



National Science Foundation
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NSF 13-015

Frequently Asked Questions for Solicitation **NSF 13-508 - Division of Environmental Biology (Core Programs)**

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1. What types of proposals in DEB require preliminary proposals?

All proposals submitted to DEB for the core programs, i.e., all regular research proposals previously submitted through the Grant Proposal Guide (GPG), or through the Research at Undergraduate Institutions (RUI) and Long Term Research and Environmental Biology (LTREB) solicitations to any of the core programs in DEB, now require a preliminary proposal. The only exceptions to the preliminary proposal requirement for core programs are LTREB Renewal proposals.

This preliminary proposal requirement **does not** include proposals to other solicitations (e.g., Research Coordination Networks, Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grants, CAREER, Dimensions of Biodiversity, Ecology and Evolution of Infectious Disease), or special proposals described in the GPG, e.g., Grants for Rapid Response Research (RAPID), EARly Concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER), Facilitation Awards for Scientists and Engineers with Disabilities (FASSED), conference and workshop proposals, and requests for supplemental funding.

2. Why did DEB change the submission guidelines from the previous twice yearly full proposal submission process?

DEB made the change to protect the quality and efficiency of our merit review system. Relatively flat budgets and steep increases in submissions had led to decreasing proposal success rates over a period of years. The new solicitation was intended to reduce the reviewing burden on the community and the large investment of time and energy by PIs in developing full proposals.

From 2001 to 2010, proposal success rates across DEB declined from an average of 25% to 13%, with rates in some programs as low as 10%. In 2011, the last year of the twice yearly deadline, DEB received just over 2,100 full proposals and requested more than 8,000 ad hoc (external) reviews in addition to panelists' reviews. Under the new system, we expect to request ~2,500 ad hoc (external) reviews for the invited full proposals annually.

DEB is collecting data about the change to the submission, review and award process and will make the analyses available at a later date.

3. Are all BIO divisions switching to the new preliminary proposal solicitation?

No. Only DEB and IOS programs have implemented the preliminary proposal solicitation format. Both MCB and DBI have their own solicitations, which have some differences in requirements. There are also separate solicitations or instructions for Research Coordination Networks, Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grants, CAREER awards, the Plant Genome Research Program, Basic Research to Enable Agricultural Development and special types of proposals described in the GPG such as, Grants for Rapid Response Research (RAPID), EARly Concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER), and Facilitation Awards for Scientists and Engineers with Disabilities (FASSED). Please review each solicitation or set of instructions in the GPG carefully for specific requirements. If you have any questions, ask a Program Director. We're here to help!

4. My funding request is a competitive renewal application for a previously NSF-funded research project. Do I need to submit a preliminary proposal?

Yes. Except for LTREB Renewals, all submissions to DEB core programs as described in Item #1 above require a preliminary proposal, including projects based on findings resulting from previous NSF funding.

5. **Can I submit a preliminary proposal to NSF for a project that was submitted to or is under review at another agency?**

Yes. However, invited **full proposals** cannot be duplicates of proposals to any other Federal agency for simultaneous consideration, except for Beginning Investigators (see [GPG Chapter I.G2](#)).

6. **How many preliminary proposals may I submit?**

In a given year, an individual may participate as a **PI, co-PI** or **lead on a subaward** on **no more than two** preliminary proposals submitted to DEB core programs. Preliminary proposals in excess of the limit for any PI or co-PI, or subaward lead will be returned without review in the reverse order received.

Participating in a proposal in any role other than PI, co-PI or the lead on a sub-award, such as other senior personnel or as a collaborator, **does not** count towards this limit, including investigators who contribute services for a fee (e.g., sequencing). *Thus, the number of projects an investigator may participate in is **unlimited**.* Changes in the team post-submission to meet the eligibility limits will **not** be allowed.

This limit **does not** include proposals submitted to other program solicitations or to core programs in other BIO Divisions. A PI may submit to as many other solicitations as he/she wishes in a single application cycle. However solicitations may have their own limit guidelines so be sure to review each solicitation carefully for details.

Definitions of all Personnel roles can be found in the GPG: [Exhibit II-7: Definitions of Categories of Personnel](#)

7. **What is the definition of a PI/Co-PI?**

From the GPG: A Principal Investigator (PI) or co-PI is defined as "the individual(s) designated by the proposer, and approved by NSF, who will be responsible for the scientific or technical direction of the project. NSF does not infer any distinction in scientific stature among multiple PIs, whether referred to as PI or co-PI. If more than one, the first one listed will serve as the contact PI, with whom all communications between NSF program officials and the project relating to the scientific, technical, and budgetary aspects of the project should take place. The PI and any identified co-PIs, however, will be jointly responsible for submission of the requisite project reports".

All PIs and co-PIs are expected to have significant intellectual input to the project. In the event a PI must leave a project it is expected that the remaining co-PI (s) could continue to direct the project and submit the requisite reports.

Definitions of all Personnel roles can be found in the GPG: [Exhibit II-7: Definitions of Categories of Personnel](#)

8. **How many full proposals may I submit?**

An individual may only submit as many full proposals as he/she is invited to submit. Uninvited full proposals will be returned without review.

9. **What feedback will I receive on my preliminary proposal?**

Preliminary proposals will be reviewed by a panel of scientists in the discipline, and you will receive a summary of their discussion (the panel summary), as well as individual reviews from three panelists. If you are invited to submit a full proposal, you will have this feedback to help you in preparing the full proposal. We strongly advise that you take this feedback into account, both in full proposal preparation and in any resubmission of the preliminary proposal.

10. What criteria will panelists use to evaluate preliminary proposals?

Each preliminary proposal will be assigned to three panelists for written reviews. All NSF rules for Confidentiality and Conflicts of Interest will be followed. The rating scale for written reviews will be Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, and Poor. A panel summary describing the key points of the panel discussion and the rationale for the proposal's placement in one of the four panel ranking categories ("High Priority", "Medium Priority", "Low Priority", "Not Competitive") will be provided for each proposal.

As with all NSF proposals, panelists/reviewers will be instructed to evaluate the **intellectual merit** and **broader impacts** of the proposed project. Preliminary proposals contain a shorter project description (4 pages) and lack much of the documentation associated with a full proposal, including budget, budget justification, facilities, and current and pending support. Consequently, we expect the reviews of preliminary proposals to focus on the following critical aspects of the work: **the questions** driving the research, **the goals** expected to be accomplished, and **the approaches** employed in the experimental design.

While reviewing panelists are asked to consider:

- Are the ideas innovative or potentially transformative?
- Are the ideas conceptually well grounded?
- Are the experimental approaches and experimental design feasible and logically linked to the central ideas?
- Is the project team well qualified and experienced enough with the approaches to be able to conduct the research?
- What risks are involved? Can they be overcome?
- What is the potential impact of the science?
- Is there a convincing and significant effort made towards broader impacts?

A strong preliminary proposal is one in which the logical flow and significance of the proposed line of investigation are articulated clearly and the broader impacts of the work are apparent. In other words, panelists are asked to identify preliminary proposals that address questions and/or ideas that are most likely to lead to advances in the field.

Panelists provide advice; they do NOT make specific Invite/Not Invite recommendations. These recommendations are made by the Program Directors after the conclusion of the panels.

11. What criteria will be used to recommend Invite or Not Invite for a full proposal following the preliminary proposal stage?

Program Directors will make Invite/Not Invite recommendations based on the scientific merit and broader impacts as well as the balance of awards among sub-disciplines, geographic distribution, types of institutions, and the potential contribution of each award to broadening the participation of individuals from groups traditionally underrepresented in science. These latter considerations comprise the program's "portfolio balance".

12. How soon will I learn whether a full proposal is invited?

Invitations to submit full proposals will be issued in May each year.

13. What is the expected invitation rate for preliminary proposals?

Approximately 20% of preliminary proposals were invited for full proposal submission in 2012. We expect the invitation rate in 2013 to be similar, depending on the number of preliminary proposals submitted in January.

14. What is the expected success rate of full proposals under the new core program solicitation?

The success rate for invited full proposals is anticipated be in the range of 20%-30% depending on the availability of funds.

15. If I am not invited to submit a full proposal, may I resubmit the preliminary proposal?

The preliminary proposal deadline is in January of each year, and there is no limit on the number of times you may resubmit a preliminary proposal. However, you are strongly advised to take comments from the reviews and panel summary into account when resubmitting, and you are encouraged to talk to a Program Director.

16. How does the project description of the preliminary proposal differ from that of a full proposal?

The first page of the preliminary proposal project description must list the PI, co-PIs, collaborators (including leads for subawards), and other senior personnel (as defined in the GPG: [Exhibit II-7: Definitions of Categories of Personnel](#)). Each name should be followed by a sentence describing that individual's role in the project. No other text should appear on this page.

The following 4 pages (pages 2-5) comprise the preliminary proposal narrative, termed the project description. The general significance of the work, efficacy of the experimental plan, and feasibility of technical approaches, and broader impacts plan should be clearly and concisely presented. The available space should be used wisely, with figures limited to essential data or diagrams. Duplication of text between the project summary and project description should be avoided.

For a preliminary proposal the references are limited to 3 pages. The reference section does not count towards the project description page limits.

17. Are preliminary data required to be included in the preliminary proposal?

No, preliminary data are not required. However, a PI may include preliminary data in support of the feasibility of the research approach at his/her discretion.

18. Do results from prior support have to be included in a preliminary proposal?

Although not required, results from previous support may be included in the preliminary proposal at the discretion of the PI.

19. Is a data management plan required for preliminary proposals?

No, a data management plan is not required for preliminary proposals.

20. Is a post-doctoral mentoring plan required for preliminary proposals?

No, a post-doctoral mentoring plan is not required for preliminary proposals.

21. Does the preliminary proposal have to have a detailed budget?

No, preliminary proposals should not include a detailed budget or budget justification; the requested budget field on the preliminary proposal cover page should be left blank.

22. Do I need institutional approvals for regulated activities, such as recombinant DNA work, human subjects, vertebrate animal use, etc., for the preliminary proposal?

Institutional approvals are **not** required for preliminary proposals.

However, institutional approvals are required for full proposals, as specified in the [NSF Proposal & Award Policies and Procedures Guide](#).

23. What supplementary documents are allowed for the preliminary proposal?

No supplementary documents are allowed.

24. What are Conflicts of Interest (COI), why do you want to know about them, and how do I know if I have any?

Program Directors are required to select reviewers who do not have any potentially biasing relationships (personal, professional, intellectual or financial) with either the PI/co-PI or the submitting institution(s). Hence, PIs are required to submit an Excel spreadsheet that lists all Conflicts of Interest (COIs). The COI spreadsheet template and e-mail address for its submission can be found in the solicitation. The spreadsheet will also allow you to indicate suggested and non-preferred reviewers. Please contact a Program Director if you have questions.

25. Do the preliminary proposals and full proposals have deadlines or target dates?

Both of these have **deadlines**. Preliminary proposals or invited full proposals received after the deadline, or that are otherwise not compliant with the solicitation and the relevant guidelines in the Grant Proposal Guide ([GPG](#)) will be returned without review.

26. My research idea falls between two programs within DEB or between two programs found in different divisions or directorates. How do I submit the preliminary proposal for consideration by both programs?

In DEB, preliminary proposals will not be co-reviewed with other programs. Thus, you will need to choose a single DEB program for your preliminary proposal submission. If you have any questions regarding which DEB program would be best for your submission, please contact a Program Director.

27. May I request that my invited full proposal be co-reviewed between a program in DEB and another program in BIO or NSF in general?

You may alert the DEB Program Director(s) to other programs that might be relevant to your proposal. However, he/she cannot guarantee co-review will occur.

28. Will reviewers for full proposals see the reviews I received for the preliminary proposal?

Yes. Invited full proposals to DEB are considered part of a single, annual review process. Consequently, the panel summary from the preliminary proposal review is shown to the panelists who will evaluate the full proposal. Therefore, it is suggested that full proposals specifically address in the project description how the feedback from the preliminary proposal panel has been incorporated.

29. If a full proposal is invited but not funded, do I have to start over with a preliminary proposal?

Yes. If your full proposal is declined, you must begin again with a preliminary proposal to one of the DEB core programs. It is strongly advised that you consider the comments from both preliminary and full proposal reviews and panel summaries when resubmitting, and contact your Program Director if you have any questions or concerns.

30. I was invited to submit a full proposal, but did not do so in this cycle. Do I need to start over with a preliminary proposal the following cycle?

No. You may, with justification, defer submission of an invited full proposal for one year, but you must seek approval ahead of time from the program that invited your full proposal.

31. As instructed, my preliminary proposal title begins with "Preliminary Proposal," can I add other prefixes to the title?

You may add additional applicable prefixes to the title after "Preliminary Proposal:". There are three prefixes listed in the solicitation that should be added to applicable DEB preliminary proposals. Your specific program may recommend additional prefixes. The "Collaborative Proposal:" prefix is not required at the preliminary proposal stage and may be reserved for a full proposal submission.

32. For whom are biographical sketches allowed/required to be uploaded?

For preliminary proposals, biographical sketches should be included for only those individuals on the personnel list.

For full proposals, biographical sketches should be included for all senior personnel (PIs, co-PIs, subaward leads, and other senior personnel). For full proposals, biographical sketches may also be included for post-doctoral scholars. Biographical sketches should not be included for anyone providing a "Letter of Collaboration" on a full proposal.

33. How do I include biographical sketches for personnel who are not on my proposal cover page?

For preliminary proposals only, if the person(s) are intended to be PI or co-PI on linked multi-institutional collaborative full proposals, add them to the cover page if space and your institution's policies allow. This will enable uploading biographical sketches for those individuals.

For all other cases, use the button in FastLane (main screen under proposal preparation) labeled "Add/Delete Non-co-PI Senior Personnel." This brings up a form with three fields (First, Middle, Last Name) for the person's name but no fields for any other data. When you add a name through this mechanism, they show up under the list of persons for whom

biographical sketches can be uploaded. This will allow biographical sketches to be uploaded for your subawardees, and other senior personnel.

The "Add/Delete Non-co-PI Senior Personnel" mechanism may be used to add PIs and co-PIs only in the case of preliminary proposals where those persons are identified as such in the personnel list and are intended to be PI or co-PI on linked multi-institutional collaborative full proposals. Submitters are still limited to four co-PIs per proposal as described in the GPG.

34. What is changed/required for the biographical sketches?

There are two changes from the GPG which apply to biographical sketches. We have removed the section "Collaborators & Other Affiliations" ([GPG II.C.2.f.i.e](#)) from the end of the biographical sketch and added a new section at the beginning of the biographical sketch.

The new section is described in the DEB Solicitation as "individual's expertise as related to the proposed research." The length of this section is constrained by the overall 2-page limit of the biographical sketch and the space needed for the other sections of the biographical sketch. How the content is presented within this new section (paragraph, bullet points, etc.) is up to the submitter. This is an opportunity to provide context and description supporting the individual's participation that may not otherwise fit within the preliminary proposal page limits.

Both preliminary and invited full proposals should use this biographical sketch format.

35. Is the proposal classification form required for preliminary proposals?

Yes. This form should be completed for all submissions to BIO including preliminary proposals. FastLane will prevent submission until this is completed.

36. What is the Small Grant option?

For submissions to DEB only, PIs may indicate preliminary proposals with intended total budgets of \$150,000 or less with the prefix of "SG:" in the project title, e.g., "Preliminary Proposal: SG: ..." These awards are intended to support full-fledged research projects that simply require smaller budgets. Small Grant projects will be assessed based on the same merit review criteria [Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts] as all other proposals.

37. How do the requirements of the DEB solicitation (preliminary proposals, submission limit, etc.) relate to the RUI program solicitation?

As stated in the DEB solicitation, PIs wishing to submit RUI proposals for funding in either Division must first submit a preliminary proposal to that Division's solicitation, using "RUI:" as a title prefix, and then be invited to submit a full proposal. Preliminary proposals for RUIs count toward participants' submission limits and follow the same format as all other preliminary proposals under the solicitation. Do not include an RUI certification or impact statement with a preliminary proposal.

The RUI certification and impact statement must be included on invited, full RUI proposals to either Division.

Both preliminary and full proposals for RUI projects should be submitted to the Division solicitations. Do not submit preliminary proposals to the separate RUI Solicitation; that solicitation is not set up to properly handle preliminary proposals.

38. Can I submit preliminary proposals myself?

No. Your Sponsored Research Office (SRO) or Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) must provide institutional electronic sign-off in FastLane.

39. FastLane is showing me a screen saying my preliminary proposal cannot be submitted, what do I do?

This question applies if you are seeing something like this:



The only things that will prevent submission should appear as "Proposal Errors", and you will need to complete the listed items to submit your proposal. The most common error of this sort we have seen is a missing Proposal Classification form (see question 35 above). Nothing we ask you to omit in the solicitation should be causing an error by its absence.

However, several of the items excluded from preliminary proposals do trigger other notifications in FastLane that may appear quite serious. If what you see is a "FastLane Warning" or "Proposal Required Items", check that the flagged components are indeed excluded by the solicitation and then continue with submission. FastLane will allow you to ignore those notifications.

For any other FastLane problems, contact FastLane help at 1-800-673-6188; e-mail: fastlane@nsf.gov.

40. Should I include response to prior reviews in either my preliminary or full proposal?

In writing a full proposal, you are encouraged to address in the project description how you have incorporated feedback received from the preliminary proposal panel. You may also respond to comments received from a previous full proposal submission, but this is not required. PIs are also free to acknowledge efforts to respond to previous submission comments when revising preliminary proposals; however, this is not required and not always advisable. We suggest that when appropriate, you discuss this issue with a Program Director in the program that handled the prior review.

41. What if my question is not addressed in this FAQ?

Please ask us! Contact information for Program Directors and management in DEB can be found linked from the solicitation and on the [Division website](#).