

(1) *Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).* As outlined in 7 CFR Part 3407 (the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service regulations implementing NEPA), the environmental data for any proposed project is to be provided to CSREES so that CSREES may determine whether any further action is needed. In some cases, however, the preparation of environmental data may not be required. Certain categories of actions are excluded from the requirements of NEPA.

(1) *NEPA determination.* In order for CSREES to determine whether any further action is needed with respect to NEPA, pertinent information regarding the possible environmental impacts of a particular project is necessary; therefore, Form CSREES-1234, "NEPA Exclusions Form," must be included in the proposal indicating whether the applicant is of the opinion that the project falls within a categorical exclusion and the reasons therefor. If it is the applicant's opinion that the proposed project falls within the categorical exclusions, the specific exclusion must be identified. Form CSREES-1234 and any supporting documentation should be placed at the end of the proposal and identified in the Table of Contents.

(2) *Exceptions to categorical exclusions.* Even though a project may fall within the categorical exclusions, CSREES

may determine that an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement is necessary for an activity, if substantial controversy on environmental grounds exists or if other extraordinary conditions or circumstances are present which may cause such activity to have a significant environmental effect.

**Subpart F—Review and Evaluation of a Research Proposal**

**§ 3406.19 Proposal review—research.**

The proposal evaluation process includes both internal staff review and merit evaluation by peer review panels comprised of scientists, educators, business representatives, and Government officials who are highly qualified to render expert advice in the areas supported. Peer review panels will be selected and structured to provide optimum expertise and objective judgment in the evaluation of proposals.

**§ 3406.20 Evaluation criteria for research proposals.**

The maximum score a research proposal can receive is 150 points. Unless otherwise stated in the annual solicitation published in the FEDERAL REGISTER, the peer review panel will consider the following criteria and weights to evaluate proposals submitted:

Evaluation criterion	Weight
(a) Significance of the problem:	
This criterion is used to assess the likelihood that the project will advance or have a substantial impact upon the body of knowledge constituting the natural and social sciences undergirding the agricultural, natural resources, and food systems.	
(1) Impact—Is the problem or opportunity to be addressed by the proposed project clearly identified, outlined, and delineated? Are research questions or hypotheses precisely stated? Is the project likely to further advance food and agricultural research and knowledge? Does the project have potential for augmenting the food and agricultural scientific knowledge base? Does the project address a State, regional, national, or international problem(s)? Will the benefits to be derived from the project transcend the applicant institution or the grant period?	15 points.
(2) Continuation plans—Are there plans for continuation or expansion of the project beyond USDA support? Are there plans for continuing this line of research or research support activity with the use of institutional funds after the end of the grant? Are there indications of external, non-Federal support? Are there realistic plans for making the project self-supporting? What is the potential for royalty or patent income, technology transfer or university-business enterprises? What are the probabilities of the proposed activity or line of inquiry being pursued by researchers at other institutions?	10 points.
(3) Innovation—Are significant aspects of the project based on an innovative or a non-traditional approach? Does the project reflect creative thinking? To what degree does the venture reflect a unique approach that is new to the applicant institution or new to the entire field of study?	10 points.
(4) Products and results—Are the expected products and results of the project clearly outlined and likely to be of high quality? Will project results be of an unusual or unique nature? Will the project contribute to a better understanding of or an improvement in the quality, distribution, or effectiveness of the Nation's food and agricultural scientific and professional expertise base, such as increasing the participation of women and minorities?	15 points.
(b) Overall approach and cooperative linkages:	

Evaluation criterion	Weight
<p>This criterion relates to the soundness of the proposed approach and the quality of the partnerships likely to evolve as a result of the project.</p>	
<p>(1) Proposed approach—Do the objectives and plan of operation appear to be sound and appropriate relative to the proposed initiative(s) and the impact anticipated? Is the proposed sequence of work appropriate? Does the proposed approach reflect sound knowledge of current theory and practice and awareness of previous or ongoing related research? If the proposed project is a continuation of a current line of study or currently funded project, does the proposal include sufficient preliminary data from the previous research or research support activity? Does the proposed project flow logically from the findings of the previous stage of study? Are the procedures scientifically and managerially sound? Are potential pitfalls and limitations clearly identified? Are contingency plans delineated? Does the timetable appear to be readily achievable?</p>	5 points.
<p>(2) Evaluation—Are the evaluation plans adequate and reasonable? Do they allow for continuous or frequent feedback during the life of the project? Are the individuals involved in project evaluation skilled in evaluation strategies and procedures? Can they provide an objective evaluation? Do evaluation plans facilitate the measurement of project progress and outcomes?</p>	5 points
<p>(3) Dissemination—Does the proposed project include clearly outlined and realistic mechanisms that will lead to widespread dissemination of project results, including national electronic communication systems, publications and presentations at professional society meetings?</p>	5 points.
<p>(4) Partnerships and collaborative efforts—Does the project have significant potential for advancing cooperative ventures between the applicant institution and a USDA agency? Does the project workplan include an effective role for the cooperating USDA agency(s)? Will the project encourage and facilitate better working relationships in the university science community, as well as between universities and the public or private sector? Does the project encourage appropriate multi-disciplinary collaboration? Will the project lead to long-term relationships or cooperative partnerships that are likely to enhance research quality or supplement available resources?</p>	15 points.
<p>(c) Institutional capacity building:</p>	
<p>This criterion relates to the degree to which the project will strengthen the research capacity of the applicant institution. In the case of a joint project proposal, it relates to the degree to which the project will strengthen the research capacity of the applicant institution and that of any other institution assuming a major role in the conduct of the project.</p>	
<p>(1) Institutional enhancement—Will the project help the institution to advance the expertise of current faculty in the natural or social sciences; provide a better research environment, state-of-the-art equipment, or supplies; enhance library collections related to the area of research; or enable the institution to provide efficacious organizational structures and reward systems to attract, hire and retain first-rate research faculty and students—particularly those from underrepresented groups?</p>	15 points.
<p>(2) Institutional commitment—Is there evidence to substantiate that the institution attributes a high-priority to the project, that the project is linked to the achievement of the institution's long-term goals, that it will help satisfy the institution's high-priority objectives, or that the project is supported by the institution's strategic plans? Will the project have reasonable access to needed resources such as scientific instrumentation, facilities, computer services, library and other research support resources?</p>	15 points.
<p>(d) Personnel Resources .....</p>	10 Points
<p>This criterion relates to the number and qualifications of the key persons who will carry out the project. Are designated project personnel qualified to carry out a successful project? Are there sufficient numbers of personnel associated with the project to achieve the stated objectives and the anticipated outcomes? Will the project help develop the expertise of young scientists at the doctoral or post-doctorate level?</p>	
<p>(e) Budget and cost-effectiveness:</p>	
<p>This criterion relates to the extent to which the total budget adequately supports the project and is cost-effective.</p>	
<p>(1) Budget—Is the budget request justifiable? Are costs reasonable and necessary? Will the total budget be adequate to carry out project activities? Are the source(s) and amount(s) of non-Federal matching support clearly identified and appropriately documented? For a joint project proposal, is the shared budget explained clearly and in sufficient detail?</p>	10 points.
<p>(2) Cost-effectiveness—Is the proposed project cost-effective? Does it demonstrate a creative use of limited resources, maximize research value per dollar of USDA support, achieve economies of scale, leverage additional funds or have the potential to do so, focus expertise and activity on a high-priority research initiative(s), or promote coalition building for current or future ventures?</p>	5 points.
<p>(f) Overall quality of proposal .....</p>	5 points
<p>This criterion relates to the degree to which the proposal complies with the application guidelines and is of high quality. Is the proposal enhanced by its adherence to instructions (table of contents, organization, pagination, margin and font size, the 20-page limitation, appendices, etc.); accuracy of forms; clarity of budget narrative; well prepared vitae for all key personnel associated with the project; and presentation (are ideas effectively presented, clearly articulated, thoroughly explained, etc.)?</p>	