



United States Department of Agriculture

May 10, 2021

**TO:** Austin Mudd  
Senior Desk Officer  
Office of Management and Budget

**THROUGH:** Levi S. Harrell  
USDA Information Collection Officer

**FROM:** Michele Brooks  
Director, Regulations Management Division  
Innovation Center, Rural Development, USDA

**SUBJECT:** Request for Emergency Approval of a New Information Collection Request  
for Rural Development Cooperative Agreements

The Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBS), Rural Housing Service (RHS), and Rural Utilities Service (RUS), agencies that comprise the Rural Development (RD) Mission Area (Agency) within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), are requesting emergency review and approval of a new information collection for the Rural Development Cooperatives Agreements. Associated with this package is a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC) initiative. The Agency is expecting to publish the NOFA, in which the 60-day notice is embedded, in the *Federal Register* by May 27, 2021. Approval of this emergency request is important because: (1) of the time sensitive competitive solicitation application window commencing on May 27, 2021; (2) the urgency to obligate fiscal year (FY) 2021 funds prior to September 30, 2021 of the fiscal year; and, (3) being able to effectively implement the program as quickly as possible to benefit rural communities. RD is requesting the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to approve this information collection no later than May 20, 2021. The Administration, Congress, and USDA have indicated that publication and timely implementation of the RPIC initiative is a priority well before the FY 2021 fourth quarter.

Pursuant to the Federal Agricultural Improvement Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-127), the USDA received authorization from Congress under 7 U.S.C. 2204b(b)(4) to enter into cooperative agreements for the purpose of improving the coordination and effectiveness of programs that benefit rural areas. This authority is referred to as the Rural Development Cooperative Agreement (RDCA) program and the RB-CS, RHS and RUS are the three agencies within USDA that administer programs that specifically target rural areas. Each year, USDA receives proposals from the public that are not in response to a specific program announcement. These

proposals are called unsolicited proposals. If the proposal is unique or innovative, then a RD agency has authority to enter into a cooperative agreement without competition (see 2 CFR § 415.1(d)(6)). Alternatively, USDA may issue an invitation to submit applications for a cooperative agreement using the RDCA authority. These proposals are called solicited proposals. The RPIC initiative would be covered under this new collection package.

On December 27, 2020, Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, which funded the RPIC. Under this new collection, the RD will announce the availability of up to \$3 million. RPIC is a technical assistance and planning process rural community leaders use to create places where people want to live, work and play. This initiative provides planning support and technical assistance to foster placemaking activities in rural communities. RPIC funds are awarded thru a competitive solicitation procedure – and proposals are evaluated using a scoring process. The scoring criterion are targeted to supporting applications that support communities that would be addressing (1) Economically Distressed Communities and (2) Broadband Planning for Infrastructure, Deployment, and/or Access.

The Administration, Congress, and the USDA have indicated that implementation of this initiative is a priority early in the FY 2021 because of their concern about already severely impacted rural communities, particularly historically impoverished communities that have had difficulty utilizing RD programs. Initiatives funded under the RPIC can play a vital role in the economic recovery created by time, distance, location, and lack of resources, which has been severely compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In lieu of the critical need to deliver funding to rural communities, USDA is requesting approval by no later than May 20, 2021. Approval of an emergency approval for this new collection is important because RPIC will not be able to be implemented prior to the end of FY 2021, as the use of normal clearance procedures is likely to prevent the collection of information from applicants which, in turn, will have negative consequences on the intended recipients. The 60-day notice for comments is included in the NOFA and comments on the RPIC information collection request is requested in order to submit the regular request to obtain a 3-year approval from OMB after receiving the 6-month OMB emergency approval. Due to the need to consider comments received and then issue another notice for the *Federal Register* for an additional thirty days of comment, RD would not be able to complete the information collection process. Please note that after the 60-day comment period closes, RD will submit the collection package for a 3-year approval addressing any comments received.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Michele Brooks, Director, Regulations Management Division, Innovation Center, Rural Development by telephone at (202) 690-1078 or by email at Michele.Brooks@usda.gov. or MaryPat Daskal, Chief, Branch 1, Regulations Management Division, Innovation Center, Rural Development by telephone at (202) 720-7853.