



2027 SCBGP Phase I Grant Opportunity

Grant Funding Opportunity Request for Applications (RFA)

RFA#: ARD.SCBGP.2027

Released: September 22, 2026

RFA Coordinator	All communication regarding the RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified below. Name: Jessica Routhier Title: Contract Grant Manager Email: specialtycropblockgrant@maine.gov
Information Session	The RFA Coordinator will offer an online information session on: October 14, 2026, 9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Eastern Time Zone. Information on how to register is on the program website listed below.
Written Questions	All written questions must be submitted via email to the RFA Coordinator by 12:00 noon, ET, on 10/20/2026. Please review the Questions and Answers subsection of this RFA for further requirements and instructions.
Application Submission Deadline	DACF must receive applications by the Application Submission Deadline: 10/30/2026, no later than 12:00 noon, Eastern Time Zone. Applications must be submitted according to the instructions provided in this RFA.
Further Resources	Additional information and resources can be found on the program website linked here: https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/usda_specialty_crop.shtml For timely information about this RFA and other DACF grant opportunities, enroll in the Maine DACF “Agricultural Grants and Loans” email listserv online: https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/MEDACF/subscriber/new
Eligible Applicants	Non-profit and for-profit organizations; local, state, and federal government entities, including Tribal governments (federally and non-federally recognized); and public or private colleges and universities are eligible to apply. Individuals are not eligible to apply. One applicant entity will not be selected to receive more than 30% of the total amount awarded.

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1. OVERVIEW

A. Background and Purpose

This solicitation and Request for Applications (RFA) identifies the eligibility criteria for the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) 2027 Specialty Crop Block Grant and provides the instructions for submitting an application.

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry (Department) is seeking Phase I Concept Proposals that, if approved, will move forward to Phase II Grant Applications. Projects that move forward through both Phases I and II will become part of a State Plan submitted for approval and funding from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) as defined in this Request for Applications (RFA) document. This document provides instructions for submitting a Phase I (Concept Proposal), the procedure, and criteria by which the awarded Applicant(s) will be selected, and the contractual terms that will govern the relationship between the State of Maine (State) and the Applicant(s).

The Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004 (7 U.S.C. 1621 note) authorized the USDA to provide grants to State departments of agriculture to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry is eligible to submit a State Plan for these funds. The State Plan will include projects that have successfully completed both Phase I and Phase II of the RFA process. These projects will be recommended for awards. The recommendation does not guarantee funding. The USDA has final approval of what projects will be funded.

The Department's SCBGP consists of a two-phase solicitation process. During Phase I, applicants must submit a Concept Proposal (i.e., an overview of their application) online using the link provided on the [SCBGP website](#) to answer all questions. The Department will review and score all submitted concept proposals. Phase I applicants will be informed if their application has been selected to move forward to Phase II. Phase I applicants selected to move forward to Phase II will be invited to submit a Grant Proposal that more intentionally outlines their proposed project. The Department will provide applicants with specific Phase II requirements and instructions with the invitation to submit a Grant Proposal.

Phase II applications will not be scored by the Department but will be reviewed by the USDA AMS SCBGP staff. All applicants will be advised of the outcome of the USDA review process. If the USDA approves the Grant Proposal and the Department's State Plan for the corresponding year, a formal contract will be established. In the event that the Grant Proposal, or the Department's State Plan, is not approved, an explanation of the decision will be provided. Please note that the USDA's decision will be final and no further action will be available following the determination.

Phase I Concept Proposals Must:

- Demonstrate a concept plan for a proposed project with a high likelihood of success.
- Demonstrate a plan to implement a project that will directly benefit multiple specialty crop growers by enhancing the competitiveness of a Maine specialty crop(s).
- Identify the specific and existing issue, problem, or need the project will address.
- Demonstrate industry need and support.
- Demonstrate readiness to conduct outreach to encourage participants to participate in project-related activities.
- Demonstrate willingness to share project results and lessons learned with specialty crop growers. (Note that marketing and advertising are not considered a benefit to producers).

B. Eligible Applicants

Any entity may apply if the proposed project benefits Maine's specialty crop(s) and aligns with program requirements, including funding restrictions. Applicants must describe how the project will benefit and produce measurable outcomes for a Maine specialty crop sector(s) rather than a single business, organization, or individual. Projects that primarily benefit a single business or that business's product, organization, or individual will not be funded.

It's encouraged that individual businesses, organizations, or individuals collaborate with other industry representatives, such as members of producer associations, to ensure that the project will benefit multiple businesses and address specialty crop industry needs.

One applicant entity will not be selected to receive more than 30% of the total amount awarded.

C. Funding Available

- DACF anticipates awarding 1-6 grants and up to \$600,000 through this RFA process.
- Award ranges will be between \$15,000 and \$100,000 per selected recipient.
- Funding requests must exceed \$14,999.99 and may not exceed \$100,000.00.
- DACF may award all or some of the available funding through this RFA process and may make multiple awards.
- There is the possibility that the USDA will require a 25% matching contribution requirement. More information will be given prior to Phase II.

D. Funding Alignment

This RFA is intended to support projects that strengthen Maine's specialty crop sector, expand opportunities for Maine producers, and contribute to a more resilient and competitive food system. Funding priorities areas are aligned with current needs and opportunities within Maine's specialty crop industry and are intended to support projects that advance consumption, production, markets, resiliency, workforce capacity, and supply chain infrastructure.

Applicants must select the focus area that most closely aligns with how the proposed project will enhance the competitiveness of Maine-grown specialty crops. Applicants should select the focus area that best represents the primary purpose and anticipated impact of the project

Applicants should review the priority and focus areas outlined in **Appendix I** and clearly identify how their proposed project addresses both.

E. Allowable Costs

Allowable expenses include costs directly associated with the project in the following categories:

- Personnel and fringe
- Travel
- Supplies
- Contractual
- Other costs that meet USDA requirements

All SCBGP projects and expenses are subject to the requirements of the current [USDA AMS General Terms and Conditions](#) and USDA AMS SCBGP approval.

All SCBGP costs must be expended to enhance the competitiveness of Maine-grown specialty crops.

All SCBGP costs must be directly aligned with project activities and must be readily distinguishable from other business/organization expenses.

Applicants should consult the [USDA AMS General Terms and Conditions](#) and the [Federal Cost Principles \(Subpart E-Cost Principles of 2 CFR Part 200\)](#) for complete allowable cost details.

F. Unallowable Costs

Examples of Unallowable costs include:

- Indirect costs,
- Equipment,
- Any expense not directly associated with the approved project,
- Costs that have been obligated and/or are incurred prior to the start of the contract,
- Costs that do not meet USDA requirements.

The following are examples of unallowable indirect costs:

- Personnel expenses not directly associated with the approved project,
- Information technology services, software, internet service,
- Facilities expenses such as rent, lease, mortgage, utilities, phone service, property maintenance, Supplies not directly associated with the project such as general office supplies,

Please refer to [USDA AMS General Terms and Conditions](#) for a more comprehensive list of unallowable costs.

G. Grant Spending Timeframe

- DACF anticipates the contract term, when recipients may begin to obligate and/or spend grant funds, will be from October 1, 2027, to September 29, 2029.
- The official contract term will be finalized in the awarded contract(s).
- **No grant purchases or activities are permitted until a contract is finalized.**
Expenditures obligated outside of the contract term will not be reimbursed.
- Expenses will be paid only on a reimbursement basis.

H. Defining a Project

“Project” means a set of interrelated tasks with a cohesive, distinct, specified, and defined goal. It follows a planned, organized approach over a fixed period and within specific limitations (cost, performance/quality, etc.). Additionally, a project uses resources specifically allocated to the project's work and usually involves a team of people. Projects are different from other ongoing operations in an organization because, unlike operations, projects have a limited duration with a definitive beginning and end. A project will also have an overarching goal that the applicant wants to accomplish through a series of individual activities or tasks. This means it has unique goals, deliverables, and characteristics that set it apart from similar initiatives. Thus, it essentially signifies a unique undertaking with its

own parameters and objectives. Examples of SCBGP projects:

- Researching new cultivars,
- Providing outreach opportunities on specialty crops to youth, families, seniors, and the overall community,
- Marketing apples through a targeted promotional campaign.

Activities or tasks that could be a part of such projects might include:

- Hiring project personnel,
- Holding an educational workshop,
- Planting specialty crops,
- Distributing product promotional materials.

2. APPLICATION PROCESS

A. Application Process Overview

Phase I: Concept Proposal in Phase I: Applicants must complete the required application online using the link provided on the cover sheet.

Note: If invited to Phase II, the applicant must be the original applicant from Phase I and no transfer of a proposal to another applicant can take place.

Phase II: Full Grant Proposal (by invite only): Select applicants from Phase I will be invited back to submit additional project information to complete the full grant proposal.

B. Timeline and Key Dates

Application Opens, RFA is released	September 22, 2026
Information Sessions (Online)	October 14, 2026, 9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. EST.
Written Questions Deadline	October 20, 2026, 12:00 noon
Questions & Answer Summary posted to the program website listed in this RFA	October 23, 2026
Application Submission Deadline	October 30, 2026, 12:00 noon, EST
Invitation to Phase II Announced (anticipated month, may vary)	January 2027

C. Application Checklist

Applicants must apply online using the link provided on the program website listed on the cover page of this RFA.

Application Steps

- ☐ Download and review the entirety of this RFA (including appendices), question and answer summaries, and all other posted resources. All materials needed to apply for this grant are available on the program website listed on the cover page of this RFA.
- ☐ Copy and paste the application questions into a word processing software.
- ☐ Attend the online information session and/or submit any written questions to best understand/clarify the application process, funding priorities, eligibility, allowable costs, etc. **It is the responsibility of all applicants and other interested parties to examine the entire RFA and seek clarification in writing or at the information session if they have specific questions.**
- ☐ Fill out and submit the online application form found on the program website listed on the cover page of this RFA.

D. Information Session

- DACF staff will offer online information sessions on the date(s) listed in this RFA.
- **Please register for the information session(s) using the links provided on the cover page of this RFA.**
- In the information session(s), the RFA coordinator will review the grant RFA, application requirements, and take questions/answers from participants.
- A written summary of the information session will be posted to the program website stated on the cover page of this RFA.
- All interested parties are responsible for going to the program website listed in this RFA to obtain a copy of the summary. Only those answers issued in writing on this website will be considered binding.

E. Questions and Answers

It is the responsibility of all applicants and other interested parties to review the entire RFA and seek clarification in writing if they have specific questions.

Questions

- All questions must be submitted by email to the RFA Coordinator listed on the cover page of this RFA.
- Questions may not be submitted via phone, text, or other means not listed in this RFA.
- Questions sent to any other email address or sent without the required subject line may not receive a response.
- **The RFA Number listed on the cover page must be included in the email subject line: RFA# ARD.SCBGP.2027**

- The Written Questions deadline is **October 20, 2026, by 12:00 p.m. ET.**
- Only questions about application technology will be answered after the written question deadline (e.g. technical challenges with the application form and/or supplemental file submission). **Plan to allow at least two business days for a response.**
- We **CANNOT** guarantee technical support in the final 2 business days of the application window.

Answers

- The RFA Coordinator will post a written summary of the questions submitted, along with the corresponding answers, on the program website stated on the cover page.
- Responses will be written and publicly posted at least seven (7) calendar days before the application deadline.
- All interested parties are responsible for going to the program website listed in this RFA to obtain a copy of the Question & Answer Summary.
- Only those answers issued in writing on the program website will be considered binding.

3. APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Applicants are HIGHLY encouraged to save a copy of the application questions in a word processing software program first, then copy and paste their answers into the online application.

Required Preliminary Questions

- ☐ Please check this box if the applicant entity considers the contents of this application to be confidential.
- ☐ By submitting this application, I attest that the applicant entity's owner, executive director, or other leader with organizational decision-making and contract-signing authority has authorized submission of this application.
- ☐ Has this organization previously received grant funds through ARD in the last 5 years?
- ☐ Has the organization received specialty crop block grant funds in previous years? If so, what years?
- ☐ What Maine specialty crop sector will the project benefit?
 - Fruits
 - Vegetables
 - Tree Nuts
 - Dried Fruits
 - Culinary Herbs and Spices or Medicinal Plants
 - Honey
 - Hops
 - Maple Syrup
 - Nursery Crops (including Christmas Trees) or Floriculture
 - Other, please specify.
- ☐ List the specific specialty crop(s) that this project will impact. List all applicable crops.

Scored Application Questions

1. Problem Statement

Clearly and succinctly describe an existing problem, gap, or need that impacts the specialty crop(s) that this project will seek to resolve. Explain the nature and significance of the issue, who is affected, and why it needs to be addressed. Focus on the current problem rather than the proposed solution.

2. Problem Resolution

Clearly and succinctly describe how the proposed project will solve the problem or fill the need to directly address the problem, gap, or need identified above.

3. Uniqueness

Clearly and succinctly describe how this project is unique from other programs, projects, or initiatives and does not duplicate existing efforts to resolve the stated problem. Identify relevant existing efforts and describe how this project will fill an unmet need, reach a different audience, use a different approach, expand existing work, or otherwise provide additional value. Demonstrate that grant funds will not duplicate activities or services already available.

4. Priority Area Alignment

Select the priority area that the project most closely aligns to and succinctly add details to describe how the priority area relates to the stated problem and proposed resolution.

- Local Food Consumption
- Specialty Crop Production
- Specialty Crop Resiliency
- Specialty Crop Workforce Training
- Specialty Crop Supply Chain

5. Focus Area- Enhanced Maine Specialty Crop Competitiveness

Select the focus area most aligned with how the project will enhance the competitiveness of Maine-grown specialty crops. Then, clearly and succinctly describe how this project aligns with the selected focus area.

- Leverage efforts to market and promote specialty crops
- Assist producers with research and development relevant to specialty crops
- Expand availability and access to specialty crops
- Address local, regional, and national challenges confronting specialty crop producers
- Other purpose

6. Objectives

Clearly identify three to five specific, measurable, and achievable objectives that the project will accomplish during the grant period. Objectives should describe incremental/measurable goals that, when achieved, will indicate the project is successful or is moving towards successful completion.

7. Benefit to Multiple Producers

Clearly and succinctly identify the specific Maine specialty crop producers that will directly benefit from this project. Describe how your project will impact multiple Maine specialty crop producers.

8. Benefit to Maine's Specialty Crop Stakeholders

Concisely identify and describe the stakeholders that are not the project's primary or direct beneficiaries but may benefit from the project's outcomes. Examples may include consumers, retailers, wholesalers, food businesses, community organizations, commodity groups, educators, researchers, or other industry participants. Explain how each stakeholder group may benefit from the knowledge, products, services, improvements, or other outcomes generated by the project.

9. Sustainability Plan

Concisely describe a five-year vision for the project to continue to have a positive impact after the grant period. Describe how the project's benefits, activities, resources, or outcomes will continue beyond the grant period. Explain how the organization and/or partners will sustain, expand, replicate, or build upon the project over the next five years. Address potential strategies for continued funding, partnerships, staffing, program integration, adoption by producers, or other means of sustaining the project's impact.

10. Entity's Background and Experience

Clearly state the type of eligible organization that the applicant is (e.g., farm, food processor, municipality, school, school district, non-profit organization, college, university, etc.). Clearly and succinctly describe how the proposed project aligns with the organization's goals and priorities and why this is a good time for the organization to receive and implement the requested grant funds. This should demonstrate a solid understanding of how the organization's background will prepare them for success in the proposed work.

11. Project Management Plan

Clearly state who will be responsible for managing the proposed project. Describe a project management plan that outlines the involvement of partnering organizations, specific job titles, designated roles, and the experience and qualifications of staff/volunteers who will assume the stated roles and responsibilities.

12. Partners

Clearly and succinctly identify and describe any organizations, businesses, agencies, producers, educational institutions, community groups, and/or other partners that have committed to supporting the project. For each partner, describe their specific contribution, such as staff time, expertise, facilities, outreach, technical assistance, funding, or other resources. Distinguish between partners that have formally committed to the project and organizations that are only being considered or approached.

13. Outcomes

Select the outcomes that this project will accomplish. Then, clearly and succinctly describe how this project aligns with the selected outcome(s).

- Outcome 1: Increasing Consumption and Consumer Purchasing of Specialty Crops
- Outcome 2: Increasing Access to Specialty Crops and Expanding Specialty Crop Production and Distribution
- Outcome 3: Increase Food Safety Knowledge and Processes
- Outcome 4: Improve Pest and Disease Control Processes
- Outcome 5: Develop New Seed Varieties and Specialty Crops
- Outcome 6: Expand Specialty Crop Research and Development
- Outcome 7: Improve Environmental Sustainability of Specialty Crops

14. Evaluation

Clearly and succinctly describe the specific methods, tools, and resources that will be used to measure project progress and determine whether objectives have been achieved. Explain what information will be collected, when it will be collected, and how the results will be used to assess project success.

15. Timeline

Provide a timeline for activities, events, evaluation, and/or accomplishments that will occur during the project period.

Provide a chronological timeline covering the full project period. Identify major activities, events, milestones, evaluation activities, and anticipated accomplishments, along with the expected timeframe for each. Include project start-up, implementation, monitoring/evaluation, reporting, and closeout activities as applicable. Ensure that the timeline is realistic and consistent with the project's objectives and scope of work. and completion date. Please include the month and year for each timeline activity. Please format with the month, then year, then activity. Example:

- November 2026: Project starts
- January 2027: Execute contract for consultant
- March 2027: Attend ABC Conference in XYZ City, State

16. Challenges

Identify potential challenges, risks, or barriers that could affect the successful completion of the project. Describe the steps or contingency plans that will be used to prevent, minimize, or respond to its impact on the project.

17. Budget

Provide a fully itemized and justified budget that is free of mathematical errors and unallowable costs and demonstrates strong cost-effectiveness. The budget should clearly align with the project as stated in this application.

The allowable budget categories are:

- Personnel and Fringe

- Travel
- Supplies
- Contractual
- Other costs that meet USDA requirements

4. REQUIRED SUPPLEMENTAL DOCUMENTATION

This application process does not require any supplemental documentation beyond the grant application.

5. SCORING SCALE

Each question will be scored using a **0–5 point system**

Rating	Description
5 – Excellent	Complete, specific, well-supported response. No additional information is needed for the reviewer's understanding.
4 – Strong	Clear and adequately supported response that requires very little evaluator inference.
3 – Adequate	Meets the basic requirement but has missing information or causes evaluator uncertainty.
2 – Weak	Significant gaps in response, insufficient description, and/or limited supporting information.
1 – Poor	Minimal response, difficult to understand, and/or the requirement is largely unmet.
0 – Unacceptable	No response, impossible to understand, and/or or the response does not pertain to the question.

6. SCORING RUBRIC

Criteria		
Applications must: - Meet the definition of “project” - Not include unallowable expenses - Request funds within the award range - Demonstrate benefit to the sector and multiple Maine specialty crop producers.		Pass/Fail
Criteria	Description	Points Available
1. Project Purpose	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal states the specific issue, problem, or need the project will address, and the likelihood of influencing the competitiveness of one or more Maine specialty crops.	5
2. Problem Resolution	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal will solve the problem or fill the need to directly address the project's purpose	5
3. Uniqueness	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal explains what makes the proposed project different from existing work.	5
4. Priority Area Alignment	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal describes how the project aligns with the selected priority area.	5
5. Focus Area-Enhanced Maine Specialty Crop Competitiveness	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal describes how the selected focus area and project will enhance the competitiveness of Maine-grown specialty crops.	5
6. Objectives	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal identifies three to five specific, measurable, and achievable objectives that will be accomplished during the project period.	5
7. Benefit to Multiple Producers	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal identifies the Maine specialty crop producers who will directly benefit from the project and demonstrates how the project will provide meaningful benefits to multiple producers.	5
8. Benefit to Maine's Specialty Crop Stakeholders	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal identifies specialty crop stakeholders who may benefit from the project outcomes and describes the anticipated benefits to those stakeholders.	5
9. Sustainability Plan	Scoring will be based on how clearly and realistically the proposal describes how the project's activities, benefits, or outcomes will continue beyond the grant period. The proposal should demonstrate a reasonable plan for sustaining, expanding, or building upon the project's impact over the following five years.	5

10. Entity's Background and Experience	Scoring will be based on how the proposal demonstrates a solid understanding of how the organization's background will prepare them for success in the proposed work	5
11. Project Management Plan	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal identifies the individual responsible for managing the project and defines the roles, responsibilities, qualifications, and experience of key staff, volunteers, and partners. The management plan should demonstrate the applicant's capacity to successfully implement and oversee the project	5
12. Partners	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal identifies committed project partners and describes their specific roles, contributions, expertise, or resources.	5
13. Outcomes	Scoring will be based on how well the selected outcome measure(s) aligns with the project's funding and focus areas and the likeliness the applicant will be able to collect data to measure results.	5
14. Evaluation	Scoring will be based on how clearly and appropriately the proposal describes the tools, methods, and measures that will be used to monitor progress and evaluate project results	5
15. Timeline	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal outlines realistic milestones that cover the entire projected length.	5
16. Challenges	Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal identifies anticipated challenges or risks that could affect project implementation and provides reasonable strategies to prevent, minimize, or address those challenges.	5
17. Budget	Costs must comply with the instructions in this RFA and the related application, program terms and conditions, and the program's allowable costs as determined by the Department and the USDA. Scoring will be based on the extent to which the budget is complete, clearly itemized, and thoroughly justified.	5
Total Points Available:		85

To advance to the next review stage, the application must receive at least 51 points, which is 60% of the total points available, from each evaluator.

APPENDIX A: RFA TERMS and DEFINITIONS

- **Acquisition Cost.** The (total) cost of the asset including the cost to ready the asset for its intended use. The total acquisition cost must be essential for the operation of the minor equipment. Acquisition cost for equipment includes the cost of any modifications, attachments, accessories, or auxiliary apparatus necessary to make it usable for its acquired purpose.
- **Commissioner.** The Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.
- **DACF.** The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.
- **Department.** means the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.
- **Indirect Costs.** mean business operating costs that do not directly align with the proposed project such as utilities, rent, and furnishings, are indirect costs.
- **Obligated.** A commitment that creates a legally binding agreement or liability.
- **Project.** A set of interrelated tasks with a cohesive, distinct, specified, and defined goal. It follows a planned, organized approach over a fixed period and within specific limitations (cost, performance/quality, etc.). Additionally, a project uses resources specifically allocated to the project's work and usually involves a team of people. Projects are different from other ongoing operations in an organization because, unlike operations, projects have a limited duration with a definitive beginning and end. A project will also have an overarching goal that the applicant wants to accomplish through a series of individual activities or tasks. This means it has unique goals, deliverables, and characteristics that set it apart from similar initiatives. Thus, it essentially signifies a unique undertaking with its own parameters and objectives.
- **Review Committee.** A committee designated by the Commissioner to evaluate, score, and make recommendations regarding grant applications.
- **SCBGP.** The USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.
- **USDA.** The United States Department of Agriculture.

APPENDIX B: APPLICANT TIPS

- To help ensure that an application is accurately submitted and well prepared for the review committee, please consider the following advice when preparing your application:
- Do not wait until the last minute to prepare or submit the application. Allow ample time for drafting, asking questions, reviewing answers, proofreading, and submission.
- Use a word processing software to draft responses to all questions. Be sure to check for grammar, spelling, syntax, and overall clarity before copy/pasting responses into the online application.
- Keep application responses clear and concise. Consider if a friend, family member, or application reviewer will be able to understand your application if they are unfamiliar with your business, organization, or industry?
- Do not provide URL links to your organization, to vendors, to partners, or any other entity or resource to convey information about the entity or the application.
- Attend the Information Session(s) and visit the program website frequently to review the question and answer summary documents.
- Submit written questions according to the instructions provided in this RFA.
- Keep in mind that changes cannot be made after the application is submitted

APPENDIX C: APPLICATION CONDITIONS

It is recommended that applicants use word-processing software to draft their responses and then copy and paste the responses into the online application form. The applicant is responsible for responding to the questions and formatting as provided in the online application.

Once the application has been submitted, no changes can be made. Proof of timely submission is automatically recorded using an electronic date/time stamp generated when the application is successfully received.

Applicants may submit more than one application for this RFA. Each submission must be for a distinct project.

APPENDIX E: EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Stage One

DACF will conduct multiple levels of evaluation. The first level is an administrative review to determine if the application is complete, if only allowable costs and activities are proposed, and if eligibility and other RFA-specific program requirements are met. If applicable, this review also assesses an applicant's past grant, contract, and reporting performance. Prior performance may be used to inform the eligibility, evaluation, and selection of applicants. This review step will result in a pass, fail, or pass with evaluation and scoring qualifications. Ineligible, late, incomplete, incorrectly formatted applications, and/or applications with unallowable cost may be disqualified from the next phases of evaluation.

Stage Two

At the second evaluation level, 3-5 members of a department-selected review committee will each evaluate and score applications that pass Phase One following the program requirements and selection criteria outlined in the rubric and described in the RFA. The scoring rubric must contain a budget section and therefore the review committee will review the application budget per the RFA. A DACF-assigned financial expert may be appointed to the review committee to support all aspects of application evaluation. Applications will NOT be scored for writing quality, including grammar, spelling, and punctuation, provided that the applicant fully responds to each required application question and that the writing quality does not obscure the meaning of the application. Applications receiving a score of 60% of the total points available, or less, from each evaluator score may be determined ineligible to move forward.

Stage Three

At the review committee team evaluation level, applications that meet the minimum score required in the RFA will be collectively evaluated by the review committee. The review committee will review both individual and average scores from the committee members to assign final points to each application.

Stage Four

At this evaluation level, a financial expert assigned by the Department will evaluate applications recommended for award by the review committee for budget accuracy, feasibility, and/or cost-benefit ratio. This phase is a component of the official review committee process and may include additional risk assessments that were not previously conducted. This phase may require additional information from the applicant to complete the financial and/or risk assessments. This phase does not overrule the recommendations of the review committee but does provide additional information for DACF consideration when determining final award selection.

Stage Five

Based on the review committee's scoring and evaluation, and the information gathered in the financial expert's financial and/or risk assessments, the RFA Coordinator will make award recommendations to the Commissioner. Final decision-making authority for determining which applicants will be invited to continue to Phase Two and submit a Grant Proposal to be included in the Department's State Plan Proposal submission to the USDA AMS SCBGP team rests with the Commissioner. All Phase One applicants shall be notified in writing to inform them whether they will or will not be invited to the SCBGP Phase Two application process.

Stage Six

Applicants invited to SCBGP Phase Two will be invited to submit a Grant Proposal that will be submitted by the Department to the USDA with the corresponding Maine SCBGP State Plan Proposal. Phase II applications will not be scored by the Department but will be reviewed by the USDA AMS SCBGP staff. Phase Two applicants will be advised of the outcome of the USDA review process. If the USDA approves the Grant Proposal and the Department's State Plan for the corresponding year, a formal contract will be established. In the event that the Grant Proposal, or the Department's State Plan, is not approved, an explanation of the decision will be provided.

APPENDIX F: GENERAL PROVISIONS

- i. From the time this RFA is issued until award notification is made, all contact with the State regarding this RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified on the cover page of this RFA. No other person/State employee is empowered to make binding statements regarding this RFA. Violation of this provision may lead to disqualification from the application process at the State's discretion.
- ii. To ensure all communications are received, applicants should add the email address of the RFA Coordinator listed in this RFA to their email safe sender's list, address book, or contact list.
- iii. Issuance of the RFA does not commit DACF to issue an award or to pay expenses incurred by an Applicant in the preparation of a response to the RFA. This includes attending personal interviews or other meetings, as applicable.
- iv. All amendments (if any) released regarding this RFA will be posted on the program website stated on the cover page of this RFA. Only those amendments posted on this website are considered binding.
- v. DACF reserves the right to revise, suspend, or terminate this RFA at its sole discretion. In such an event, DACF will inform all applicants as soon as reasonably possible. DACF also reserves the right to extend the deadline for proposal submissions or to solicit additional proposals under this RFA.
- vi. The issuance of a grant solicitation or any grant award decision does not obligate DACF to make any award. Nor does it obligate DACF to make an award in the amount requested. In instances where the amount awarded differs from what was sought by the applicant, DACF will provide a written explanation for the record.
- vii. All applications must adhere to the instructions and format requirements outlined in the RFA and all written supplements and amendments (such as the Summary of Questions and Answers) issued by DACF. Failure to use the instructions specified in this RFA, or failure to respond to all questions and instructions throughout the RFA and application process, including submitting any required supplemental documents, may result in the application being disqualified as non-responsive or receiving a reduced score. DACF and its review committee have sole discretion to determine whether a variance from the RFA specifications will result in either disqualification or a reduction in the scoring of an application. DACF, at its sole discretion, reserves the right to recognize and waive minor informalities and irregularities found in applications received in response to the RFA.

- viii. Additional materials submitted beyond those requested explicitly in this RFA will not be used to evaluate or score an application and may result in the applicant's disqualification.
- ix. DACF assumes no liability for ensuring the accurate/complete/on-time email/online form transmission and receipt of emails and online application forms.
- x. Applications and emails containing links to file-sharing sites or online file repositories will not be accepted as submissions.
- xi. Encrypted attachments received that require opening attachments and logging into a proprietary system will not be accepted as submissions. It is the applicant's responsibility to check with its organization's information technology team to ensure that security settings will not encrypt its application submission.
- xii. File size limits are 25 MB per email. Applicants may submit files separately across multiple emails, as necessary, due to file size concerns. All emails and files must be received in accordance with all the instructions listed in the RFA.
- xiii. Grant solicitations shall be publicly posted and available online. DACF shall announce the grant opportunity request for applications (RFA) at least fourteen (14) calendar days before the application submission deadline.
- xiv. Information sessions, if any are held, shall be scheduled at least two weeks before the deadline for submitting a grant application.
- xv. A written summary of the questions and answers raised during office hours and/or written questions submitted shall be posted on the program website at least seven calendar days before the application submission deadline.
- xvi. In evaluating the eligibility and award determination of applications submitted in response to this RFA, the DACF will consider materials provided in the application, information obtained through interviews/presentations (if any), and internal Departmental information of previous contract history with the Applicant (if any). DACF also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the Applicant's experience and capabilities.
- xvii. Applicants must submit their best proposal based on the intent of their application and understanding of this RFA. DACF is not permitted to request any additional information to be submitted for application evaluation and scoring. DACF may request an interview or written clarification to help clarify an applicant's eligibility, litigation status, financial situation, risk assessment, and/or other information that

may be used to determine program/fund eligibility, award, and/or contract specifics. DACF will consider the materials provided in the application, any information obtained through interviews/presentations (if applicable), and internal departmental information regarding previous contract history with the applicant (if applicable). DACF also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the applicant's experience and capabilities.

- xviii. The application must be submitted by, or with the express permission of, a person authorized to legally bind the Applicant into a contract agreement.
- xix. DACF reserves the right to determine the number of awards and modify, partially fund, or increase awards at the Department's discretion, which may include the offering of partial awards at amounts less than requested.
- xx. DACF may select one or multiple award recipients as a result of this RFA.
- xxi. Grant applicants will be informed in writing of the final grant award decisions.
- xxii. The RFA and the awarded Applicant's application, including all appendices, attachments, or updated documents requested by DACF, will be the basis for the final contract, as determined by DACF.
- xxiii. Following the announcement of an award decision, all submissions in response to this RFA will be public records, available for public inspection pursuant to the State of Maine Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) (1 M.R.S. § 401 et seq.).
- xxiv. All applicable laws, whether or not herein contained, shall be included by this reference. It shall be the Applicant's responsibility to determine the applicability and requirements of any such laws and to abide by them.

APPENDIX G: APPEAL RIGHTS

An aggrieved applicant (Petitioner) may request an appeal hearing on the SCBGP Phase I determination by submitting a request for appeal to the Department Commissioner, in writing, no later than fifteen (15) calendar days from the date of the decision notification (date applicant is notified if they have been selected, or not selected, to move forward).

The written request for appeal must identify one or more of the appeal indicators listed below and must describe the specific nature of the grievance. The Commissioner shall grant an appeal hearing unless it is determined that:

- i. The petitioner is not an aggrieved person; or
- ii. The written request for appeal was submitted more than fifteen (15) calendar days after notification of award.

The burden of proof within the hearing of appeal lies with the petitioner. The evidence presented must specifically address and be limited to one or more of the following appeal indicators:

- i. Violation of law;
- ii. Irregularities creating fundamental unfairness; or
- iii. Arbitrary or capricious award.

Notice of the appeal proceeding shall follow the requirements of 5 M.R.S. § 9051-A(2) and be provided to those entities as determined applicable by the Commissioner. The notification must include the date and location of the hearing and the name of the Hearing Officer. Appeal proceedings may be held in person, virtually, or in a hybrid format at the discretion of the Hearing Officer. Failure to appear for a scheduled hearing may be grounds for default.

APPENDIX H: OUTCOME MEASURES

The USDA has specific performance measures for all Specialty Crop projects. Below is the list of outcomes to choose from. It is recommended that no more than two outcomes be chosen. Indicators will be chosen in Phase II.

Outcome 1: Increase Consumption and Consumer Purchasing of Specialty Crops

Outcome 2: Increase Access to Specialty Crops and Expanding Specialty Crop Production and Distribution

Outcome 3: Increase Food Safety Knowledge and Processes

Outcome 4: Improve Pest and Disease Control Processes

Outcome 5: Develop New Seed Varieties and Specialty Crops

Outcome 6: Expand Specialty Crop Research and Development

Outcome 7: Improve Environmental Sustainability of Specialty Crops

Please refer to [USDA Outcomes and Indicators](#) for a complete list of all outcomes and indicators and suggestions for data collection.

APPENDIX I: PRIORITY AND FOCUS AREAS

Priority Areas

- **Local Food Consumption**
Projects that impact the Maine Won't Wait Plan for Climate Action Plan efforts to strengthen Maine's food economy by increasing the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers to 30% by 2030
- **Specialty Crop Production**
Projects that pilot new specialty crop growing and/or harvesting innovations or test specialty crop production processes for a new production scale or market channel.
- **Specialty Crop Resiliency**
Projects that develop strategies and tools to help specialty crop producers increase resiliency amidst environmental challenges and/or natural disasters.
- **Specialty Crop Workforce Training**
Projects that create and implement workforce training programs to develop and maintain the technical skills required to keep the specialty crops sector competitive.
- **Specialty Crop Supply Chain**
Projects that alleviate supply chain disruptions for specialty crop inputs, processing, or distribution.

Focus Areas

- Leverage efforts to market and promote specialty crops
- Assist producers with research and development relevant to specialty crops
- Expand availability and access to specialty crops
- Address local, regional, and national challenges confronting specialty crop producers
- Other purpose