



Agricultural Marketing Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Transportation & Marketing Program, Grants Division

PANEL REVIEWER MANUAL

FARMERS MARKET PROMOTION PROGRAM
AND
LOCAL FOOD PROMOTION PROGRAM

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PART I. BACKGROUND

Applications submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) and Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) are evaluated by a panel of external reviewers to ensure they receive full and uniform consideration, and that the selected proposals merit receipt of Federal funds. As a reviewer, you play an important role in the evaluation of applications to ensure fairness, competence, and objectivity. This manual provides instructions and guidance on activities associated with the review of applications.

The USDA- AMS is working in collaboration with GrantSolutions (GS) to use their online Application Review Module (ARM) for conducting the competitive review process.

PART II. PROGRAM PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION

FMPP and LFPP aim to develop, coordinate, and expand direct producer-to-consumer markets and local and regional food business enterprises that engage as intermediaries in indirect producer to consumer marketing to help increase access to and availability of locally and regionally produced agricultural products.

1. **FMPP** focuses on the development, coordination, and expansion of **direct producer- to consumer** markets. FMPP offers the following project types:

Project Type	Amount	Duration	Project Examples
Capacity Building (CB)	\$50,000- \$250,000	36 Months (3 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local training and education • Farmers market, roadside stand, CSA, or agritourism startup and/or expansion • Market analysis and strategic planning • Recruitment, outreach, and retention
Community Development, Training and Technical Assistance (CTA)	\$100,000- \$500,000	36 Months (3 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statewide or regional training/education to help develop a direct-to-producer markets • Technical assistance for advertising and promotion of locally and regionally produced agricultural products • Network and organization building, including developing sourcing channels using direct-to-consumer market opportunities • Technical support for small- and mid-sized producers to become compliant with specifications and standards
Turnkey Marketing and Promotion	\$50,000 - \$100,000	24 Months (2 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and analyze new/improved market opportunities. • Develop/revise a marketing plan. • Design/purchase marketing and promotion media. • Implement a marketing plan.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate marketing and promotion activities.
Turnkey Recruitment and Training	\$50,000 - \$100,000	24 Months (2 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and analyze new or improved strategies for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. Develop or revise strategies or plans for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. Design materials for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. Implement plans for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. Evaluate outcomes related to vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both.

2. **LFPP** focuses on the development, coordination, and expansion of local and regional food business enterprises (including those that are **not direct producer-to-consumer markets**) that process, distribute, aggregate, or store locally or regionally produced food products. LFPP offers the following project types:

Project Type	Amount	Duration	Project Examples
Planning	\$25,000-\$100,000	24 Months (2 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feasibility study for a new food hub. Hiring an expert(s) to provide technical assistance to implement a food transportation system Hiring an expert(s) to train on managing a local/regional food storage or processing facility Devising a business plan for a new business
Implementation	\$100,000-\$500,000	36 months (3 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing and/or expanding the scope of local/regional food incubators. Establishing, expanding and/or diversifying existing kitchens and food processing facilities. Instituting individual or group GAP certification for sellers of local food into wholesale marketing channels. Exploring opportunities for food hubs/aggregators to create institutional and retail market access through joint business networks. Providing training and/or technical assistance to accomplish any of, or related to, any of the above activities.
Turnkey Marketing and Promotion	\$50,000-\$100,000	24 (2 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and analyze new/improved market opportunities. Develop/revise a marketing plan.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design/purchase marketing and promotion media. • Implement a marketing plan. • Evaluate marketing and promotion activities.
Turnkey Recruitment and Training	\$50,000- \$100,000	24 (2 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and analyze new or improved strategies for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. • Develop or revise strategies or plans for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. • Design materials for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. • Implement plans for vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both. • Evaluate outcomes related to vendor and producer recruitment, training, or both.

Note: For detail information about program purpose, eligibility, description on the different project types, and review criteria please review the specific [FMPP](#) or [LFPP](#) Request for Applications (RFAs).

PART III. OVERVIEW OF THE PANEL REVIEW PROCESS

Reviewers are required to commit approximately 4 weeks to the review process. Panel are organized into teams of 3 members, each of whom brings local and regional food system expertise to the evaluation process.

AMS designates one reviewer from each team as the Panel Chair. Each individual team member (including the Panel Chair) will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the applications against standard review criteria (see RFAs). The Panel Chair will coordinate and lead consensus review via teleconference to develop consensus scores and comments for each application. Panel Chairs are responsible for compiling the team’s consensus results into a Panel Summary Report in ARM before submitting to AMS. Applicants will receive a copy of the Panel Summary Report. Thus, comments in the final Panel Summary Report should provide **substantive** and **constructive** feedback to help applicants improve their application if they choose to apply again.

AMS will fund applications that are not only technically sound but also have the potential for significant impact and a reasonable probability to succeed. Remember that a project may be innovative, a great idea, or be a good cause with intended targets, but it must meet the purpose (**see section 3.2 of the FMPP or LFPP RFA) of the grant program.**

Each panel will be assigned a number of applications to review. Panels should refer to the Program specific page of AMS’ Grant Reviewer Guidance and Resources website for information on the timeline of the review.

AMS will review Panel Summary Reports as they are submitted in ARM and return reports to the Panel Chair for editing as needed. Any returned reports will include notes on what specifically needs to be changed. **Ensuring from the start that comments included in the Panel Summary Reports are written per the guidelines in this document will help reduce the amount of back and forth in this process.**

PART IV. PRE-REVIEW ACTIVITIES

A. PEER REVIEWER WEBINARS

Reviewers and Panel Chairs are **required** to attend two webinars. The initial webinar will provide an overview of the Application Review Module (ARM) system. The second webinar will discuss the FMPP and LFPP programs and scoring criteria, the review process and give reviewers the opportunity to ask questions regarding review policies and procedures. If you are unable to attend the orientation due to an extenuating circumstance, you must notify us in advance by emailing FMLFPPReview@grantreview.org. More information regarding the orientation will be provided via email. The webinars will cover:

- Overview of ARM System
- General information regarding the review process;
- Reviewer responsibilities including confidentiality and conflicts of interest;
- Developing and writing clear, concise evaluations using the published review criteria;
- General information on the RFA;
- Reviewer stipends; and
- Review team logistics

B. CONFLICT OF INTEREST/CONFIDENTIALITY

All reviewers are required to follow the AMS Conflict of Interest & Confidentiality Policy (form AMS-34) which should have already been signed and submitted during the reviewer recruitment process. **If you did not sign and submit your conflict-of-interest form when registering, please email FMLFPPReview@grantreview.org immediately.** By signing this form, you, as a reviewer, have certified that you will inform AMS if you discover a conflict of interest and that the contents of each application and all team discussions will remain confidential. Failure to comply with the Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality policies may subject you to the removal from the current review and/or disqualify you for future review of grant applications.

1. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

As soon as you gain access to your assigned applications, immediately review the applicants to determine if any potential conflicts of interest exist, including actual or perceived conflicts. **Reviewers should identify any conflicts of interest as early as possible to avoid compromising the integrity of the review.** Reviewers are required to inform GS/AMS if they discover a conflict of interest or suspect a potential conflict of interest with any of the assigned applications. If necessary, GS and/or AMS/FMLFPP Review Team will re-assign the conflicting application(s) or re-assign the reviewer(s).

2. CONFIDENTIALITY

All aspects of your review should remain confidential to protect both the reviewers and the applicants. Upon completion of the review process, any printed applications must be shredded, and any downloaded applications must be deleted from your computer. At no time prior to, during, or after the application review should reviewers discuss the applications, comments, recommendations, evaluations, scores, names of applicants, or names of other reviewers with anyone outside the review process. Questions regarding applications should be directed to AMS. **Direct contact or communication with applicants or associated persons is strictly prohibited.**

Note: An applicant (or other individual) may request review-related information via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the Federal Government is required to release the names of all reviewers who participated in the program review. However, names of the individual reviewers will NOT be associated with specific application review assignments.

C. REVIEWER RESPONSIBILITIES

1. INDIVIDUAL REVIEWERS

As a reviewer, you are responsible for evaluating each application assigned to you. You are expected to:

- Read the Request for Application (RFA), any RFA related materials, and the ARM Training Manual prior to the Training Webinars.
- Complete individual reviews (scores and comments) in the ARM system for assigned applications following guidance from this manual. **Do not speak with other team members about the proposals until the consensus review.**
- Ensure that your comments correspond to how you score each section of the proposal. If the comments suggest significant weaknesses, a high score should not be assigned. If the section receives a low score, the comments should reflect significant weaknesses, and vice versa.
- Ensure that comments are substantive, constructive, and helpful to the applicant. One-liners comments are not acceptable. Criterion responses should reflect the entirety of each criterion. Comments should be written to support each and every criterion.
- Actively participate throughout the review process by providing individual reviews that meet program standards and actively discuss your opinion with fellow team members during the consensus review. You must participate in ALL panel discussions set by the Panel Panel Chair. Failure to reply to the panel Panel Chair will result in dismissal.
- Maintain collegial dialogue in your discussions with fellow team members and provide constructive feedback to the applicants through your consensus comments.
- Meet deadlines established by AMS staff and your panel chair.
- If you discover a missing component of the proposal, make a note, and discuss it during the consensus review. It is okay to score an application lower if the applicant fails to 1) answer all the questions in a section (with no apparent reason or explanation), and/or 2) follow the instructions in the RFA.

- Inform AMS and/or Panel Chair **immediately** of any conflicts of interest or if you cannot meet the review requirements.
 - Notify the AMS and GrantSolutions Review staff at FMLFPPReview@grantreview.org, if you encounter any challenges with your Chair or other Panel Members.
-

2. PANEL CHAIR (PANEL CHAIR)

Panel Chairs perform the dual role of individual reviewer and Chair. Panel chairs are expected to:

Prior to the Reading Days

- Read the assigned Request for Applications (RFA) in its entirety, all program related materials, each application assigned to your panel, all reviewer instructions/guidance materials, and the ARM Training Manual prior to any Panel Chairs Training Webinar. ARM is the software utilized to collect the scores and conduct the remote review.
- Attend the Mandatory Grant Review and ARM Training Webinar.
- Ensure ALL panelists enter scores and thorough comments in ARM prior to each panel discussion.
- Coordinate, set, and monitor a work schedule for your panel to participate in each panel discussions concerning application strengths and weaknesses via teleconference.
- Notify the ARM GrantSolutions Team, if you encounter any challenges with your Panel Members, if you cannot resolve meeting scheduling internal to your panel, or if you have any conflicts of interests with any applications that you receive.
- Notify your USDA Federal Panel Manager if you have challenges/questions regarding the Announcement/Criteria.

During the Reading Days

- Read the RFA and related materials, the ARM Training Manual, and all applications assigned to your panel.

Panel Review Comments

- Monitor Reviewer submissions and ensure that comments are properly provided for every criterion and support the scores provided by the reviewer:
 - Comments should be written to support each and every criterion (if comments are desired/required/requested).
 - Ensure substantive comments are entered that focus on strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions to improve.
 - Comments must be written in language that is appropriate to share with the applicant.
- Manage the timeline of your panel work-flow review process to ensure that Reviewers are on schedule for score submissions on time.
- Ensure that your team members' individual reviews scores and comments are completed in ARM prior to the consensus review discussion.

- Provide panelists the opportunity to make changes to their scores and comments prior to finalizing the evaluation.

Panel Summary Reports and Consensus Review Prep

- As Reviewers complete and submit their written evaluative comments and scores in ARM, contact your team members to schedule meetings to discuss the applications and conduct the consensus review. You may use a variety of communication tools available, including Zoom, Skype, Facetime, three-way calling features on cell phones, etc.
- During or after the consensus discussion, the Chair will prepare the Panel Summary Reports.
 - The Panel Summary Report should reflect the consolidated evaluative comments provided by the Reviewers as well as any additional comments, written by you as Panel Chair, that are deemed appropriate for incorporation into the Panel Summary Report.
 - Ensure all comments are thorough and concise; one-liners are not acceptable. Avoid writing “I” statements, duplications, and contradictory statements in the Panel Summary Report.
- Responsiveness to the panel members is mandatory.

During the Review Days

- Objectively facilitate the panel review conversations, ensuring that there is open dialog that flows smoothly.
- Ensure all team members have a chance to freely present their views during the consensus review.
- Compile and edit written comments for final Summary Report in ARM ensuring that comments reflect the score awarded to each criterion.
- Ensure that your team members have read and agree to the consensus review by the established due date.
- Ensure full participation of all panel members.
- Responsiveness to the Federal Panel Managers and Review Directors is mandatory.

3. ALTERNATE REVIEWER

Alternate reviewers that are on stand-by will be contacted if a panelist cancels or is otherwise unable to fulfill the required duties. If an alternate cannot be found, current reviewers may be assigned as alternates to another team and will be compensated accordingly.

PART V. REVIEW ACTIVITIES

A. REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS (RFA)

Familiarize yourself with the RFA for which you are reviewing applications (FMPP or LFPP) before beginning your review of the proposals. Use the RFA throughout the review to understand the application requirements. Pay attention to the Program Description (section 3.0), the Eligibility

Information (section 2.0), and the Review Criteria (section 6.2). You can refer to our [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ's\) document](#) for additional information.

B. ACCESSING THE APPLICATIONS (Application Review Model (ARM))

Each reviewer will receive an email with their individual ARM username and password in order to access the grant applications assigned to your team. Once you are logged in you will open the appropriate session, indicate if you have a conflict of interest by checking a box and go to the panel list screens to access the application. Please refer to the ARM Reviewer User's Manual for more details.

C. REVIEW CRITERIA

Each application needs to be reviewed competitively using the review criteria and respective scoring as mentioned in the RFA (Section 6.2). Each review criterion's full description is provided in the ARM system as well as the respective Program's RFA.

D. INDIVIDUAL SCORE AND COMMENT

1. REVIEWERS COMMENTS

Reviewers should identify and clearly state strengths and weaknesses for **EACH** review criterion. In certain circumstances you may find it difficult to write comments for each review criterion. If this occurs, consider listing either two to three commendable features, and/or instances where the criteria elements are not met, for each of the review criteria. **Comments must be written in complete sentences.**

- **A strength** is a response that clearly meets or substantially exceeds requirements set forth in a review criterion.
- **A weakness** is a response that falls short of meeting requirements set forth in a review criterion.

Statements should be constructive and absent of bias and outside information.

2. REVIEWERS SCORES

Individual scores should reflect the comments made for each review criterion. Please make substantive scoring differentiations between proposals that will result in a reasonable distribution of numerical scores. A proposal with many negative comments should not receive a high score, and vice versa. Each proposal must meet basic requirements. **If the application is incomplete or if the applicant has not fully addressed the required elements, note the discrepancies in your comments and score accordingly.**

- As a Reviewer you can only see your own scores and comments.
- You must enter a score before you can enter a comment.
- ARM automatically totals your overall evaluation score for you as you enter your individual criterion scores.
- You cannot submit your evaluation to the panel chair unless you have entered scores for all scoring criteria.

[APPENDIX A – GUIDELINES FOR WRITING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES](#) contains guidance on writing strengths and weaknesses and for scoring each proposal.

Note: To assist AMS on final selection no two applications reviewed by your panel may have the same score.

E. CONSENSUS MEETINGS, SCORING AND COMMENT WORKBOOK

1. THE CONSENSUS REVIEW PROCESS

Consensus requires working together as a team to determine scores, and comments for all applications. It is based on compromise, and the ability to find common ground. Everyone should be satisfied with the outcome.

To make the best use of the team’s time, we suggest not spending too much time where there is general agreement about an aspect of the proposal. Instead, focus the discussion on significant differences of opinion or wide variance between individual scores for a section.

Teams may use whichever business communication technology is most appropriate (such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams) to conduct their consensus discussions, provided that access is available to all team members.

2. PANEL CHAIR FACILITATION

The panel chair should facilitate the discussion and draft comments by:

- Considering each proposal in turn, beginning with a brief overview of the proposal:
 - Name of the applicant organization
 - Title of the application
 - Goals and Objectives
 - Who benefits, and
 - How the project will be implemented
- Leading the discussion about the application’s strengths and weaknesses, placing specific emphasis on the review criteria. AMS will fund projects that are not only technically sound, but also have the potential for significant impact and a reasonable probability to succeed. Discuss what may be gained if the project is selected and is successful.
- Ensuring substantive and constructive comments for each criterion per proposal. Comments are required for **EACH** criterion.
- Reminding team members that the consensus comments and scores will be shared with applicants and become a part of the application file (public record). For that reason, the tone of the comments should focus on strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions to improve. Again, comments should be constructive, but not harsh or inflammatory. Be honest in your evaluation but also acknowledge specific proposal strengths where appropriate.
- Ensure that all comments reflect a consensus viewpoint, not that of one individual. Panel Chairs reviewers may use individual review comments as guides but **should not simply cut/paste all**

individual review comments together to form one “consensus” review response. “I” statements should not be included in the Panel Summary report.

Refer to the examples in [APPENDIX B – EXAMPLE SUMMARY OF CONSENSUS COMMENTS](#) for additional detail on preparing consensus comments.

F. CLARIFICATION ON ELIGIBLE AND INELIGIBLE PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

It is very important that applications are complete according to the RFA requirements. Upon reviewing the application materials, a reviewer may determine that an application does not fully meet the RFA requirements, is missing required documents or that the proposal contains a budget discrepancy or unallowable cost. Those applications should be scored accordingly.

Reviewers should individually score applications according to the review criteria and add comments that can be discussed during the consensus review. If the team questions the overall eligibility of an application, the Panel Chair should contact the FMPP/LFPP Review Team before making a final decision. Once the application eligibility is confirmed, Panel Chair will discuss with the team during the consensus review and score it to reflect eligibility decision. Discuss any questions regarding eligibility with the AMS contact.

Reviewers should review and note if budget expenses seem appropriate, low, or unreasonably high and if it's consistent with the size and scope of the project. For detailed information on how to review the budget, see [APPENDIX C – REVIEWING THE APPLICATION BUDGET](#). Although we do not expect reviewers to decide whether costs are allowable or not, we ask reviewers to comment whether the cost is necessary and reasonable to accomplish the project or if there are any discrepancies between what is described in the proposal's narrative (Work Plan, Project Management Plan, Partners List, etc.) and what is requested in the Budget Summary section of the Project Narrative.

For your reference, please see [APPENDIX D – ALLOWABLE AND UNALLOWABLE COSTS](#) for some common allowable/unallowable project costs.

PART VII. CONTACT INFORMATION

ARM Questions:

Grant Review Team

Email: FMLFPPReview@grantreview.org

Programmatic Questions:

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APPENDIX A – GUIDELINES FOR WRITING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The following are guidelines and examples to help panel members describe strengths and weaknesses.

FOCUS ON THE REVIEW CRITERIA (SECTION 6.2 OF THE RFA)

Use only the review criteria for all assigned applications. Do not consider factors outside the scope of any review criterion. Only consider what is written in the proposal. Don't make assumptions or judgements based on what you know about any prior work completed or the reputation of the organizations or people involved. In fact, if you have prior knowledge, this may be a conflict of interest that merits notifying AMS staff.

Remember that each application should be evaluated on its own merit. The evaluation should reflect a clear, objective, explicit, and justified assessment of the application. The reviewer should write the strengths and weaknesses based on how well the applicant develops the proposed project and the extent to which the project is responsive to the published criteria.

Be constructive and directly address each criterion. Reference the review criteria, but do not repeat it back to the applicant word-for-word.

CLEAR AND CONCISE WRITING

Provide information that helps the applicant understand why a particular statement or recommendation was made.

Use complete declarative sentences with language that presents ideas fully. Incomplete sentences and fragments will be returned to Panel Chair and will delay the completion of team's review.

Make clear, definitive assertions. For example, instead of "*The application appears to not have included objectives,*" write "*The application does not include objectives.*" You can use phrases like "*it would have been strengthened by...*"

If using acronyms, write out the entire name followed by the acronym in parenthesis the first time the acronym is used.

Avoid duplicate statements listed under strengths and weaknesses.

Avoid contradictory statements. Panel Chair must review the Panel Summary Report prior submission to AMS to ensure no contradictory statements are listed under the strengths and weaknesses.

PROVIDE AN EVEN-HANDED REVIEW

Depersonalize your comments. When describing a weakness, always refer to the *application's* weaknesses, *NOT the applicant's* weaknesses. Use of the term "applicant organization" is also preferred over "applicant." Avoid using phrases like "fails to" and other negative statements. Also, include an example, where possible. For instance, instead of stating "*The applicant organization fails to demonstrate the issue or need the project addresses,*" write "*The applicant organization does not clearly*

demonstrate the issue or need suggested by the proposal. For example, they mention demand for a neighborhood mobile market but do not explain who is requesting the service and why.” The difference is subtle but significant.

Write in the third person (i.e., “*The applicant organization plans to...*”) rather than the first or second person, (i.e., “*This reviewer feels...*” or “*In the opinion of this reviewer...*”). The final consensus needs to be the combined opinions of all reviewers. Use page numbers in lieu of lengthy passages of text when examples are too lengthy to include, but specific to the statement. Avoid writing “I” statements.

Avoid comparing one application’s content, process, or budget to any other assigned application. Each application should be reviewed independently and be assessed and analyzed based on the facts presented within the application.

MAKE SURE THAT THE APPLICATION’S SCORE REFLECTS THE REVIEW COMMENTS

Think in terms of a rating scale when scoring proposals, such as high, above average, average, below average, or low; or a grading scale such as A, B, C, D, or F. Once you have broadly defined the rating, select a more specific numeric score that best reflects the evaluation.

Review and be sure that the consensus review scoresheets are completely accurate concerning the presence or absence of information in the application.

OTHER TECHNICAL ITEMS TO CONSIDER

Use basic formatting when writing your comments, avoiding any bold or underlining or using numbers and/or bullets.

APPENDIX B – EXAMPLE SUMMARY OF CONSENSUS COMMENTS

The following are examples of both inadequate and adequate comments.

EXAMPLES OF **INADEQUATE** COMMENTS

STRENGTH

Reviewer Comment	Problem
The budget as presented is reasonable.	This statement doesn't explain why the budget is reasonable. There must be support language justifying this finding.

WEAKNESS

Reviewer Comment	Problem
The applicant fails to present numbers of its beneficiaries with whom it reaches with its project. It fails to present short-term and long-term impacts to the beneficiaries.	Use "the application" or "the applicant organization" instead of "the applicant." Avoid using words such as "fails to present," in case the point is indeed addressed somewhere in the application. Change to "does not adequately present."

EXAMPLE OF **ADEQUATE** COMMENTS

STRENGTH

Reviewer Comment
The application presents compelling background data for deriving the initial and final sales dollar amount and a plausible evaluation plan for collecting the sales data by the end of the grant.
The applicant organization provides a targeted customer count increase and percent change performance indicator and a clear summary of anticipated challenges that are predicted to contribute to and restrict progress toward the indicator, including action steps for addressing identified restricting factors.
The applicant organization thoroughly describes the extent of the short-term and long-term impacts of the farmers' market promotion and training program to the project beneficiaries.
The work plan details the activities necessary to develop the framework to support purchasing of local food and then facilitate implementation to the regional school districts in a fully integrated statewide network.
The applicant organization clearly describes the objectives to increase access to local foods and outreach strategies to inform the target population of available services.
The applicant organization documents collaboration and coordination with formal letters of commitment from partner organizations with whom have key roles in project implementation. It also outlines clear and realistic plans for assessing the need and feasibility of a county-wide food hub.

WEAKNESS

Reviewer Comment
The application provides documented baseline information on how the initial sales dollars were derived but does not adequately present background information for how the initial customer count number was derived.
The application does not clearly describe the expertise of project contributors (in particular, the training coordinators) in regard to conducting regional food safety training to farmers market managers.
The work plan did not present a clear scope of work and it was difficult to tell how the activities, specifically relating to the purchase of equipment, related to the project objectives.
The timeline in the work plan included many activities and was too ambitious. For example, at the start of the project, training was conducted with farmers to sell produce at the market and develop business plans and by the end of the one-year project, equipment was being purchased to assist farmers in establishing a business to process the produce.
The application does not provide enough information to demonstrate how the budget is appropriate given the number of farmers to be served.
The application does not provide a plan to disseminate results or communicate to stakeholders.

APPENDIX C – REVIEWING THE APPLICATION BUDGET

While reviewers are evaluating the proposals based on the review criteria mentioned in section 6.2 of the RFA, they are strongly encouraged to evaluate the requested budget to determine whether it is realistic for the proposed project by using their experience and judgment. This includes assessing direct costs such as proposed labor costs and hours, supplies and equipment, travel, and other programmatic details. While reviewers' budget recommendations are advisory, this advice is encouraged and taken into consideration in making application selections. Be as concrete and definitive as possible.

AMS EXPECTATIONS WHEN REVIEWING THE BUDGET OF AN APPLICATION

Review the entire application, including the budget amounts and related justification.

Advice regarding budgets should be the result of panel consensus.

Any advice should be thorough and precise. Expressions of vague discomfort that stop short of a quantitative recommendation are not enough. (For example, "This budget is too high for the proposed project." AMS needs to know what the reviewers were thinking in order to correctly act on their recommendations:

- Give a number that can be applied specifically to a particular line item or cost element (For example, "Decrease the travel budget by \$1,000, to cover the cost of traveling two people instead of three people to the All-Grantee Meeting.")
 - Ideally, this budget reduction is an actual dollar amount from a particular line item. But if you can only be specific to a percentage, note where in the budget this reduction should take place. (For example, "Data analyst is more appropriate at 50% time on this project than 100% time.)
-

AMS DOES NOT EXPECT REVIEWERS TO...

Be accountants and manipulate every budget detail.

Make judgments about whether costs are "allowable" in accordance with AMS policy, but instead to make judgments about whether proposed budgets are reasonable and necessary for performing the proposed projects.

ITEMS TO CONSIDER WHEN REVIEWING AN APPLICATION'S BUDGET

CONSISTENCY, NECESSITY AND REASONABILITY

- Is the total proposed budget consistent with the objectives and scope of the project?
 - Are the costs necessary and reasonable to accomplish the project?
 - Consider the bottom line versus the scope of the project—are they compatible?
 - Can the applicant organization accomplish the goals of the application with the total amount of fund proposed?
-

INDIVIDUAL LINE ITEMS

- Are they understandable in terms of what the applicant will request in the proposed project?
- Do they logically link to the activities in the proposed project?
- Are they necessary or reasonable to support the project?

EXTRANEOUS ITEMS OR ACTIVITIES

- Consider the direct costs including personnel, equipment, travel, materials, consultants, and possible many others.
- Are there extraneous items of cost that do not appear necessary or reasonable in support of the proposed project?
- Are there line items that do not appear necessary or reasonable to accomplish the proposed project?
- Do any individual line items appear inflated (or under-funded) compared to the overall scope or individual tasks proposed?
- Are there any line items that do not logically link to activities outlined in the project narrative?

INDIRECT COSTS

You don't need to comment on indirect rates which may be characterized as overhead or General and Administrative (G&A) cost elements in the budget application. AMS does not expect reviewers to comment on whether a cost is allowable or not. Just think about whether the cost is necessary and reasonable to accomplish the project.

BUDGET TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Budget Term	Definition
Allocable cost	A cost whose relative benefits make it assignable to one or more of the cost objectives
Allowable cost	A cost that is reasonable, allocable, within accepted standards, or otherwise conforms to generally acceptable accounting principles, specific limitations or exclusions, or agreed-to terms. HRSA's Division of Grants Management Office (DGMO) makes these determinations.
Direct cost	Any cost that can be identified specifically with a particular final cost objective.
Indirect cost	Any cost that is not directly identified with a single, final cost objective, but identified with two or more final cost objectives or an intermediate cost objective.
Indirect cost rate	The percentage or dollar factor that expresses the ratio of indirect expense incurred in a given period to direct labor cost, manufacturing cost, or another appropriate base for the same period.
Unallowable cost	Any cost that, under the provisions of any pertinent law, regulation, or contract, cannot be included in prices, cost-reimbursements, or settlements under a government contract to which it is allocable.

APPENDIX D – ALLOWABLE AND UNALLOWABLE COSTS

Below are common allowable and unallowable activities and costs. AMS does not expect you to comment on whether a cost is allowable or not. Just think about whether the cost is necessary and reasonable to accomplish the project.

AMS will conduct an administrative evaluation of each review panel’s top scoring and recommendations to determine if costs are allowable or not. The panel chair may inform AMS if their team identify costs that are unallowable.

Cost	Description
Agricultural Production Costs and Activities	Projects that focus its efforts on increasing production of a commodity or farm and gardening activities are ineligible. These production activities include but not limited to soil, seeds, shovels gardening tools, greenhouse and hoop houses and other related costs.
Construction Projects and/or Activities	Grant funds cannot be used to pay for construction projects or related activities. This includes rehabilitation of a building or structure or construction-related materials, which may include, but are not limited to the purchase of building materials, such as wood, nails, concrete, asphalt, roofing gravel, sand, paint, insulation, drywall, or plumbing.
Contributions or Donations Costs	It is unallowable to purchase food or services to donate to other entities and/or individuals.
Dependance on Resources not already in place	<p>Projects must not depend upon a critical component (i.e., land, buildings), that are not in place at the time of application submission. Applicants are required to supply letters and/or other evidence of commitment from the resource provider(s) illustrating that these critical components are already in place.</p> <p>Example 1: An applicant would like to implement a food hub and provide processing and packing for producers, however they do not own a processing facility. Have they obtained permission to use a local processing facility and do they provide a Critical Resources and Infrastructure letter which details the terms and conditions for the use of the facility?</p> <p>Example 2: The applicant has indicated that they will use property owned by their city to hold a new farmers market. Have they provided the required “Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure” letter from the city that states they have permission to use the land, how long they are allowed to use the land, and at what cost if any?</p>
Purchase of Trucks and Cars	In cases where the purchase of a vehicle conforms to the definition of Special Purpose Equipment (see below for more on special purpose equipment). In FY25, AMS’ General Terms and Conditions allow for the purchase of “purpose specific” vehicles. Such vehicles must not be for personal use.

	Equipment is defined as any item that has a useful life of more than 1 year and a per-unit cost that equals or exceeds the lesser of the applicant’s procurement of equipment threshold or \$10,000.
General Purpose Equipment	It is unallowable for an applicant to use grant funds to purchase general purpose equipment; however, an applicant may use grant funds to rent or lease general purpose equipment. General purpose equipment refers to equipment that is not limited to technical activities. Examples include office equipment and furnishings, modular offices, telephone networks, information technology equipment and systems, air conditioning equipment, reproduction and printing equipment, and general motor vehicles such as trucks, vans, and cars.
Special Purpose Equipment	Special purpose equipment is equipment used only for research or technical activities. Examples include mobile markets, special purpose motor vehicles such as food trucks (purchase of a food truck is not allowed but buying a trailer to retrofit into a food truck is allowed); etc. Refer to the program RFA for more information on how to determine special purpose equipment.
Entertainment	Entertainment expenses are allowable with prior approval from AMS so long as they are necessary for the completion of the project and reasonable in their nature and amount. Reasonableness means that it does not exceed the amount that would be incurred by a prudent person. Additionally, these projects must illustrate an economic benefit to agricultural producers that may include but is not limited to an increase in sales for the farmers at the farmers’ market.
Food Costs	Allowable for food for displays, tastings, and cooking demonstrations with prior approval if the project’s expected outcome indicator is an increase in sales. The applicant must include quantitative metrics for an increase in sales in the Project Narrative.