

Request for Applications
United States Department of Agriculture,
Agricultural Marketing Service
Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) Program Infrastructure Grants
Awarded by the Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries

FUNDING YEAR: Fiscal Year (FY) 2024

APPLICATION DEADLINE: January 15, 2024, 11:59PM CST

ANTICIPATED FUNDING: \$5,867,166.31

FEDERAL AWARD RANGE: \$100,000-\$3,000,000

FUNDING OPPORTUNITY NUMBER: AM-RFSI-23-002

CATALOG OF FEDERAL DOMESTIC ASSISTANCE NUMBER: 10.190

Executive Summary

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), has entered into a cooperative agreement with the Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries (ADAI) to administer the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) Program. ADAI is working in partnership with USDA AMS to award competitive Infrastructure Grants to support middle-of-the-food-supply-chain infrastructure for domestic food and farm businesses and other eligible entities. Funds will support expanded capacity for the aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, and distribution of locally and regionally produced food products, including specialty crops, dairy, grains and other row crops for human consumption, aquaculture, and other food products, excluding meat and poultry. This program is funded by Section 1001(b)(4) of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021 (Pub. L. 117—2).

Infrastructure Grant applicants may apply for a minimum federal award of \$100,000 and a maximum award of \$3 million. Projects may start on May 25, 2024 and must be completed by May 24, 2027. Grant applicants are required to contribute 50% of the total proposed project cost as a match to federal funding. For historically underserved farmers and ranchers and small businesses that qualify under the Small Business Administration (SBA) including small disadvantaged businesses, women-owned small businesses, and veteran-owned small businesses, the required match is reduced to 25% of the total proposed project cost.

ADAI solicits applications for projects that fall within the scope of the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program.

This notice identifies the RFSI Funding Priorities for Alabama, eligibility criteria for projects and applicants, funding information, application form locations, and associated instructions.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

General Information

- A. Background
- B. Purpose
- C. Alabama RFSI Funding Priorities
- D. Description of Potential Infrastructure Grant Activities
- E. Ineligible Projects
- F. Matching Funds Requirement
- G. Available Funding
- H. Program Implementation Timeline

Application Requirements

- A. Eligible Entities
- B. Required Documents

Criteria for Evaluation

- A. Competitive Project Descriptions
- B. Competitive Review by Independent Expert Review Panel
- C. Project Evaluation Criteria

Award Administration Information

- A. Award Notices
- B. Unsuccessful Applicants
- C. Appeal Process
- D. Reporting Requirements
- E. Agency Contacts

GENERAL INFORMATION

A. Background

Section 1001(b)(4) of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021 (Pub. L. 117—2), as amended, authorizes the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), to make grants and agreements to maintain to improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency.

Under the RFSI program, AMS is entering into cooperative agreements with each State department of agriculture. Cooperative agreements are a form of federal financial assistance that anticipate substantial involvement by the awarding federal agency (e.g., engaging with the recipient on overall project direction and implementation). Up to \$420 million in American Rescue Plan funding is available for this program, and allocation to each State will be made through the following weighted sum formula: (A) State percent share of commodity by sales (20%), plus the weighted sum of (B) State percent share of commodity by small farm sales (60%), plus the (C) weighted State percent share of Rural populations living in distressed communities (20%). States will use the formula funds to make competitive Infrastructure Grants (i.e., subawards) for projects to expand capacity and infrastructure for the aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, or distribution of targeted local and regional agricultural products.

B. Purpose

The purpose of the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program (RFSI) is to assist U.S. states and territories (States) to build resilience in the middle-of-the-supply-chain and strengthen local and regional food systems by creating new revenue streams for their state's producers. States will make subawards in the form of Infrastructure Grants to middle-of-the-supply businesses to create more diverse local and regional market options and create more economic opportunities for communities, allowing them to retain more of the value chain dollar. RFSI investments aim to create a food systems infrastructure to support competitive and profitable market access for domestic farm products. The primary goal of RFSI is to support food system crops and products meant for human consumption (excluding meat and poultry products, which are funded through other USDA programs).

The program also aims to:

- Support development of value-added products available to consumers;
- Support proposals that provide fair prices, fair wages and new and safe job opportunities that keep profits in rural communities; and
- Increase diversity in processing options in terms of business model approaches, geography, and availability to underserved communities.

C. Alabama RFSI Funding Priorities

ADAI conducted statewide outreach through a priority identification survey and in-person outreach meetings to ascertain funding priorities for the RFSI program in Alabama. Based on the collected data from surveys and input from outreach meetings, funding priorities for Alabama RFSI subawards will include:

- Projects that increase local producers' abilities to process, aggregate, and distribute agricultural products,
- Projects that construct, expand, or modernize processing/value-added facilities;
- Projects that construct, expand, or modernize distribution facilities;
- Projects that construct, expand, or modernize storage facilities;
- Projects that purchase and/or modernize middle-of-the-food-supply-chain equipment; and
- Projects that will increase the local food supply to school systems and grocery stores.

Submitted Infrastructure Grants must correspond with at least one funding priority listed above.

D. Description of Potential Infrastructure Grant Activities

Infrastructure Grants will be used for the purpose of expanding middle-of-the-food-supply-chain capacity for locally and regionally produced foods and offer more and better market opportunities and new streams of revenue to small and mid-sized agricultural producers, including those who may not have access to value-added opportunities or processing to meet market demand for premium or value-added products, such as underserved producers. Potential activities funded by the RFSI Program may include:

- Expanding capacity for processing, aggregation and distribution of agricultural products to create more and better markets for producers;
- Modernizing manufacturing, tracking, storage, and information technology systems;
- Enhancing worker safety through adoption of new technologies or investment in equipment or facility improvements;
- Improving the capacity of entities to comply with federal, state, and local food safety requirements;
- Improving operations through training opportunities;
- Supporting construction of a new facility;
- Modernizing or expanding an existing facility (including expansion and modifications to existing buildings and/or construction of new buildings at existing facilities);
- Construction of wastewater management structures, etc.;
- Modernizing processing and manufacturing equipment; and
- Developing, customizing, or installing equipment that reduces greenhouse gas emissions, increases efficiency in water use, improves air and/or water quality, and/or meets one or more of USDA's climate action goals.

All proposals must align with standards and protocols outlined in the Resilient Food Infrastructure Program Scope and Requirements:

https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf.

New construction projects must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), Endangered Species Act (ESA), and all other federal environmental laws and regulations. The State is required to review projects for NEPA compliance prior to the award of Infrastructure Grant subaward funds.

E. Ineligible Projects

The following activities are not eligible for RFSI funding:

- Acquiring real property (including pre-existing buildings and land purchases), or any interest therein;
- Projects focused on meat and poultry processing or other ineligible agricultural products;
- Activities that have received a Federal award from another Federal award program;
- Claim expenses that have been or will be reimbursed under any Federal, State, or local government funding; and
- Projects which have already received funding from another federal grant or subaward programs may not receive funding for the same activities through an Infrastructure Grant. However, Infrastructure Grants may build on the successes of prior funding, such as the USDA Regional Food Business Centers Business Builder subawards, to fund subsequent activities.

F. Matching Funds Requirement

Infrastructure grant recipients are required to contribute 50% of the total proposed project cost as a match to federal funding. This applies to all applicants except those who qualify for the reduced match described in the next paragraph.

For historically underserved farmers and ranchers, or for other businesses that qualify under SBA categories of small disadvantaged business, women-owned small business, or veteran-owned small business, the required match funding contribution or cost share is reduced to 25% of the project cost. States will require eligible applicants to self-certify in their Infrastructure Grant applications regarding eligibility for this reduced match.

Each application must include the total amount of match and how it will specifically align with their requested funding. Additionally, applicants must submit one match verification letter for **EACH** cash or in-kind resource signed by the matching organization. A Match Verification Letter Template is available at <https://agi.alabama.gov/rfsip/> under "Forms".

G. Available Funding

Infrastructure Grants will be funded at a minimum amount federal funding of \$100,000 and a maximum amount of federal funding of \$3 million per USDA AMS guidelines stated in the RFSI Program Scope and Requirements. The total federal funding available for Infrastructure Grants in Alabama is \$5,867,166.31.

H. Implementation Timeline

Table 1. Implementation timeline.

Activity	Projected Completion Dates
Infrastructure Grant Submission	October 10, 2023-January 15, 2024, 11:59PM CST
Infrastructure Grant Competitive Review	January 22, 2024-February 23, 2024
Submission of Approved Infrastructure Grant Proposals and updated State Plan to USDA AMS	March 1, 2024
RFSI Funding Period Begins	May 25, 2024
RFSI Funding Period Concludes	May 24, 2027

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

A. Eligible Entities

Entities eligible to apply for Infrastructure Grants include:

- Agricultural producers or processors, or groups of agricultural producers and processors;
- For-profit entities operating middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, or distribution of targeted agricultural products, whose activities are primarily focused for the benefit of local and regional producers, and that meet the eligibility requirements of the SBA small business size standards;
- Nonprofit organizations operating middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, distribution of targeted agricultural products;
- Local government entities operating middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, distribution of targeted agricultural products;
- Tribal governments operating middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, distribution of targeted agricultural products; and
- Institutions such as schools, universities, or hospitals bringing producers together to establish cooperative or shared infrastructure or invest in equipment that will benefit multiple producers middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, distribution of targeted agricultural products.

B. Required Documents

Applicants must apply to this RFA electronically. The electronic application and other required attachments for this RFA can be found at <https://agi.alabama.gov/rfsip/> under “Forms”. Table 2 includes the required forms and instructions for each form.

Table 2. Required forms for RFSI Infrastructure Grant Application.

Required Form	Instructions
Infrastructure Grant Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Download the Infrastructure Grant Application (PDF file) from https://agi.alabama.gov/rfsip/ • Complete the application in its entirety
Match Verification Letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Download the Match Verification Letter Template (Word document) from https://agi.alabama.gov/rfsip/ • Complete the template for EACH source of matching funds/resources • Ensure each letter is signed by an authorized organization representative from each source of matching funds • Upload the completed, signed match verification letter(s) in PDF format

Evidence of Critical Resources & Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Download the Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure Letter Template (Word document) from https://agi.alabama.gov/rfsip/ • Complete the template for EACH critical resource/piece of infrastructure (necessary land, buildings, or other resources) • Ensure each letter is signed by an authorized organization representative from each source of matching funds • Upload the completed, signed match verification letter(s) in PDF format
Construction Documents (if construction or expansion of a building is included in project)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If your project includes a construction component, provide design documents, supply lists, etc. that illustrate the scope of the construction project

Applications should be submitted via the ADAI website: <https://departmentofagriculture-alabama.submittable.com/submit>. This link is also accessible from the Alabama RFSI webpage: <https://agi.alabama.gov/rfsip/>. Applicants will be asked to create a username and login to save progress. All required documents should be uploaded in the appropriate file format. Applicants will be notified by email once their application is received.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

A. Competitive Project Descriptions

Projects most likely to be considered competitive will include the following elements:

- The project will meet an identified infrastructure need that correlates to at least one Alabama RFSI Funding Priority as described in General Information Section C,
- The project will service the needs of historically underserved producers, processors, and small food businesses,
- The project will be made available to or will incorporate product from multiple producers, processors, and/or small food businesses rather than benefit a singular entity,
- The project is designed and implemented in a manner that will provide long-term middle-of-the-food-supply-chain opportunities to Alabama producers, processors, and small food businesses, and
- The project will create positive economic impact by providing more and better markets for Alabama agricultural products, support the development of value-added products for consumers, encourage fair prices and fair wages, and establish new and safe job opportunities.

B. Competitive Review by Independent Expert Review Panel

Applications will be scored by an independent expert review panel that will use a scoresheet to assign points to application content including Alignment and Intent, Technical Merit, Achievability, Fiscal Plan and Resources, and Historically Underserved Status. Language included in the competitive review process scoresheet for Infrastructure Grants will prioritize funding to projects that:

- Are submitted by historically underserved farmers, new and beginning farmers, veteran producers, and food businesses owned by socially disadvantaged individuals,
- Offer family-supporting job quality and safe treatment of workers,
- Focus on small and medium-size businesses that add value-added options for producers and consumers,
- Demonstrate local support of the project,
- Support underserved communities, and
- Are submitted by cooperatives and farmer- and worker-owned enterprises.

C. Project Evaluation Criteria

Each project submitted by an eligible entity that addresses at least one of the Alabama RFSI Funding Priorities will be reviewed and scored by the competitive review panel using the criteria listed below.

Alignment and Intent.....30 points

- a. The application provides a clear and concise description of the need for the proposed project.
- b. The applicant identifies and engages the intended beneficiaries of the proposed project, including the number of beneficiaries and how they will benefit.
- c. The proposed project focuses on small- and medium-sized enterprises that add options and choices for producers and consumers.
- d. The proposed project will support underserved communities in the State.
- e. The application is submitted by a cooperative or a farmer- or worker-owned enterprise.

Technical Merit.....20 points

- a. Extent to which the application presents a clear, well-conceived plan of work that addresses at least one identified Alabama RFSI Funding Priority.
- b. The application complies with all written instructions and requirements described in the Program Scope and Requirements and Infrastructure Grant Application.

Achievability.....25 points

- a. The application presents a realistic schedule for implementing the proposed project.
- b. Performance measures are appropriate for the scale and scope of the proposed project.
- c. The application demonstrates local support for the proposed project.
- d. Project results in connecting product to end markets (particularly schools and grocery stores).

Fiscal Plan and Resources.....20 points

- a. The budget for the proposed project is consistent with the size and scope of the project.
- b. The proposed project fiscal plan offers family-supporting job quality, fair treatment, and safety to workers.
- c. The applicant provides evidence that critical resources and infrastructure that are necessary for the proposed project are in place.

Historically Underserved Status.....5 points

- a. The Infrastructure Grant Application is submitted by one of the following: historically underserved farmer or rancher, new and beginning farmer, veteran producer, and/ or processor/other middle-of-the-supply-chain business owned by socially disadvantaged individuals as defined by the Small Business Administration.

AWARD ADMINISTRATION INFORMATION

A. Award Notices

Upon completion of the competitive review process, selected applications will be sent to USDA AMS with an updated copy of Alabama's State Plan. Final determination of approved projects and award amounts will be facilitated by USDA AMS. Successful applicants will be notified after final approval of the Infrastructure Grant application by USDA AMS. Successful applicants will be required to register as a vendor of the State prior to the awarding of Infrastructure Grants.

B. Unsuccessful Applicants

Unsuccessful applicants will be notified by ADAI personnel via email as soon as possible after awards are approved by USDA AMS. Unsuccessful applicants will be provided review panel consensus comments regarding their proposals at the request of the applicant.

C. Appeal Process

Applicants may appeal a funding request by submitting a request for review in writing to rfsi@agi.alabama.gov. The appeal letter must include new or substantive information provided by the applicant. An Appeal Committee will consist of Don Wambles, Hassey Brooks and Meredith Casey. If the appeal is not deemed to have merit by the Appeal Committee, this information will be communicated by Meredith Casey to the applicant. Reason for denials of appealed applications will be documented in the file.

D. Reporting Requirements

Funded Infrastructure Grants will be subject to data collection on a quarterly basis. The Alabama RFSI Program Coordinator will solicit performance measure data from each project via email, phone calls, teleconferencing, and/or site visits.

E. Agency Contacts

Applicants and other interested parties are encouraged to contact the Alabama RFSI personnel by email with questions about the program at rfsi@agi.alabama.gov. For more information, please visit the Alabama RFSI webpage at <https://agi.alabama.gov/rfsip/>.