**STATE OF MAINE**

**Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

*Agricultural Resource Development Division*

**RFA# 202403069**

**Farms for the Future Phase 2**

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| --- | --- |
| **RFA Coordinator** | *All communication regarding the RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified below*.**Name:** Mariam Taleb **Title:** Farm Viability and Farmland Protection Specialist**Contact Information:** mariam.taleb@maine.gov  |
| **Submitted Questions Due** | *All questions must be received by the RFA Coordinator identified above by:***Date:** April 9, 2024, no later than 11:59 p.m., local time |
| **ApplicationSubmission Deadline** | *Applications must be received by the Division of Procurement Services by:***Submission Deadline:** April 22, 2024, no later than 11:59 p.m., local time.*Applications must be submitted electronically to:* Proposals@maine.gov |

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Page** |
|  |  |
| **RFA DEFINITIONS/ACRONYMS** | **3** |
|  |  |
| **PART I OVERVIEW OF THE GRANT OPPORTUNITY** | **5** |
| 1. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND
 |  |
| 1. GENERAL PROVISIONS
 |  |
| 1. ELIGIBILITY TO SUBMIT BIDS
 |  |
| 1. AWARDS
 |  |
| 1. APPEAL OF CONTRACT AWARDS
 |  |
| 1. APPLICABLE LEGISLATION
 |  |
|  |  |
| **PART II ACTIVITIES AND REQUIREMENTS** | **8** |
| 1. REQUIRED ACTIVITIES
 |  |
| 1. ALLOWABLE USE OF FUNDS
 |  |
| 1. REPORTING REQUIREMENTS
 |  |
|  |  |
| **PART III KEY PROCESS EVENTS** | **10** |
| 1. SUBMISSION OF QUESTIONS
 |  |
| 1. AMENDMENTS
 |  |
| 1. APPLICATION SUBMISSION
 |  |
|  |  |
| **PART IV APPLICATION EVALUATION AND SELECTION** | **12** |
| 1. EVALUATION PROCESS – GENERAL INFORMATION
 |  |
| 1. SCORING PROCESS
 |  |
| 1. SCORING WEIGHTS
 |  |
| 1. SELECTION AND AWARD
 |  |
| 1. CONTRACT ADMINISTRATION AND CONDITIONS
 |  |
|  |  |
| **PART V APPLICATION FORM** | **15** |
|  |  |
| **APPENDIX A** – SUBMITTED QUESTIONS FORM | **16** |

**RFA TERMS/ACRONYMS with DEFINITIONS**

The following terms and acronyms, as referenced in the RFA, have the meanings indicated below:

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| **Term/Acronym** | **Definition** |
| 7-Year Farmland Protection Agreement (FPA) | A written agreement between a farm selected to receive an investment support cash grant and the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, wherein the farm agrees to keep an area of farmland of no less than 5 acres in active agricultural use and to protect that land from non-agricultural development for a period of seven (7) years. |
| Agricultural Products | Means fresh, or to be processed, food, fiber, or horticultural products grown on the farm, with the intent that the product be sold or otherwise generate income. Agricultural products produced on the farm may include the growing and harvesting of some specialty forest products, such as firewood processing, but may not include the products of a business engaged primarily in the growing, harvesting or processing of trees for the purpose of producing pulp or other materials used in paper manufacturing or wood manufacturing. An agricultural product may also include aquacultural products, which the USDA defines as the production of aquatic organisms under controlled conditions throughout part or all their lifecycle. Wild-caught seafood is an ineligible product.  |
| Applicant | Farm Owner/Operator that is applying for Phase 2 Investment Support and is a private, for-profit company that is owned by individuals, partners or corporations, that grows or produces agricultural products for commercial sale (excluding marijuana farms, except as permitted under 7MRS Ch.406A, Section 2231) |
| Business Plan | A document that identifies changes in farm management practices and investments in equipment and property that would increase the profitability and net worth of the farm (vitality). A typical plan identifies ways to increase on-farm income through such methods as improved management practices, direct marketing, and value-added initiatives; and describes current operations and future plans for the business, including but not limited to sections on mission/vision, legal organization, management team, product descriptions, market research, market promotion, customer profiles, financial statements, financial analysis of planned changes in the business and long-term goals for the business. |
| Department | Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry |
| FAME | Finance Authority of Maine |
| Farm Business | Agricultural products that are grown or produced on the Selected Farm and are being sold commercially. The farm must provide documentation of gross and net farm income, expenses, net worth, and farm debt. |
| Farm Vitality | An increase in long-term, maintainable, farm profitability and net worth. |
| FFF | Maine Farms for the Future Program |
| Idea(s) for Change | Ideas the Applicant proposed to research to improve Farm Vitality |
| Land in Agricultural Use | Land that is currently being used to grow agricultural, horticultural, and silvicultural products. |
| Phase 1 Business Plan Development Grant | A grant awarded to conduct research on proposed Idea(s) for Change, that if found to be feasible are developed into a project or projects that are described in a written business plan. |
| Phase 2 Investment Support – AMLF Loan Recommendation | The Review Panel may recommend, and the Department may provide a selected applicant with a recommendation to apply for a reduced-interest (2%) loan from the Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund. If the total cost to implement the Business Plan is less than $100,000 then the reduced-interest loan may be up to 90% of that cost. If the total cost to implement the Business Plan is more than $100,000 then the reduced-interest loan may be up to 75% of that cost. In either case, the total amount of the reduced-interest loan may not exceed $250,000. The reduced-interest loan may be used as match for the cash grant. |
| Phase 2 Investment Support – Cash Grant | The cash grant is for an amount not to exceed the lesser of $25,000 or 25% of the total investments identified by the Business Plan. Prior to the disbursement of cash grant funds, the Department may require the grantee to provide documented evidence of match of a proportionate amount of match equaling 75% of the total investments identified by the Business Plan. |
| The Program | Maine Farms for the Future Program |
| Review Panel | A panel appointed by the Department Commissioner to review applications and make grant funding recommendations to the Commissioner. |
| RFA | Request for Application |
| Selected Farm | A farm that previously applied to and was selected for Phase 1 between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2023. |
| State | State of Maine |

**PART I OVERVIEW OF THE GRANT OPPORTUNITY**

## Purpose and Background

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (Department) is seeking applications for Phase 2 of the Maine Farms for the Future Program as defined in this Request for Applications (RFA) document. This document provides instructions for submitting applications, the procedure and criteria by which the awarded Applicant(s) will be selected, and the contractual terms which will govern the relationship between the State of Maine (State) and the awarded Applicant(s).

The Maine Farms for the Future Program is a competitive grant program that provides selected farms with assistance in conducting research, business planning and investment support. The **first Phase of FFF (Phase 1)** allows selected farmers to develop a detailed Business Plan to increase farm vitality, the long-term, maintainable farm profitability and net worth. Farms selected for Phase 1 grants were awarded a $6,000 to work with a certified business advisor, as well as other agricultural and professional service providers to research ideas for change on their farm which would serve the goals of the Business Plan. Once the Phase 1 business plan has been completed the Selected Farm is eligible to respond to a competitive RFA for **FFF** **Phase 2** investment support to implement the project or projects described in the business plan.

The second phase of FFF **(Phase 2)** includes a cash grant and/or low-interest rate on an Agricultural Marketing Loan. Phase 2 is open to those awarded the FFF Phase 1 business planning grant between January 2020 and December 2023, who completed a Business Plan, and are implementing a project(s) identified within that Department-approved plan. Those who received FFF Phase 2 funding between January 2020 and December 2023 will not be eligible. In exchange for a FFF Phase 2 cash grant, each farm must sign a Farmland Protection Agreement that will be valid for 7 years. If a farm is permanently protected with a conservation easement, the farm may only compete for the low interest rate on the AMLF loan.

## General Provisions

1. 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.
2. Issuance of the RFA does not commit the Department to issue an award or to pay expenses incurred by an Applicant in the preparation of a response to the RFA. This includes attendance at personal interviews or other meetings, where applicable.
3. 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 the Department. Applications are to follow the format and respond to all questions and instructions specified in Part III of the RFA.
4. Applicants will take careful note that in evaluating an application submitted in response to this RFA, the Department 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). The Department also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the Applicant’s experience and capabilities.
5. The application must be signed by a person authorized to legally bind the Applicant and must contain a statement that the proposal and the pricing contained therein will remain valid and binding for a period of 180 days from the date and time of the bid opening.
6. The RFA and the awarded Applicant’s proposal, including all appendices or attachments, will be the basis for the final contract, as determined by the Department.
7. Following 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](http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/1/title1sec401.html) et seq.).
8. The Department, at its sole discretion, reserves the right to recognize and waive minor informalities and irregularities found in applications received in response to the RFA.
9. 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.

## Eligibility to Submit Applications

This RFA is intended to provide investment support to implement a FFF Phase 1 Business Plan. Therefore, to qualify for this program:

1. The applicant must have been awarded a Phase 1 Business Planning grant between January 2020 and December 2023, but not have been awarded a Phase 2 Implementation grant in that timeframe, and
2. The applicant must have completed a Business Plan, as defined on page 3 of this RFA.

The applicant may apply to be considered for either or both of two types of investment support grants: A) a recommendation to apply for a reduced-interest (2%) loan from the Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund **and/or** B) an investment support cash grant in exchange for a Farmland Protection Agreement.

1. An applicant requesting an investment support cash grant in exchange for a 7-year Farmland Protection Agreement must own at least 5 acres of land in agricultural use at the time of application.
	1. If the entirety of the Applicant’s owned farmland is already permanently protected by a permanent agricultural conservation easement, then the farm may NOT apply for the cash grant. However, the Applicant may apply for the recommendation for the 2% AMLF interest rate.
2. If the Applicant is seeking a recommendation to receive a 2% interest rate on a loan issued through the AMLF, the Applicant will be subject to all AMLF project eligibility and loan application and underwriting requirements. Additional AMLF requirements are described on the Department’s [AMLF webpage](http://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/agricultural_marketing.shtml).

## Awards

No more than **eight (8) FFF Phase 2 Investment Support Grants** will be available in this grant cycle.

1. **Appeal of Contract Awards**

Any person aggrieved by the award decision that results from this Request for Applications may appeal the decision to the Director of the Bureau of General Services in the manner prescribed in 5 MRSA § 1825-E and 18-554 Code of Maine Rules, Chapter 120 (found here: [Chapter 120](https://www.maine.gov/dafs/bbm/procurementservices/policies-procedures/chapter-120)).  The appeal must be in writing and filed with the Director of the Bureau of General Services, 9 State House Station, Augusta, Maine, 04333-0009 within 15 calendar days of receipt of notification of contract award.

1. **Applicable Legislation**

The Program statute can be found here: [Title 7, Chapter 10-B](http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/7/title7ch10-Bsec0.html); and the Program rules can be found here: [Chapter](https://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/rules/01/001/001c036.doc) 36 listed as 01-001 Chapter 36.

**PART II ACTIVITIES AND REQUIREMENTS**

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1. **Required Activities**
2. Application Review
	1. The Review Panel shall evaluate applications within five (5) weeks of the deadline for applications.
	2. The Review Panel shall send a written notification of a grant to a selected farm within one (1) week of its decision.
3. Selected Farmers requesting an investment support cash grant will receive, along with written notification of the Review Panel’s decision, a draft of the Farmland Protection Agreement. The Farmland Protection Agreement must be finalized and signed by the selected farm before any grant funds are disbursed by the Department. The Agreement will protect the farmland for the years 2024 through 2031.
4. Selected Farmers recommended to receive a 2% reduced rate AMLF loan in FFF Phase 2 must submit an [AMLF eligibility form](https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/documents/amlf-project-eligibility-form-saveable-dec2023.pdf) to the Department within the FFF Phase 2 performance period (typically within two (2) years of entering into a FFF Phase 2 contract).
	1. If an AMLF [eligibility form](https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/documents/amlf-project-eligibility-form-saveable-dec2023.pdf) is submitted after the FFF Phase 2 performance period, but within five (5) years of the date the FFF Phase 2 performance period started, the Department, at its sole discretion, may agree to consider the Selected Farmer for the AMLF reduced rate recommendation.
	The Department may require resubmission and approval of a business plan that aligns with the Selected Farmers Phase 1 Ideas for Change and revisions necessary to demonstrate updated planned activities and expenditures.
5. Reporting Requirements are described below (C. Reporting Requirements).
6. **Allowable Use of Funds**
	1. Any funds provided by the Department pursuant to investment support to implement a Business Plan must be used to implement the Business Plan in its original form or in a subsequent amended version that has been approved by the Program Administrator and the Department prior to disbursement of funds.
	2. The Department may provide investment support by granting a selected Applicant a portion of the funds needed to implement the Business Plan. The cash grant is for an amount not to exceed the lesser of $25,000 or 25% of the total investments identified by the Business Plan.
		1. Prior to the disbursement of cash grant funds, the Department may require the grantee to provide documented evidence of a proportionate amount of match equaling 75% of the total investments identified by the Business Plan.
			1. The match must be directly related to the implementation of the Business Plan and must have a real market value. Match may include, but is not limited to, in-kind labor and farm resources such as timber, sand, gravel or other natural resource materials used to implement the Business Plan; personal cash resources; loans, including a reduced-interest (2%) loan from the Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund; other grants; and other resources relevant to the Business Plan.
	3. The Department may provide a selected Applicant with a recommendation to apply for a reduced-interest (2%) loan from the Agricultural Marketing Loan Fund established under Title 10, Section 1023-J and administered under 7 M.R.S.A. Section 43.
		1. If the total cost to implement the Business Plan is less than $100,000 then the reduced-interest loan may be up to 90% of that cost.
		2. If the total cost to implement the Business Plan is more than $100,000 then the reduced-interest loan may be up to 75% of that cost.
		3. In either case, the total amount of the reduced-interest loan may not exceed $250,000.
		4. The reduced-interest loan may be used as match for the cash grant described above.
7. **Reporting Requirements**

***Selected Applicants awarded the cash grant (or both a cash grant and recommendation for the 2% AMLF rate) will be required to:***

1. Provide annual data regarding farm business income, production, land, jobs, environmental and agricultural sector impacts for 2024, 2025 and 2026.
	* Due: May 1, 2025, 2026, 2027. \*

***Selected Applicants awarded ONLY the recommendation for the 2% AMLF rate will be required to****:*

1. Provide annual data regarding farm business income, production, land, jobs, and environmental and ag sector impacts for 2024, 2025 and 2026.
	* Due: May 1, 2025, 2026, 2027.

*\*The Department will keep all such individual information confidential. It will be aggregated to track Program efficacy and to share program reports with the Administration & Legislature.*

**PART III KEY PROCESS EVENTS**

## Submission of Questions

* 1. **General Instructions:** It is the responsibility of all Applicants and other interested parties to examine the entire RFA and to seek clarification, in writing, if they do not understand any information or instructions.
		1. Applicants and other interested parties should use **Appendix A** (Submitted Questions Form) for submission of questions. The form is to be submitted as a WORD document.
		2. Questions must be submitted, by e-mail, and received by the RFA Coordinator identified on the cover page of the RFA as soon as possible but no later than the date and time specified on the RFA cover page.
		3. Submitted Questions must include the RFA Number and Title in the subject line of the e-mail. The Department assumes no liability for assuring accurate/complete/on time e-mail transmission and receipt.
	2. **Question & Answer Summary:** Responses to all questions will be compiled in writing and posted on the State’s Division of Procurement Services [Grant RFPs and RFAs](https://www.maine.gov/dafs/bbm/procurementservices/vendors/grants) website. It is the responsibility of all interested parties to go to this website to obtain a copy of the Question & Answer Summary. Only those answers issued in writing on this website will be considered binding.

## Amendments

All amendments released in regard to this RFA will be posted on the Division of Procurement Services [Grant RFPs and RFAs](https://www.maine.gov/dafs/bbm/procurementservices/vendors/grants) website. It is the responsibility of all interested parties to go to this website to obtain amendments. Only those amendments posted on this website are considered binding.

## Application Submission

* 1. **Applications Due:** Applications must be received no later than 11:59 p.m. local time, on the date listed on the cover page of the RFA.
		1. Any e-mails containing original application submissions or any additional or revised application files, received after the 11:59 p.m. deadline, will be rejected without exception.
1. **Delivery Instructions:** Applications must be submitted electronically to the State of Maine Division of Procurement Services at proposals@maine.gov.
	1. Only applications received by e-mail will be considered. The Department assumes no liability for assuring accurate/complete e-mail transmission and receipt.

Application submission e-mails that are successfully received by the proposals@maine.gov inbox will receive an automatic reply stating as such.

* 1. E-mails containing links to file sharing sites or online file repositories will not be accepted as submissions. Only e-mail application submissions that have the requested files attached will be accepted.
	2. Encrypted e-mails received which 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.
	3. File size limits are 25MB per e-mail. Applicants may submit files across multiple e-mails, as necessary, due to file size concerns. All e-mails and files must be received by the due date and time as described above.
	4. Applicants are to insert the following into the subject line of their e-mail submission: “**RFA# 202403069 Application Submission – [Applicant’s Name]**”.
1. **Submission Contents**
2. The Application form must be submitted as two, typed, PDF files.

Each file must include all required information and attachments as stated below, and must be titled as stated below:

	* + 1. **Title: [Applicant’s Farm Name]\_FFF P2\_Application**The application template can be found linked in Part V of this RFA—all components must be completed in the Application.
			2. **Title: [Applicant’s Farm Name]\_FFF P2\_Business Plan**The Applicant's Business Plan from FFF Phase 1.
				1. The Applicant may propose edits Phase 1 Business Plan for approval by the Department, but the Business Plan must be submitted to FFF Phase 2 with tracked edits or notations to reflect proposed revisions.
				2. Applicants that used Phase 1 funds for tasks other than writing a Business Plan should submit a Business Plan which follows the format of this template: [Farms for the Future](https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/business_and_market_development/farms_for_future/index.shtml).
3. Applicants are not to provide additional attachments beyond those specified in the RFA or Application Form for the purpose of extending their response. Materials not requested will not be considered part of the application and will not be evaluated.

**PART IV APPLICATION EVALUATION AND SELECTION**

1. **Evaluation Process – General Information**
	1. An evaluation team, composed of qualified reviewers, will judge the merits of the proposals received in accordance with the criteria defined in the RFA.
	2. Officials responsible for making decisions on the award selection will ensure that the selection process accords equal opportunity and appropriate consideration to all who are capable of meeting the specifications. The goals of the evaluation process are to ensure fairness and objectivity in review of the applications and to ensure that all contracts are awarded to the Applicants that provide the best value to the State of Maine.
	3. The Department reserves the right to communicate and/or schedule interviews/presentations with Applicants, if needed, to obtain clarification of information contained in the applications received. The Department may revise the scores assigned in the initial evaluation to reflect those communications and/or interviews/presentations. Changes to applications, including updating or adding information, will not be permitted during any interview/presentation process and, therefore, Applicants must submit proposals that present their rates and other requested information as clearly and completely as possible.
	4. Failure to respond to all questions and instructions throughout the RFA may result in the application being disqualified as non-responsive or receiving a reduced score. The Department, and its evaluation team, has sole discretion to determine whether a variance from the RFA specifications will result either in disqualification or reduction in scoring of a proposal.
2. **Scoring Process:** The evaluation team will use a consensus approach to evaluate and score all sections listed below. Members of the review team will not score those sections individually but, instead, will arrive at a consensus as to assignment of points for each of those sections.
3. **Scoring Weights:** The score will be based on a 100-point scale and will measure the degree to which each application meets the following criteria.

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| **Scoring Criteria** | **Points Available** |
| The Applicant meets the Program eligibility requirements listed in Part 1 Section C of this RFA. | Pass/Fail |
| **Completeness of the Business Plan**  | 5 |
| **Management Capacity -** *“Will the applicant be able to implement the Idea for Change?”*The application and business plan demonstrate applicant’s knowledge, experience, and capacity to successfully plan, implement and manage the proposed changes to the farm business. | 20 |
| **Financial Capacity and Debt Management** - *“Will the Idea for Change improve the applicant’s business’ financial health? Are they ready to take this on?”*The changes proposed in the business plan will improve the cash flow, and management of debt load needed to pay any new debt associated with the proposed changes to the farm business. | 10 |
| **Collateral and Asset Base** – “*Can existing resources support this new direction?”*The application and business plan demonstrate that the farm will improve the productivity of the land (soil quality, fertility, water holding capacity), the physical condition of the buildings and equipment, and maintain any newly acquired assets to increase the overall sustainability of the farm business. | 20 |
| **Farm Vitality & Development of New Capital** – *“Will it work?”*The Business Plan demonstrates, through better strategies, marketing, production efficiencies and upgrading of facilities and equipment, an increase in profitability and overall net worth that will improve the overall sustainability of the Farm Business. | 30 |
| **Other Conditions** (**A**) The Business Plan identifies how the current or proposed farm operations will accomplish broader conservation objectives such as protecting water quality, improving wildlife habitat, or maintaining open space and local scenic and cultural amenities as long as such practices enhance or maintain the profitability of the farm. (5 points)(**B**) The percentage of the farmland owned by the applicant that is to be protected under the Farmland Protection Agreement. (5 points)(**C**) The degree to which the change in the business is new and different to the business. (5 points)  | 15  |
| **Total Points**  | **100 points** |

1. **Selection and Award**
	1. Notification of conditional award selection or non-selection will be made in writing by the Department.
	2. Issuance of this RFA in no way constitutes a commitment by the State to award a contract, to pay costs incurred in the preparation of a response to the RFA, or to pay costs incurred in procuring or contracting for services, supplies, physical space, personnel, or any other costs incurred by the Applicant.
	3. The Department reserves the right to reject any and all applications or to make multiple awards.
2. **Contract Administration and Conditions**
	1. The awarded Applicants will be required to execute a State of Maine Service Contract with the appropriate riders as determined by the issuing Department.
	2. Allocation of funds is final upon successful negotiation and execution of the contract, subject to the review and approval of the State Procurement Review Committee. Contracts are not considered fully executed and valid until approved by the State Procurement Review Committee and funds are encumbered. No contract will be approved based on an RFA which has an effective date less than fourteen (14) calendar days after award notification to Applicants. (Referenced in the regulations of the Department of Administrative and Financial Services, [Chapter 110, § 3(B)(i)](https://www.maine.gov/dafs/bbm/procurementservices/policies-procedures/chapter-110)). This provision means that a contract cannot be effective until at least 14 calendar days after award notification.
	3. Following the award, a Contract Administrator from the Department will be appointed to assist with the development and administration of the contract and to act as administrator during the entire contract period. Department staff will be available after the award to consult with the awarded Applicants in the finalization of the contract.
	4. In providing services and performing under the contract, the awarded Applicant must act as an independent contractor and not as an agent of the State of Maine.

**PART V APPLICATION FORM**

## Applicants must use the Application Form embedded below to submit their application in response to this RFA.

## The Application Form may be obtained in a Word (.docx) format by double clicking on the document icon below.



**APPENDIX A SUBMITTED QUESTIONS FORM**

This form should be used by Applicants when submitting written questions to the RFA Coordinator.

If a question is not related to any section of the RFA, enter “N/A” under the RFA Section & Page Number. Add additional rows as necessary. Submit this document in WORD format, not PDF.

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| **Organization Name:** |  |

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| **RFA Section & Page Number** | **Question** |
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