work in foreign labs. Please be aware that if you plan foreign travel, you must provide justification.

Question: Can a city's wastewater treatment plant or the city's wastewater management office be a part of the research team?

Answer: While these organizations are not eligible to apply directly, personnel may be key parts of the research team and may also submit letters of support or intent.

Question: Does this RFA require more pollutants to be covered in one proposal?

Answer: Given the scope and budget we would expect more than one pollutant, or groups of pollutant to be covered in a research proposal.

Question: In the RFA, it is stated that around four projects are likely funded. Are all of the projects expected to be around the full size of budget?

Answer: The size of the budget is up to you. It is important for the purposes of peer review to demonstrate that you are able to perform the work feasibly within the budget you propose. Please note that this is grant research and not a "low bid" contract program, so we are not necessarily comparing budget sizes, as long as you do not exceed budget limits.

Question: Does the RFA focus on study of chemicals only or biological and chemical hazards?

Answer: The RFA is focusing on chemical pollutants.

Question: Can a wastewater utility pursue and lead this project?

Answer: From Section III.A of the RFA: “This solicitation is available to public and private nonprofit institutions and public and private universities and colleges located in the United States. Foreign entities, States, including the District of Columbia, and State and local government departments, territories, possessions, and Tribal nations of the U.S., are not eligible to apply under this RFA. Profit-making firms are not eligible to receive assistance agreements from the EPA under this program.” It is not likely that a wastewater utility meets the definition of an eligible applicant. However, as a governmental organization it might be a subawardee organization or as a private for-profit organization the utility can serve in a consulting role. In addition, the utility can provide funds to the eligible applicant organization as part of the cost share and may also submit letters of support or intent.

Question: Can we be involved with a project as well as be involved in peer-review?

Answer: No. Peer reviewers may not be involved with any applicant, not even submitting a letter of support or intent.

Question: Can we pursue, as lead, if we are an independent wastewater authority?

Answer: See answer above. The answer is likely no unless the organization meets the definition of a non-profit organization as specified in the RFA.

Question: Are regulated or unregulated pollutants preferred?

Answer: Unregulated pollutants are preferred, given the lack of information on those pollutants.

Question: Are microplastics considered pollutants?

Answer: For purposes of this RFA the focus is on chemical pollutants.

Question: What is the source of your 500 pollutants?

Answer: EPA identifies pollutants found in biosolids through open literature reviews and sewage sludge surveys. More information on this can be found on the EPA [Biosolids Website](#) and the biosolids list provided in the EPA's [CompTox Chemicals Dashboard](#).

Question: Are multi-institutional teams encouraged or even required?

Answer: Multi-institutional teams are not required but are allowable under this RFA. Applicants are required to develop a Collaboration and Engagement Plan (pg. 12 and 32 of RFA) which includes a description of strategies for obtaining collaboration and support from partners including states, tribes, academia, industry groups, non-for-profit organizations, associations, and local communities/community-based organizations. This may require multi-institutional teams and establishment of subawards, which are allowable and described on pg. 32 of the RFA. Additional information on funding subawards, partnerships, and contracts, can be found on the following link: <https://www.epa.gov/grants/epa-solicitation-clauses#contractsubawards>

Question: Not- for- profit organizations can submit proposals and for profit organizations can provide the cost share. Is that correct?

Answer: While for-profit organizations are not eligible to receive an assistance agreement, they can contribute to the cost share. Cost share is not restricted to for-profit entities. See pg. 16 of the RFA for information on cost share.

Question: What start date should be used on the application?

Answer: EPA expects awards to be made by September 2021; therefore, start dates of September – October 2021 would be appropriate.

Question: Can EPA employees or other federal researchers be collaborators (not PIs) on the proposed research?

Answer: EPA employees are not allowed to participate in an application or provide any kind of letters of support or intent. Other federal agencies may provide limited support as described in the RFA. EPA will award cooperative agreements under this announcement after awards are selected and EPA employees will be contacted after that takes place to negotiate ways in which EPA can collaborate with grantees. Please see pg. 15-16 for more information on cooperative agreements and the anticipated Federal involvement proposed by EPA.

Question: Regarding the cost match and allowable indirect costs. Do you have a maximum indirect cost rate? I can't find anything within the RFA. Also, would under recovery of indirect costs be considered a cost match?

Answer: There is not a maximum indirect cost (IDC) rate limit or requirement. EPA accepts IDC rates that are negotiated for each recipient on behalf of all Federal agencies by a cognizant Federal agency, which is the agency that typically provides the most direct funding to the recipient. For more information, please see the [EPA Indirect Cost Policy](#). Regarding the use of unrecovered indirect costs for the cost share requirement, this could be allowable; however, you would need to adequately describe how the unrecovered indirect costs will be applied towards cost share in your application (i.e., budget and budget justification) and approval would be contingent upon the Award Official approving the contribution of unrecovered indirect costs for cost share if the application is selected for funding. Section 6.5 of EPA's Indirect Cost Policy provides more detail on the use of unrecovered indirect costs for cost share.