

**National Institute of Food and Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
OMB No. 0524-0041
NIFA Proposal Review Process**

SUBJECT: Supporting Statement for Paperwork Reduction Act Submission to Revise and Extend an Information Collection for the Proposal Review Process

A. JUSTIFICATION

1. CIRCUMSTANCES MAKING COLLECTION OF INFORMATION NECESSARY

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) administers competitive, peer-reviewed research, education, and extension programs. The reviews are undertaken to ensure that projects supported by NIFA are of a high-quality and are consistent with the goals and requirements of the funding program. These programs are authorized pursuant to the authorities contained in the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977, as amended (7 U.S.C. 3101), the Smith-Lever Act, and other legislative authorities.

This information collection is authorized under Sections 3015.158 and 3430.11 of 7 CFR which govern competition in the awarding of discretionary grants and cooperative agreements. 7 CFR 3015.158 sets forward the standard that applications are to be evaluated objectively by independent reviewers in accordance with written criteria set forth by the awarding agency. It also states that reviewers are to make written comments, as appropriate, for each application.

NIFA receives research, education, and extension grant applications each year, of which approximately a quarter are awarded. The majority of these applications are subjected to a rigorous peer-review involving technical experts (scientists, educators, farmers, engineers, extension specialists) located world-wide. Given the highly technical nature of many of these applications, the quality of the peer-review greatly depends on the appropriate matching of the subject matter of the application with the technical expertise of the potential reviewer. NIFA maintains a database of potential reviewers. Information in the database is used to match applications with the most appropriate (potential) reviewers. Therefore, the accuracy of the database content is integral to the success of the NIFA peer review process.

If this information is not collected, it would be difficult for a review panel and NIFA staff to determine which projects warrant funding, or identify appropriate qualified reviewers. In addition, Federal grants staff and auditors could not assess the quality or integrity of the review, and the writer of the application would not benefit from any feedback on why the application was funded or not.

2. HOW, BY WHOM, AND PURPOSE FOR WHICH INFORMATION IS TO BE USED

The NIFA Application Review Process is accomplished through the use of the NIFA Peer Review System (PRS), A Web-based system which allows reviewers and potential reviewers to update personal information and to complete and submit reviews electronically to NIFA.

Information about potential panel and ad hoc reviewers is collected via an electronic questionnaire. New reviewers are prompted via an e-mail message to complete the questionnaire. The information from the completed questionnaire is loaded into a NIFA database system. The questionnaire collects basic biographical information including address, contact information, and professional expertise. If a reviewer's information is already included in the database, then the questionnaire serves as a request for the potential reviewer to update her/his information. Completing this questionnaire does not commit the respondent to review applications for NIFA.

Information in the database system is used to match applications with the most appropriate (potential) reviewers. The purpose of this information is to obtain current reviewer expertise, contact information, willingness to review, and other biographical information about potential reviewers. This in turn ensures the best possible reviewers are assigned to review applications submitted to NIFA. NIFA program officers can search the expertise information in this database when seeking reviewers for applications. The program officers will not only look for specific technical expertise appropriate to an application, but institutional information in assessing conflict-of-interest and expressed willingness of the potential reviewer to review at that time. Once appropriate reviewers have been selected by NIFA and the reviewer agrees to perform a review, the application and associated materials are then made available to her/him. With respect to the application, a reviewer must assure s/he: (1) will comply with the NIFA Confidentiality Guidelines and (2) does not have a conflict of interest.

Upon completion of a review, the reviewer completes various worksheets in PRS evaluating an application against established criterion providing comments as necessary. If appropriate, a peer panel is convened to review and discuss proposals and make funding recommendations. Once collected this information is used by a panel of external reviewers from various institutions to determine which applications are fundable based on a series of specified criteria. The information is utilized by NIFA staff in selecting and awarding applications to provide feedback to the writer of the application, and by auditors in ensuring the integrity of the review.

3. USE OF IMPROVED INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

This information collection does employ the use of improved information technologies. Reviewers are able to maintain their profile information and have the option of submitting reviews through the NIFA Peer Review System (PRS). This is a web based

submission tool that accommodates the selection of reviewers, the assignment of applications to reviewers, and permits reviewers to electronically submit ratings and comments. The system is a critical tool supporting the NIFA review process.

4. DESCRIBE EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY DUPLICATION.

Reviewers may have to prepare reviews for more than one application, however each application is unique and the effort is not duplicated. Efforts are made to minimize the number of applications any one reviewer is asked to prepare written reviews of. In addition, NIFA has taken steps to minimize the number of duplicate accounts in our peer review system.

5. METHODS TO MINIMIZE BURDEN ON SMALL BUSINESSES OR OTHER SMALL ENTITIES.

Most reviewers are from colleges and universities, although some employees of small businesses are asked to review for some programs. The Small Business Innovation Programs however does not allow reviewers from for-profit institutions to participate in the review of applications, which has the benefit of reducing burden on small business entities.

Respondents are individuals and all responses are voluntary. Reviewers can decline any request to serve on review panels or review individual applications outside of a panel. In addition, NIFA uses an electronic system to monitor application assignments to ensure individual reviewers are not over burdened.

Therefore, this collection should have trivial impact on small businesses or entities.

6. CONSEQUENCES IF INFORMATION COLLECTION WERE LESS FREQUENT.

To insure the highest quality of funded research, NIFA must collect reviews in a timely manner and on an individual application basis. If this information was not collected and documented, the decision to fund a particular application could be questioned.

In addition, because of the rate of change of science and thus scientific expertise, the need to have correct contact information, and the need to update willingness to review (which can be fluid based on events in the potential reviewer's life and career), respondents must be asked to complete a questionnaire annually.

7. SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES FOR INFORMATION COLLECTION.

There are no special circumstances for this information collection. This collection is consistent with the regulation at 7 CFR 3015.115 authorizing its use.

- Requiring respondents to report information to the agency more often than quarterly:

The agency does not require respondents to report information more often than quarterly.

- Requiring respondents to prepare a written response to a collection of information in fewer than 30 days after receipt of it.

Response is voluntary and respondents have more than 30 days to reply.

- Requiring respondents to submit more than an original and two copies of any document:

Only one response is requested and is collected electronically.

- Requiring respondents to retain records, other than health, medical, government contract, grant-in-aid, or tax records for more than three years;

Respondents are not required to retain records in response to this request.

- In connection with a statistical survey, that is not designed to produce valid and reliable results that can be generalized to the universe of study;

This information collection does not include statistical surveys.

- Requiring the use of a statistical data classification that has not been reviewed and approved by OMB;

This information collection does not require the use of statistical data classification that has not been reviewed and approved by OMB.

- That includes a pledge of confidentiality that is not supported by authority established in statute or regulation, that is not supported by disclosure and data security policies that are consistent with the pledge, or which unnecessarily impedes sharing of data with other agencies for compatible confidential use;

This information collection does not require a pledge of confidentiality that is not supported by authority established in statute or regulation, that is not supported by disclosure and data security policies that are consistent with the pledge, or which unnecessarily impedes sharing of data with other agencies for compatible confidential use.

- Requiring respondents to submit proprietary trade secret, or other confidential information unless the agency can demonstrate that it has instituted procedures to protect the information's confidentiality to the extent permitted by law.

This information collection does not require respondents to submit proprietary trade secret, or other confidential information.

8. FEDERAL REGISTER NOTICE, SUMMARIZATION OF COMMENTS AND CONSULTATION WITH PERSONS OUTSIDE THE AGENCY.

Notice of intent to revise this information collection was published in the *Federal Register* on January 17, 2012, 77 FR 2267. No comments were received on this notice.

The names and contact information for 3 people surveyed for the burden estimates are below.

Penny Swanson
Penny.swanson@noaa.gov

Ramesh Ramachandran
rameshr@psu.edu

Carol Bagnell
bagnell@aesop.rutgers.edu

9. EXPLAIN ANY DECISION TO PROVIDE ANY PAYMENT OR GIFT TO RESPONDENTS.

Payments or gifts are not given to any respondents for completing the information collection. Participation in this collection is voluntary. However, panelists are compensated with an honorarium for the time they spend in panel.

10. CONFIDENTIALITY PROVIDED TO RESPONDENTS.

Verbatim but anonymous copies of review comments are sent to the principal project director for each application. Subject to NIFA policy and applicable laws, reviewers' comments and names will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. The notice requesting respondents to complete the questionnaire includes a privacy information notice.

Every reviewer assures, in the Peer Review System, prior to preparing a review that they do not have a conflict of interest with a particular application and will maintain its confidentiality.

11. QUESTIONS OF A SENSITIVE NATURE.

This collection does not ask respondents questions of a sensitive or individual nature.

12. ESTIMATE OF BURDEN.

The burden estimates for the three components to the NIFA review process are as follows.

Transaction Name	Estimated # of Respondents	Estimated # of Responses per Respondent	Estimated # of annual responses	Estimated burden in hours per response	Estimated total annual burden in hours
Proposal Review Sheet	18,400	1	1	5	92,000
Reviewer Questionnaire	50,000	1	1	.166 hours or 10 minutes	8,330
Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Certification Form	1,000	1	1	.166 hours or 10 minutes	167
Totals	50,000				100,497

TOTAL ANNUAL COST BURDEN TO RESPONDENTS OR RECORDKEEPERS.

Based on an average faculty hourly wage of \$54.00, NIFA estimates the total annual cost burden to respondents for the value of their time to participate in the NIFA review process to be \$5,426,838.

The hourly wage was derived from the American Association of University Professors 2011-2012 Faculty Salary Report data. The average associate level professor salary of \$86,300 for a 10 month year was used.

13. START-UP COSTS

There are no start-up or capital costs incurred by respondents of this collection.

14. PROVIDE ESTIMATES OF ANNUALIZED COST TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

NIFA estimates the total annual cost to the agency for the collection of this information to be \$4,000,000 which includes staff time in reviewing and managing the information, panel costs, and system maintenance.

15. REASONS FOR CHANGES IN BURDEN.

The total annual burden for the NIFA Review Process has increased from the previously approved total of 78,065 hours to the new requested amount of 100,497 hours. This is principally the result of adjustments in the number of respondents and one minor program change.

The number of responses for the Proposal Review Sheet was adjusted to reflect an increase from the previously estimated 12,600 responses to 18,400 responses. To be on the conservative side, the estimated number of four reviews per application (4,600) was used. Not all application receives four reviews but all are required at least three written reviews. This adjustment resulted in an increase of 16,400 hours.

Adjustments were made to the number of respondents as well. NIFA went back to the using the full available 50,000 reviewers available in the database to calculate the estimate. Because any of these reviewers may be used, the entire pool is reflected in this estimate. This adjustment resulted in an increase of 5,865 hours from the total for the Reviewer Questionnaire.

A program change has been made to restore the hard copy Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Certification Form and use in addition to the electronic assurance provided through the Peer Review System. This resulted in minor addition of 167 hours from the previous total.

As a result of these calculation changes the annual number of responses also increased from 27,100 to 69,400. This increase is principally due to using the full available database of reviewers.

In all, there is an increase of 22,265 hours as a result of a program adjustment and an increase of 167 hours as a result of program changes.

Instrument	Previous Burden	Requested Burden	Change in burden	Reason
Review Sheet	75,600	92,000	Increase of 16,400 hours	Adjustment
Reviewer Questionnaire	2,465	8,330	Increase of 5,865 hours	Adjustment
Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Certification Form	0	167	Increase of 167 hours	Program Change
Total	78,065	100,497	Increase of 22,432 hours	

16. TABULATION, ANALYSIS AND PUBLICATION PLANS.

The information collected is not planned for publication. It is used solely to administer NIFA programs.

17. REASONS DISPLAY OF EXPIRATION DATE OF OMB APPROVAL IS INAPPROPRIATE.

NIFA will display the OMB approval number on the Peer Review System. To prevent from having to modify system screens exemption is requested to not display the expiration date of this collection.

18. EXCEPTIONS TO 83-I CERTIFICATION STATEMENT.

A certification of exception is not requested.

B. COLLECTION OF INFORMATION EMPLOYING STATISTICAL METHODS

Information to be collected does not employ statistical methods.