

Signed, Sealed, and Delivered (Video transcript)

Signed, Sealed, and Delivered helps grant applicants understand how CSREES administers federal assistance to support the delivery of science and education programs for agriculture. It features CSREES personnel explaining how the agency budgets and plans; solicits, accepts and reviews proposals; and makes awards available to grantees.

Hi, I'm Colien Hefferan, the administrator of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service. Our mission is to advance knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and community vitality. We do this in a number of ways, but certainly the most important is that we lead science and education by working through university partnerships and others to identify critical issues facing agriculture broadly defined, whether it's environmental protection, or human health and well-being, or helping a community develop new businesses. We work with a number of people across the country to identify these issues, and then seek funding and support for the work that we think is critical to achieving the nation's goals.

The second thing we do though is equally complex and critically important, and, that is, we administer a large program of federal assistance to support universities, and individuals, educators, researchers across the country, to deliver programs in science and education for agriculture. In any one year, we may make as many as 2,000 grants and awards, as well as providing a base of support to land-grant universities for agricultural science and education. That means we may be managing, at any one time, as many as 8,000 different projects around the country that support the development of better nutrition education, better use of water, more efficient crop production, the whole range of issues important to American agriculture and consumers. Doing this is not easy. It takes a lot of people here in Washington, and even more across the country.

And, in this video, we want you to begin to understand how the work of each person in this long chain of planning, and development, and administration of agricultural science and education is important to serving America's needs. We hope this helps you understand your part in the process and appreciate what each of us does for American agricultural science and education.

(Narrator) The health of the Chesapeake Bay, one of the largest and most important ecosystems on America's eastern seaboard, is threatened daily by non-point source pollution. Contaminants enter the bay and other key U.S. waterways, from storm water runoff through neighborhoods, golf courses, and farms. One of those contaminants is phosphorous, a central nutrient in animal feed that can cause excessive algae growth in the bay, stealing oxygen from plants and animals. Research under way at the University of Maryland and partner institutions may help farmers in the mid-Atlantic region reduce the amount of phosphorous in poultry litter. That's good news for the environment, and it's being made possible by a competitive research grant.

(Rosalina Angel) My name is Rosalina Angel. This is an experiment involving turkeys. And we're looking at different feed additives - phytate, vitamin d-3, as well as citric acid - and looking at the amount of phosphorous that they make available to the animal.

(Narrator) Most of the phosphorous that exists in corn and soybean feed is unavailable to the birds. That means a lot of phosphorous ends up in the litter and the environment. What happens is it comes out of the body without being accessed by the animal. What we're trying to do with all the feed additives is actually make that phosphorous available. That way, we can minimize the amount of phosphorous that we put in the diet. We'll know exactly how much feed they ate; we'll know how much came out. In the lab we analyze for nutrients to determine how much phosphorous we have and in what state it is.

(Narrator) This important research could have tremendous economic and environmental impact.

(Angel) For example, in broilers, we are seeing about 60% decrease in the amount of phosphorous being excreted. In turkeys we're seeing 75% decrease.

(Narrator) And it all started with a competitive grant application. Today we'll show you the steps that bring a good idea from paper to proposal, through the grant approval process, and finally to research results. It all begins with budget, the money appropriated by Congress to fund the agency's programs.

(Tina Buch) Hello, I'm Tina Buch, the budget officer for CSREES. There are eight of us in the budget office, and we're responsible for the development, presentation, and execution of the budget. It takes approximately 16 to 18 months to develop a federal budget. During this time we work with department officials and our state partners to develop the budget. Agency officials appear before the Senate and House appropriations subcommittees to testify of the budget. And then we await the passage by Congress of the appropriations bill, and the approval of the bill by the President. Once we have a signed appropriation bill, or a continued resolution, we begin the process of providing the states their formula payments and making awards under our competitive and other programs.

(Narrator) Next, requests for proposals to put that grant money to good use are developed.

(Winston Sherman) Hi, how ya doing? Come on in. My name is Winston Sherman. I'm a policy specialist here in the Office of Extramural Programs. Our responsibility is to prepare requests for proposals. The RFP, request for proposal process, begins with the program officer, or program manager developing a draft of the request for proposals. It's at that point where we review the RFP in collaboration with the program office and make suggested changes. We then send it to the award branches within the Office of Extramural Programs for their review and input. After we receive their feedback, this RFP is further developed and sent forward to the management in the Office of Extramural Programs for review and input; and finally, to the administrator for signature and release. We're all looking at this RFP from a different perspective to carry on the mission of the agency.

(Narrator) Universities and other sources of grant applicants follow guidelines to make their proposals complete and competitive. Once a scientist has developed the proposal, the next step is to have institutional sign-off. We go through it relatively thoroughly for several things. Number

one, capability of doing that research. There are a lot of rules and regulations that have to be followed.

(Dan Ramia) We sort of look at it to see if it's got an overhead amount that's allowed by the RFP. We look at the dates of the project, if there's any cost-share or matching. We try to make sure that we have identified things that would be auditable. We're here to assist the faculty to do the research that is important.

(Angel) About half of the total research portfolio for our faculty is funded through competitive sources. This is a major source of funds for our faculty. It's becoming more of an important source for our faculty as time goes on.

(Narrator) Which proposals will be chosen for grant awards? That's the next step at CSREES headquarters.

(Melanie Krizmanich) Welcome to the proposals services unit. I am Melanie Krizmanich. This unit is responsible for receiving all proposals that are submitted to the agency, and processing those proposals to the point of delivery to the national program leader. This is the first step in the award process. Once proposals are delivered, the proposal services unit must open each package and perform a cursory review of the application page. The unit looks for the inclusion of items such as required signatures and to ascertain that the proposal was submitted within the deadline. The proposals meeting these requirements are then arranged by program or program area.

At this point the national program leader will review the proposals, assigning the programmatic code to each proposal. The programmatic code categorizes the type of work being proposed by the submitting organization. At this point, we assign a unique number to the proposal and stamp the number on the application page of the original and each copy. This number allows the agency to track the proposal through the award process. The original proposal is then hole punched and included in a brown jacket. We then enter the proposal number in C-REEMS, the agency database, along with general information put into that proposal. Other offices involved in the award process will build upon this information by adding information relevant to their work. Finally, documentation is generated from C-REEMS and is included in the jacket, which will be utilized by the national program leader.

(Narrator) Next, the all-important peer review process.

(Charles Cleland) My name is Charles Cleland. I'm the director of the Small Business Innovation Research Program at USDA, and I'm going to talk to you about the panel review process that we follow in evaluating grant proposals. The process that we follow is one of peer review, where we use extensive numbers of outside experts drawn from universities and government research facilities to evaluate the proposals. We start by identifying one person who's an expert in a particular field to serve as the topic manager. We then assemble a panel and select all the ad hoc reviewers. These are people, in addition to the panel members, who will be asked to review the proposals. The reviews are collected and the panels come to Washington and meet for usually two days and discuss each proposal, place them in categories, depending upon their merit. There will be a number of these up on the board, and then we'll go back and take the

top 30% or so and discuss them in more detail, and then place them in rank order. And that rank order is what we use to determine who gets funded. This is taxpayer money we're working with, and we want to make sure it's used in the most appropriate way.

(Narrator) When grant selections are made, the process continues.

(Gwen Leftwich) I'm Gwendolyn Leftwich. Let's find out what happens once the proposal has been recommended for award. First we get a list of recommended proposals. With that list we prepare a jacket. One of the critical elements in this jacket is the recommended award data sheet or the RAD. The RAD is the mechanism used to commit the funds for the project. What we do is, we have several pairs of eyes within this office that actually review the jacket to ensure that everything is in the jacket when it reaches the awards office.

(Narrator) Then it's on to the awards unit.

(Adriene Woodin) I'm Adriene Woodin. I'm a team leader in the awards unit, and today we're going to be walking you through the awards process. Proposals are forwarded to our office for assignment to an awards specialist. After the proposals have been assigned, the file is forwarded to a clerk for logging the assignments into the database. The specialist reviews the proposal for the required forms and documentation and to be certain that the proposal is in compliance with the stated regulations. If a deficiency is noted during the review, the grantee is contacted to provide the additional details. The award information is entered into the database. Award forms are generated from this database, and the completed file is forwarded to the team leader where the award file is thoroughly reviewed for quality control. After the team leader or branch chief signs the award document, the file is then forwarded to the clerk who logs the assignments out of the database and distributes the award accordingly.

(Narrator) After distribution of the award, the funds may be released.

(Denise Robinson) My name is Denise Robinson, and I'm a team leader in the Funds Management Branch, also referred to as FMB. Once the award has been signed off, and we have received it from the awards unit, there are two methods of payment. The one that's used the majority of the time is electronic transfer through the Department of Health and Human Services payment management system. The other method of payment is treasury check. On a monthly basis, our FMB will issue a letter of authorization, and that will notify the recipient that the funds are available at HHS. It will tell you what account the funds have been set up under, and the amount of the award, and the date that it will be available so that you can request your funds.

(Narrator) This orderly and important process makes it possible for grants to deliver great results.

(Angel) In the Chesapeake Bay area, we know that phosphorous leaches into waterways, and it is creating problems. We're trying to produce meat in this case, while having as little impact on the cost of the consumer as possible, and minimizing environmental impacts.

(Narrator) To recap first the budget process. Congress makes funds available to CSREES. The agency determines the program areas to support, and publishes these, along with administrative

requirements, in a request for proposals or RFP. Using the RFP as a guide, applicants write proposals and submit them to CSREES. Proposals are received and the review process begins. A panel of experts reviews and ranks the proposals. The agency program manager uses the panel deliberations to decide which proposals to recommend for funding. The Office of Extramural Programs conducts an administrative review of proposals recommended for funding to ensure they meet all legal and regulatory requirements, then prepares and signs the awards, and mails them to the recipients. Funds are made available to the recipients through an electronic payment system to be drawn down as needed. The recipient conducts the project. CSREES staff and the recipient interact regarding post-award matters to ensure the project progresses and is conducted appropriately. The USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service—working to advance knowledge for agriculture, human health and well-being, communities, and the environment.