

**1National 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 Renew a
Currently Approved Information Collection for the NIFA Proposal Review
Process

A. JUSTIFICATION

1. CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MAKE THE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION
NECESSARY.

1The 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 et. seq.), the Smith-Lever Act (7 U.S.C. 341 et. seq.), and other legislative authorities.

This information collection is authorized under 7 CFR 3403.10 specifically for the Small Business Innovation Research program (15 U.S.C. 638) and 7 CFR 3430 which governs competition in the awarding of discretionary grants and cooperative agreements for NIFA. 7 CFR 3430.33 specifies the criteria that are to be used to select reviewers including their relevant training and experience, the variety of specialization and expertise, their location and organization type. Reviewers are to make written comments, as appropriate, for each application. It also specifies that confidentiality of the reviewers and applicants is maintained, and conflicts of interest evaluated with care to remove any actual or perceived conflicts, and that reviewers provide this assurance through the NIFA Peer Review System (PRS). PRS is a web-based system which allows reviewers and potential reviewers to update personal information, provide assurances for confidentiality, and to complete and submit reviews electronically to NIFA. Electronic reviews are included in the application electronic record maintained at NIFA.

NIFA has updated its Reviewer Questionnaire to improve the quality, consistency, and utility of the information collected from applicants. These revisions are designed to better align volunteer capabilities and interests with program needs, while streamlining internal processes. Key changes include:

- **Expanded Required Fields:** Questions related to volunteer skills, experience, and availability (Questions 3, 4, and 5) are now mandatory, ensuring more complete and standardized data collection.

- **New Role Interest Option:** A new question has been added to identify applicants interested in serving as a *Panel Chair*, enabling more effective recruitment of volunteers for leadership roles.
 - A Panel Chair handles the recruitment of panelists, the assignment of applications, and assists in leading an impartial panel management process.
- **CV Integration:** Applicants are now asked to provide information from their curriculum vitae (CV), which is automatically transferred into the Grants Management Reporting Application (GMRA), NIFA's internal database. This enhancement supports more efficient reviewer selection and program planning.
- **Updated Demographic Fields:** The race and/or ethnicity fields have been updated to capture guidance provided by OMB, offering a more comprehensive profile of each applicant.
- **Improved Layout and Clarity:** The form has been restructured to enhance usability and ensure that volunteer preferences, qualifications, and availability are clearly communicated.

These updates reflect a commitment to improving operational efficiency and ensuring that volunteer placements are well-matched to program needs.

In addition, to improve efficiency and clarity in the peer review process, NIFA has replaced the Conflict-of-Interest and Confidentiality Certification Form with a new, consolidated Peer Reviewer Agreement.

Key changes include:

- **Consolidation of Responsibilities:** The Peer Reviewer Agreement combines conflict-of-interest disclosures, confidentiality commitments, and reviewer duties into a single document, reducing administrative burden and improving clarity.
- **Expanded Role Definition:** The agreement outlines specific expectations for panelists, including participation in training, timely submission of reviews, engagement in panel discussions, and completion of panel summaries.
- **Refined Confidentiality Language:** Confidentiality provisions have been updated to emphasize the protection of sensitive materials and reviewer identities, with clearer guidance on reporting breaches.
- **Ethics and Honorarium Guidance:** The agreement incorporates federal ethics guidelines and provides structured options for accepting or declining honorarium, ensuring transparency and compliance.

This replacement ensures reviewers are fully informed of their obligations and supports a consistent, legally sound framework for managing peer review activities.

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 and completeness 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. The proposed updates will help increase the integrity of our electronic records by improving the quality, consistency, and utility of the information collected from applicants.

2. PURPOSE AND USE OF INFORMATION.

The NIFA Application Review Process is accomplished through the use of the NIFA Peer Review System (PRS). This web-based system allows reviewers and potential reviewers to update personal information, provide assurances for confidentiality, and complete and submit reviews electronically to NIFA.

Information about potential panel and ad hoc reviewers is collected via NIFA PRS. Individuals volunteering to be considered as a panelist can complete the Volunteer Survey on the PRS home screen, and access this home screen from the [NIFA Website – Panelist Information](#) page. Furthermore, outreach efforts via avenues such as e-mail messages from NIFA staff prompt individuals to sign up as new reviewers in the NIFA PRS system. Even if a reviewer previously served on a panel for NIFA, the PRS will prompt for the potential reviewer to update their information. Completing this volunteer survey does not commit the respondent to review applications for NIFA.

Information in the database system (PRS) is used to match applications with the most appropriate (potential) reviewers. The purpose of this information is to obtain and maintain current potential reviewer expertise, contact information, willingness to review, conflicts, location, etc. This in turn ensures that the best possible reviewers are assigned to review applications submitted to NIFA. NIFA program staff can search the expertise information in this database when seeking reviewers for applications. The program staff will not only look for specific technical expertise appropriate to an application, but institutional information in assessing conflict-of-interest, geographic location, organization type, demographics information, 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 them through PRS. With respect to the application, a reviewer must assure they: (1) will comply with the NIFA Confidentiality Guidelines and (2) do not have a conflict of interest prior to viewing an application. Furthermore, NIFA EEO/CR staff will continuously monitor from an EEO/CR perspective how reviewers are selected, and ensure compliant methods for reviewers to self-report their demographics are being followed.

Upon completion of a review, the reviewer completes a Reviewer 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 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND BURDEN REDUCTION.

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 web based submission tool accommodates the selection of reviewers, the instructions for the review, 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. Further, NIFA staff utilize this information for the Panel Composition Approval Process, significantly decreasing the burden and errors caused by manually inputting panelist information into an Excel sheet for approval. By gathering this information directly from PRS, NIFA staff can generate reports in GMRA to assess panels and better address needs for future improvements. This technical improvement provides ease for offices across NIFA to access and use the information, while decreasing time for Program Staff to compile a panel of qualified peer reviewers.

4. 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 through our data governance initiative. Reviewers will only be prompted to update their information once each year as applicable.

5. IMPACTS ON SMALL BUSINESSES OR OTHER SMALL ENTITIES.

The respondents for this collection do not include any small business. Therefore, this collection should have trivial impact on small businesses or entities.

6. CONSEQUENCES OF COLLECTING THE INFORMATION LESS FREQUENTLY.

To ensure 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, 1because 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 update their information in PRS annually.

7. SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES RELATING TO THE GUIDELINES OF 5 CFR 1320.5.

There are no special circumstances for this information collection.

8. COMMENTS TO THE FEDERAL REGISTER NOTICE AND EFFORTS FOR CONSULTATION.

If applicable, provide a copy and identify the date and page number of publications in the Federal Register of the agency's notice, required by 5 CFR 1320.8(d), soliciting comments on the information collection prior to submission to OMB. Summarize public comments received in response to that notice and describe actions taken by the agency in response to these comments. Specifically address comments received on cost and hour burden.

Describe efforts to consult with persons outside the agency to obtain their views on the availability of data, frequency of collection, the clarity of instructions and recordkeeping, disclosure, or reporting format (if any), and on the data elements to be recorded, disclosed, or reported.

Consultation with representatives of those from whom information is to be obtained or those who must compile records should occur at least once every 3 years even if the collection of information activity is the same as in prior years. There may be circumstances that may preclude consultation in a specific situation. These circumstances should be explained.

Notice of intent to revise this information collection was published in the *Federal Register* on Tuesday, July 8, 2025, Vol. 90 No. 128 (90 FR 30036). Two comments were received on the 60-day notice which was, but they did not contain input relevant to this information collection.

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

Danielle Treadwell, Associate Professor and State Extension Specialist
University of Florida - IFAS
ddtreadw@ufl.edu

Todd Callaway, Professor
University of Georgia
todd.callaway@uga.edu

Robert Dove, Undergraduate Coordinator and Swine Extension Specialist
University of Georgia
crdove@uga.edu

The individuals we consulted regarding this collection provided information about the time needed to complete forms associated with this collection. They expressed that the forms were easy and quick to complete. For the PRS Questionnaire, their suggestions for improvements were considered to improve clarity and redundant statements were removed.

9. EXPLAIN ANY DECISIONS 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, eligible panelists are compensated with an honorarium for the time they spend in panel.

10. ASSURANCES OF 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. 1The 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.

Privacy information collected as a part of this information collection is covered by the USDA/OASCR-1 Civil Rights Enterprise System (CRES) Systems of Record Notice (SORN), 83 FR 64135, December 19, 2018.

11. JUSTIFICATION FOR ANY QUESTIONS OF A SENSITIVE NATURE.

This collection will permit NIFA to continue to collect/update reviewer demographics information that is already collected from applicants, including Project Directors and Co-Project Directors, using forms OMB 4040-001, the Research & Related Personal Data form and the Research & Related Senior/Key Person Profile (Expanded) form of the approved R&R Family. The reviewer self-reported response in the NIFA PRS will serve as the source of the information to enable NIFA to effectively ensure minority representation of reviewers according to the criteria in 7 CFR 3430.

12. ESTIMATES OF THE HOUR BURDEN OF THE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION.

A. 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
Standard Worksheet	18,400	1	18,400	1.5	27,600
Reviewer Questionnaire	50,000	1	50,000	.75 hours or 45 minutes	37,500
Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Certification Form	2,000	1	2,000	.2 hours or 12 minutes	400
Totals	70,400	1	70,400	2.45	65,500

B. Based on an average faculty hourly wage of \$48.88, NIFA estimates the total annual cost burden to respondents for the value of their time to participate in the NIFA review process to be \$3,201,640.

The hourly wage was derived from the American Association of University Professors 2023-2024 Faculty Salary Report data. The average annual associate level professor salary of \$97,760 was used, with an average of 2000 hours worked per year. This estimate also includes the cost of fringe benefits.

13. ESTIMATES OF OTHER TOTAL ANNUAL COST BURDEN.

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 \$400,000 which includes staff time in reviewing and managing the information, panel costs, and system maintenance. This estimate also includes the cost of fringe benefits.

15. EXPLANATION OF PROGRAM CHANGES OR ADJUSTMENTS.

The burden estimate for this collection has not changed.

16. PLANS FOR TABULATION, AND PUBLICATION AND PROJECT TIME SCHEDULE.

NIFA does not currently plan to publish any reports using the information in this collection.

17. DISPLAYING THE OMB APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE.

1NIFA 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 THE CERTIFICATION STATEMENT IDENTIFIED IN ITEM 19.

There are no exceptions to item 19 of OMB Form 83-I.