

Note: The following addresses questions submitted in response to the Statement of Interest (SOI) for Feed the Future Innovation Labs (Opportunity number: DFOP0017826). An Amended SOI addressing key questions will be posted to grants.gov (changes are highlighted in yellow in the amended SOI).

Feed the Future (FtF) Innovation Labs Statement of Interest - Questions and Answers

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Eligibility

Question 1: Land- and sea-grant universities are referenced in several places in this SOI (eligibility and elsewhere). Are land-grant universities required to be the lead organization for a Feed the Future Innovation Lab?

Answer 1: Eligibility is restricted. The eligibility requirements below apply only to the principal Applicant. Eligibility is restricted to Title XII institutions as set forth below:

This program is authorized under Title XII of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended. Applications must only be submitted by eligible U.S. colleges and universities as defined under 22 USC 2220a(d): "...those colleges or universities in each State, territory, or possession of the United States, or the District of Columbia, now receiving, or which must hereafter receive, benefits under the Act of July 2, 1862 (known as the First Morrill Act) or the Act of August 30, 1890 (known as the Second Morrill Act), which are commonly known as 'land-grant' universities; institutions now designated or which must hereafter be designated as sea-grant colleges under the Act of October 5, 1966 (known as the National Sea Grant College and Program Act), which are commonly known as sea-grant colleges; Native American land-grant colleges as authorized under the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 301 note); and other United States colleges and universities which— (1) have demonstrable capacity in teaching, research, and extension (including outreach) activities in the agricultural sciences; and (2) can contribute effectively to the attainment of the objectives of this title."

The Title XII university-led FTF IL programs involve multiple partners, principal of

which are U.S. universities, working in collaboration with scientists in developing country universities, national and international research centers, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to jointly pursue scientific investigations to overcome critical agricultural constraints facing today's global food systems. All types of U.S. and non-U.S. entities are eligible as collaborating partners (i.e. sub-recipients or contractors at various tiers), provided that they are not excluded from U.S. Government acquisition and assistance awards (this may be verified through SAM.gov). In preparing the application, it is the Applicant's responsibility to ensure that no individuals or organizations proposed for participation in the program are excluded by the U.S. Government. After award, and it is the Recipient's responsibility to ensure that no transactions are conducted with excluded parties.

Question 2: Other eligibility criteria are listed as “(1) have demonstrable capacity in teaching, research, and extension (including outreach) activities in the agricultural sciences”. Would a policy school which has capacity in global agricultural research and innovation fit?

Answer 2: The SOI has been modified to include an additional attachment in Section D.1.i. Applicants that are not “land-grant universities,” “sea-grant colleges,” or “Native American land-grant colleges” under the statutory definition of Title XII “universities” must submit with their application an additional attachment with a statement relating to their eligibility under the statutory definition of Title XII institutions. This statement must contain references to other parts of the Technical and/or Cost Application and to non-proprietary and publicly available references, and must not exceed two pages in length. The Statement on Eligibility will not count against the 8 total page count for the SOI.

Question 3: Can you please clarify the text that says that eligibility includes "other United States colleges and universities which— (1) have demonstrable capacity in teaching, research, and extension (including outreach) activities in the agricultural sciences; and (2) can contribute effectively to the attainment of the objectives of this title"? Specifically, what would be required for a researcher at a non land-grant institution to demonstrate that their university meets this criteria?

Answer 3: See answer 1 above.

Question 4: Under eligible institutions, besides land grant institutions, it indicates that other United States colleges and universities that can apply must "1) have demonstrable capacity in teaching, research and extension (including outreach) activities in agricultural sciences; 2) can contribute effectively to the attainment of the objectives of this title". Does this statement indicate that private universities that do not have formal extension and outreach activities in the agricultural sciences are not eligible to apply?

Answer 4: See answer 1 above.

Question 5: A land-grant university which is eligible under the Title XII requirement, may also have research, extension and experimental stations or centers with their own

governing structure, DUNS and UEI numbers. Are they eligible to apply?

Answer 5: U.S. Colleges and Universities that meet the Title XII designation requirement are eligible to apply as a Management Entity and submit two applications. Individual centers, labs and extension facilities that are part of a College or University system are included in the number of submissions for the overall College or University, not treated separately (regardless of having distinct DUNS or UEI numbers). All types of U.S. and non-U.S. entities are eligible as collaborating partners (i.e. sub-recipients or contractors at various tiers) of the applicant, provided that they are not excluded from U.S. Government acquisition and assistance awards (this may be verified through SAM.gov).

Budget / Funding

Question 6: Is there a budget template or guideline we have to follow in Phase 1?

Answer 6: A Summary Budget should be provided as an Annex. The following Summary Budget format information is included in an Amended SOI. All proposed costs must be allowable per 2 CFR Part 200 Subpart E—Costs Principles. Please include in the Summary Budget header the applicant organization’s name, program title, and duration of the program. The Summary Budget must include total proposed Federal Share in U.S. dollars listed according to the cost categories detailed in the Summary Budget Table Example below. If Cost Share is proposed, this should be included in the Budget Summary as shown below. Please provide the total proposed Contractual costs for sub-recipient organizations, and if specific organizations have been identified at this phase, provide the total for each proposed sub-recipient organization as a separate Contractual sub-category item. An optional Summary Budget template is available in the “Suggested Templates and Guidance” section under “Budget Guidance for Applicants - New Award Budget Sample” at: <https://www.state.gov/resources-for-programs-and-grants/>. A detailed line item budget with cost-schedule is not a requirement for this SOI phase and will be discussed further for applications selected to advance to the Request for Full Proposals (RFP) phase. The Summary Budget Annex should not exceed one page. The SOI and all accompanying annex documents should be combined into a single document for submission, in a searchable and editable PDF or Word format, with the exception of the required form SF-424.

Summary Budget Table Example:

| Cost Category | Federal Share | Cost Share (if applicable) | Total Project Budget |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A. Personnel | | | |
| B. Fringe Benefits | | | |
| C. Travel | | | |
| D. Equipment | | | |
| E. Supplies | | | |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| F. Contractual (including subawards) | | | |
| G. Construction | | | |
| H. Other Direct Costs | | | |
| I. Total Direct Costs | | | |
| J. Total Indirect Costs | | | |
| K. Total (Sum I-J) | | | |

Question 7: Is there any requirement to set aside some portion of the budget for competitive awards for research projects to be designed and developed in collaboration with the State Department after the Management Entity award is selected?

Answer 7: There is not a requirement to set aside some portion of the budget for competitive sub-awards for research projects that would be developed in collaboration with the Department State after an award is made to the successful applicant. However, applications must clearly describe how they will meet the goals and objectives outlined in the SOI and research portfolio. See [2 CFR 200.318](#) - General procurement standards. [See also 2 CFR 200.319 - Competition.](#)

Question 8: Page 13 includes the “Total Federal Share Requested” and “Total Cost Share (as applicable)” items as required contents. For the Statement of Interest phase, does only the total overall amount for each need to be included, or should a simple/summary budget be provided (with the detailed budget being provided if selected to submit a full proposal)?

Answer 8: The required form SF-424 requests the total overall amount for “Total Federal Share Requested” and “Total Cost Share (as applicable)” items as part of the SOI application. All forms can be found in PDF editable format on Grants.gov at the following link: <https://www.grants.gov/forms/forms-repository/sf-424-family>. A Summary Budget should also be provided as an Annex. See the Amended SOI and the response to Answer 6 above for details about the Summary Budget format. A detailed budget will not be requested until the full proposal phase.

Question 9: The NOFO instructions require inclusion of the “Total Federal Share Requested” and federal shares for partners, but do not specify whether a detailed budget narrative or cost breakdown is required at the SOI stage. Beyond the SF-424, is DOS expecting any budget justification, cost realism discussion, or summary budget table in Phase 1? If so, what level of detail is recommended?

Answer 9: Statement of Interest applications must include the SF-424 and a Summary Budget. See the Amended SOI and Answer 6 above for Summary Budget format details.

If selected for advancement to submit a full proposal, a detailed budget and justification will be required with the full proposal.

Question 10: Aside from the SF-424, are there any budget requirements or guidelines for the SOI?

Answer 10: Please refer Answer 6 above for details on budget requirements.

Question 11: Is an estimated detailed budget needed or recommended for the SOI submission?

Answer 11: Statement of Interest applications must include the SF-424 and a Summary Budget. See Answer 6 above for Summary Budget format details. If selected for advancement to submit a full proposal, a detailed budget and justification will be required with the full proposal.

Question 12: How much budget detail is expected for the SOI?

Answer 12: Statement of Interest applications must include the SF-424 and a Summary Budget. See Answer 6 above for Summary Budget format details.

Question 13: In the Application Contents and Format, 1.a.VI. Total Federal Share Requested, are applicants asked to list only the total amount being requested, inclusive of indirect costs?

Answer 13: Statement of Interest applications must include the SF-424 and a Summary Budget. See Answer 6 above for an example Summary Budget table, including a line item for indirect costs.

Question 14: What are the allowable Indirect Costs or Facilities & Administrative (F&A) costs on this grant for the U.S. Universities and non-University partners from the US and other countries?

Answer 14: Information about allowable indirect costs can be found in [2 CFR 200.414](#). Applicants must indicate in the Summary Budget of the SOI whether they are proposing indirect costs or will charge all costs directly. Below are the most commonly used Indirect Cost Rate methods:

Method 1 - Direct Charge Only

- Eligibility: Any applicant.
- Initial Application Requirements: See guidance on direct costs in [2 CFR 200.413](#).

Method 2 - Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA)

- Eligibility: Any applicant with a NICRA issued by a US Government Agency must

use that NICRA rate.

- Initial Application Requirements: If the applicant has a current NICRA and wishes to charge indirect costs, that rate must be used in the Summary Budget included in the SOI.

Method 3 - *De minimis* rate of 15% of modified total direct costs (MTDC)

- Eligibility: Any applicant that has never received a NICRA.
- Initial Application Requirements: [2 CFR 200.414\(f\)](#) specifies that any non-Federal entity that does not have a current negotiated (including provisional) rate, may elect to charge a *de minimis* rate of up to 15 percent of modified total direct costs. Costs must be consistently charged as either indirect or direct costs, and may not be double charged or inconsistently charged as both. The applicant must describe which cost elements it charges indirectly vs. directly. See [2 CFR 200.414\(f\)](#) for further information. The *de minimis* rate does not require documentation to justify its use and may be used indefinitely. Once elected, the recipient or subrecipient must use the *de minimis* rate for all Federal awards until the recipient or subrecipient chooses to negotiate a negotiated rate. If the applicant does not have an approved NICRA and does not elect to utilize the 15% *de minimis* rate, the Grant Officer will provide further instructions and may request additional supporting information, including financial statements and audits, should the application still be under consideration after the merit review.

Question 15: Is there any limit on overhead/indirect costs?

Answer 15: Please refer Question 14 above for details on overhead/indirect costs.

Question 16: What is the allowable overhead rate (e.g. is it the NICRA for each University applicant)?

Answer 16: Please refer Question 14 above for details on overhead/indirect costs.

Question 17: Should the budget be submitted as a (Word or PDF) table that follows this guidance “Font sizes in charts and tables, including the budget, can be reformatted to fit within 1 page width,” or can it be submitted as a separate spreadsheet file (e.g., Excel)?

Answer 17: A Summary Budget should be submitted as an Annex to the SOI. The Summary Budget can be incorporated into the combined SOI submission document as a single PDF or Word file, not as a separate Excel file. See also Answer 6 above for a Summary Budget Table example and Answer 67 below about SOI file submission guidelines.

Question 18: To what extent is the State Department interested in proposals that plan to seek additional funding to grow the program into a larger portfolio over a longer time frame?

Answer 18: The SOI solicitation is a call for concept notes for programs of up to 60

months. Applications should propose a program that is likely to achieve intended results with Federal funding. The recipient or subrecipient is encouraged to earn income to defray program costs when appropriate. Program income must be used for the original purpose of the Federal award. Program income earned during the period of performance may only be used for costs incurred during the period of performance or allowable closeout costs. See [2 CFR 200.307](#) - Program Income.

Question 19: Funding Mechanism: Buy-Ins & Associate Awards? In the past, Innovation Lab award budgets included additional, authorized-but-unfunded award “ceiling” (above the stated \$20-40 million award amount), which allowed the lead awardee to accept potential supplemental “buy-ins” or “associate awards” from other USG operating units. Does DoS anticipate incorporating this kind of funding approach under new IL awards, to allow for addition of potential future, supplemental activities within the general scope of the award?

Answer 19: Individual awards may range from a minimum of \$20 million to a maximum of \$40 million (approximately) over the life of the award. This includes potential use of funding allocated to various operating units within the Department (e.g. functional bureaus; regional bureaus; posts) to “buy in” to the lab for specific activities or technical assistance and support.

Question 20: Cost Share: The solicitation explicitly states that “cost-sharing/matching will not be evaluated as part of the merit review process” — however, it then prompts applicants to submit cost-share estimates in not one or two but *three* separate places within the initial 8-page Statement of Interest (sections (a.VII), (e), and (f)). Is this correct? Can you clarify how DoS will use this information, if not for evaluating the merit of the initial SOI?

Answer 20: The Department of State does not require a mandatory level of cost-sharing (matching) for FtF Innovation Labs, but nevertheless cost-sharing may be proposed by applicants as appropriate to achieve the SOI goals and objectives. A cost-share or match is that portion of project or program costs not borne by the U.S. Government. Cost sharing includes cash and in-kind contributions, and for U.S. organizations is subject to [2 CFR 200.306](#), which, among other things, requires that cost sharing be verifiable from the Recipient’s records. Cost-sharing or matching is normally associated with contributions from the same prime and sub-recipient sources that also receive Federal funds under an award, but can include contributions from third parties. Recipients are encouraged to identify opportunities to leverage private sector funds. As stated in the SOI solicitation, “cost-sharing/matching will not be evaluated as part of the merit review process” for the concept note evaluation. This information is not a scored element of the concept note review, but will give the MRP a more complete picture of the resources available for the proposed approach. The optional cost share estimates are to be included in the form SF-424 and Summary Budget Annex, which do not count toward the 8-page limit for the SOI. The request for narrative justification of Cost Share has been removed from SOI requirements.

Question 21: Please can you help me identify the IDC rate?

Answer 21: See Answer 14 for details on Negotiated Indirect Cost Rates and *de minimis* cost rates.

Question 22: We are considering a model in which a portion of research funding would be competitively allocated through a formal Request for Proposals process, governed by a Selection Board. Would this approach be acceptable under this award?

Answer 22: Yes. See also relevant answers in “Partnerships and Management Structure” below.

Question 23: The SOI notes that total funding of \$64 million is available in FY 2026, with outyear funding subject to availability of funds. Could you provide additional clarity on two related questions: (a) Should applicants assume annual funding will be roughly consistent across the 60-month performance period, or should budgets be designed conservatively to account for potential year-to-year variability? (b) Are there any known constraints in the current federal funding environment that applicants should factor into their project design or contingency planning for the full performance period?

Answer 23: (a) Summary Budgets are required to include total proposed costs; Annual Detailed Budgets are not requested from applicants at the SOI stage. More information on Detailed Budget requirements will be provided to selected applicants in the Request for Full Proposals. (b) Funding for Innovation Lab project outyears is subject to Congressional appropriations and the availability of funds.

Question 24: Does DoS anticipate that there will be additional funding made available to innovation labs through associate awards or buy-ins?

Answer 24: The budget should be designed to achieve the program goals with a minimum of \$20 million to a maximum of \$40 million and up to 5 years of programming over the life of the award. Funding for all Innovation Lab programs is subject to Congressional appropriations and the availability of funds. See also Answer 19.

Question 25: What percent of money should go outside USA? In USAID there was a push to move more abroad but now with America, Safer, Stronger and More prosperous maybe you have a guide?

Answer 25: See Answer 31 on subaward partnership approaches in the Partnerships and Management Structure section. This solicitation does not have a required percentage of funding for subawards. The Department of State welcomes proposals for a management structure that adheres to eligibility requirements and reflects the overarching priorities elaborated in the Statement of Interest call for concept notes. Applicants may propose approaches that align with their organizational policy procedures, [2 CFR 200.331](#), and [2 CFR 200.318](#) - General procurement standards. See also [2 CFR 200.319](#) - Competition,

and [2 CFR 200.320\(c\)](#) - Noncompetitive procurement.

Question 26: Will American graduate students be allowed to be funded under the new Innovation Labs?

Answer 26: Graduate study may be included in proposed approaches. Please adhere to allowable costs per [2 CFR Part 200 Subpart E](#)—Costs Principles.

Question 27: Will international graduate students, post-doctoral scholars, or visiting scholars be allowed to be funded for study in the U.S. under the new Innovation Labs?

Answer 27: The Department of State will address any questions about international student requirements during Phase 2 for any selected concepts that propose international graduate students as part of their Innovation Lab program., Graduate study for international students may be included in proposed approaches. Applicants should demonstrate adequate consideration of benefits, risks, and costs of proposed approaches. See [22 CFR Part 62](#) for applicable requirements. See also Answer 26 above.

Partnerships and Management Structure

Question 28: Would a consortium of more than one University and with entities in the global south be evaluated better and a one entity submission?

Answer 28: All applications will be scored according to the review criteria outlined in the SOI document, Section F.

Question 29: At the SOI stage, what level of formality is expected for private sector partnerships — are letters of intent or named company commitments expected, or is a conceptual description of the partnership strategy sufficient?

Answer 29: Letters of commitment are not requested as part of the concept note submission per Section D of the SOI document.

Question 30: Can Management Entity leadership be co-managed with LMIC institutions?

Answer 30: The Department of State welcomes proposals for a management structure that includes institutions in low- to middle-income countries (LMICs) as subrecipients, adheres to eligibility requirements, and reflects the overarching priorities elaborated in the Statement of Interest call for concept notes.

Question 31: How much decentralization to partner institutions is acceptable?

Answer 31: The Department of State welcomes proposals for a management structure that adheres to eligibility requirements and reflects the overarching priorities elaborated in the Statement of Interest call for concept notes.

Question 32: Is there an advantage to partnering with minority-serving institution(s)?

Answer 32: U.S. and non-U.S. entities are eligible as collaborating partners (i.e. sub-recipients or contractors at various tiers) of the applicant, provided they are not excluded from U.S. Government acquisition and assistance awards (this may be verified through SAM.gov).

Question 33: Will the State Department allow an institution with a proven national and global track record to lead the entire Innovation Lab network? This could greatly expedite the establishment of the Innovation Labs, streamline agency interactions, and increase accountability for outcomes and effectiveness.

Answer 33: The Department of State welcomes proposals for a management structure that adheres to eligibility requirements and reflects the overarching priorities elaborated in the Statement of Interest call for concept notes.

Question 34: Management Entity Governance: What are the expectations regarding advisory boards or steering committees for the Management Entity? Should we consider their integration into the Management Entity structure?

Answer 34: The Department of State welcomes proposals for a management structure that adheres to eligibility requirements and reflects the overarching priorities elaborated in the Statement of Interest call for concept notes.

Question 35: Do proposed subaward organizations need to have a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) at the pre-award stage?

Answer 35: Each applicant should adhere to regulations outlined in [2 CFR 200](#). [See 2 CFR Part 25](#). For exceptions see [2 CFR 25.110](#). Most applicants will need to complete the following:

- (1) Be registered in SAM.gov before submitting an application;
- (2) Maintain a current and active registration in SAM.gov at all times during which it has an active Federal award as a recipient or an application under consideration by a Federal agency. The applicant or recipient must review and update its information in SAM.gov annually from the date of initial registration or subsequent updates to ensure it is current, accurate, and complete. If applicable, this includes identifying the applicant's or recipient's immediate and highest-level owner and subsidiaries, as well as providing information on all predecessors that have received a Federal award or contract within the last three years; and

(3) Include its UEI in each application it submits to the Federal agency.

At the time of application, the Prime Applicant must have both a UEI and active SAM.gov registration. Both the Prime Applicant and proposed sub-awardees are required to have UEI prior to award. Please refer to SOI section E.3.

Question 36: Competitive vs. Directed Sub-Award Process? In the past, the USG explicitly required many Innovation Lab Management Entities to identify sub-awardees via open competitive solicitations, as part of the program design. In contrast, this SOI solicitation prompts applicants to identify sub-awardees up-front, at the time of SOI submission (similar to earlier Consortium model ILs). Will DoS introduce additional requirements for competitive sub-awards later in the procurement process, or can you confirm that DoS prefers to finalize sub-awardees by the time of award issuance?

Answer 36: For any sub-awards that applicants proposed to be approved at the time of award, applicants must submit information. However, it is not required for specific sub-awardee organizations to be identified in the SOI. An applicant's submission should have the necessary information required to evaluate the application, and must adhere to [2 CFR 200.331 - Subrecipient and contractor determinations](#). There are no requirements in the SOI for competitive subawards; applicants may propose approaches that align with their organizational policy procedures, [2 CFR 200.331](#), and [2 CFR 200.318 - General procurement standards](#). See also [2 CFR 200.319 - Competition](#), and [2 CFR 200.320\(c\) - Noncompetitive procurement](#).

Question 37: Are there any stipulations/preferences for how the Management Entity (ME) administers its research-for-development portfolio, specifically is there an expectation that the ME competitively procure a portion of its activities? Or can the ME exclusively commission activities from partners and other members of its network?

Answer 37: See answer 36 above.

Question 38: In addition to the subrecipients in the core team, does the Department of State anticipate a competitive process for making awards to sub-grantees?

Answer 38: See answer 36 above.

Question 39: Can we fund directly U.S. companies doing work that meets the objectives of the NOFO?

Answer 39: All types of U.S. and non-U.S. entities are eligible as collaborating partners (i.e. sub-recipients or contractors at various tiers) of the applicant, provided that they are

not excluded from U.S. Government acquisition and assistance awards (this may be verified through SAM.gov). Private sector partners may be engaged in a variety of proposed roles, including as sub-recipient, advisory board member, or cost-share provider. See SOI Section C.1 and C.2.

Question 40: Do all partners have to be defined in the Statements of Interest, or could additional partners be added if the SOI moves on to the full proposal stage?

Answer 40: Additional partners may be added if the SOI moves on to the full proposal stage.

Question 41: Joint submissions: Some prior Innovation Lab NOFOs encouraged a two-university Management Entity structure. For this competition, may two eligible institutions jointly serve as the Management Entity (with one submitting as prime)? Is there any preference regarding a multi-US university consortium structure at the SOI stage?

Answer 41: One prime applicant must be identified in the application. Per Section B: “Eligibility” in the SOI document “Coordination with other eligible applicants and use of a consortia approach is acceptable. In addition to applying as a Management Entity, an organization may partner as a sub awardee under other eligible applications.” All types of U.S. and non-U.S. entities are eligible as collaborating partners (i.e. sub-recipients or contractors at various tiers) of the applicant, provided that they are not excluded from U.S. Government acquisition and assistance awards (this may be verified through SAM.gov). This may include sub-recipients that support management and coordination functions.

Question 42: ME Structure: At the SOI stage, what level of specificity does DOS expect regarding the Management Entity’s structure and responsibilities? Should applicants describe a detailed portfolio management model (e.g., competitive subawards, thematic research clusters, technology-to-scale pathways, MEL systems), or is a high-level management framework sufficient for Phase 1?

Answer 42: Department of State welcomes proposals for a management structure that adheres to eligibility requirements and reflects the overarching priorities elaborated in the Statement of Interest call for concept notes. The SOI submission instructions do not request a detailed management plan. The requested List of Partner Roles and Responsibilities should include a summary of the management structure and the broad approach to coordination. This should be a brief, preliminary characterization of roles and responsibilities that may evolve significantly during the subsequent phase. See SOI Section D.1.e.

Question 43: Is it favorable to work with key partners with a focus area or with large organizations (NGOs), and research institutes?

Answer 43: Applicants should propose the partners that best support the achievement of

the programmatic objectives and areas of inquiry that are being pursued.

Programmatic

Question 44: Should a lab address all parts of any “area of inquiry”? For example, in the nutrition, food systems and food safety area of inquiry: does the lab/proposal need to address all 3, or would 1 or 2 be fine?

Answer 44: Applicants may submit concepts that align with one or both objectives and one or multiple areas of inquiry or topics. As noted in the SOI: “Concepts do not need to address every topic listed under an area of inquiry. The description of the areas of inquiry are illustrative and may not include topics that reasonably fit within the area of inquiry. Applicants may suggest topics that fit within the area of inquiry that are not listed.”

Question 45: Is an implementation/field implementation a required component of the grant?

Answer 45: Section 103A of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (FAA), as amended, requires that agricultural research carried out under the Act *...shall (1) take account of the special needs of small farmers in the determination of research priorities, (2) include research on the interrelationships among technology, institutions, and economic, social, environmental, and cultural factors affecting small-farm agriculture, and (3) make extensive use of field testing to adapt basic research to local conditions.* [See 22 USC 2151a-1](#). Finally, Congress provides that special emphasis shall be placed on disseminating research results to the farms on which they can be put to use, and especially on institutional and other arrangements needed to assure that small farmers have effective access to both new and existing improved technology.

Question 46: Would the development of indices to guide decisions around food security and import/export and trade vulnerabilities be eligible for this grant?

Answer 46: FTF Innovation Labs support impact through applied innovation (e.g. see answer directly above). As stated in the SOI “This research is expected to generate knowledge and new or improved technologies and practices, while also building linkages to partners and activities that can transfer information and innovation into the hands of stakeholders, where impacts may be achieved.”

Question 47: Given the eight-page limit at the SOI stage, what level of detail is expected in describing a scaling strategy? Specifically, are reviewers looking for named scaling partners and defined handoff mechanisms at this stage, or is it sufficient to articulate the theory of change and the types of partnerships that would be pursued during implementation?

Answer 47: Please refer to the purpose of the SOI (page 5). The submission of the SOI is

the first step of a two-step process. Applicants are invited to submit a concise (maximum of 8-page) Statement of Interest (SOI) that clearly communicates project ideas, objectives and approach. This is not a full proposal and this phase will not result in a federal assistance award. Rather, the SOI process allows applicants to submit project ideas for evaluation prior to the development of a full application and reference the SOI objectives and Key Issues and Approaches in Sections C.1 and C.2 for suggestions on the level of detail.

Question 48: Will the State Department prefer to use the design or structure of prior Innovation Labs, or is it envisioning an entirely new model? For example, previous Innovation Labs included a central management entity and a portfolio of competitively awarded research subawards. They also secured Associate Awards under the Leader Award mechanism to implement specific activities not originally included under the Leader Award. Should we anticipate a similar structure, or a different approach

Answer 48: Applications should detail a proposed approach that will ensure the scientific quality and relevance of the portfolio, and accountability to ensure effective, efficient implementation of the award's stated objectives and activities, and for meeting administrative and compliance requirements.

Question 49: How should considerations related to equal opportunity, youth engagement, and broad participation be addressed in the SOI?

Answer 49: Please note, if the place of performance or delivery of any award made under this Statement of Interest will be within the United States, applicants are advised that they will be required to certify the following at the time of award:

- Its compliance in all respects with all applicable Federal anti-discrimination laws is material to the government's payment decisions for purposes of section 3729(b)(4) of title 31, United States Code and;
- It does not operate any programs promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion that violate any applicable Federal anti-discrimination laws. A program promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion means a program whose purpose is to promote preferences based on race, color religion, sex, or national origins, such as in training or hiring.

Applicants should review the U.S. Department of State Standard Terms and Conditions published on the Department of State's [Federal Assistance Policies & Appeals](#) website, [2 CFR Part 200](#), and [2 CFR Chapter VI](#).

Question 50: What qualifies as credible long-term sustainability, beyond 60 months?

Answer 50: Please see SOI Section D.1.d: “***Anticipated Outcomes and Results:*** *Identify the specific outcomes and results the approach/activities seeks to achieve and define “success.” Identify Outcomes and results that can be achieved during the program’s lifetime as well as any potential “quick wins” that may be delivered in the earlier phases of the work. The nature, scope, and sustainability of outcomes and results will be critical to assessing the costs and benefits – and determining whether the SOI will proceed to the next stage of the merit review process.*”

Question 51: How much weight is given to artificial intelligence integration?

Answer 51: Proposed approaches should be justified and considered using the overarching objectives and areas of inquiry for this call for concept notes. SOI Section C.2 describes themes to include in program design, which include leveraging cutting-edge American technology and innovation using a range of advances, such as Artificial Intelligence and digital solutions. Application review criteria are included in SOI Section F.

Question 52: Artificial Intelligence: The NOFO encourages leveraging AI and digital solutions. Are there any constraints or expectations applicants should be aware of at the SOI stage (e.g., data governance requirements, cybersecurity standards, preferred types of decision-support tools, expectations regarding open data, or limits on stand-alone modeling activities)? How should AI-enabled research be framed to align with DOS priorities?

Answer 52: Any technologies proposed must conform to the applicable rules and regulations of both the US and the target country they are practiced or researched in. Applicants should review the U.S. Department of State Standard Terms and Conditions published on the Department of State’s [Federal Assistance Policies & Appeals](#) website, [2 CFR Part 200](#), and [2 CFR Chapter VI](#).

Question 53: What data sharing/governance structures are recommended?

Answer 53: The Department will not make recommendations on specific data sharing/governance structures. Additional resources are available at resources.data.gov.

Question 54: Does aquaculture research fit within the scope of this RFP?

Answer 54: Yes. Refer to SOI Section C.1 Area of Inquiry 1.2, livestock and animal health.

Question 55: Does the State Department consider genomic trait discovery for crops to be included in “technologies and/or methods to enhance resilience to crop threats”?

Answer 55: The Department can consider genomic trait discovery for crops as aligned with Area of Inquiry 1.1 or 2.1. Proposed approaches should be justified and considered using the overarching objectives and areas of inquiry for this call for concept notes.

Question 56: Is there a preference for statements of interest that consider multiple topics within the Areas of Inquiry or that focus on one specific topic?

Answer 56: Please refer to page 12 of the SOI document, “Each SOI may be responsive to either a single or multiple objectives and areas of inquiry.”

Question 57: Capacity building: With respect to research capacity in non-US institutions, the NOFO discusses “enhance leveraging of capacity and resources for maximum impact, achieving buy-in from practitioners, achieving scale, and crowding in resources” and “build the capacity of research institutions, agricultural sectors, and food systems around the world, better equipping other governments with the tools they need to feed their own populations”. However, it does not explicitly prioritize local research capacity strengthening at the individual or institutional level within low- and middle-income countries, which was a central feature of prior Innovation Labs. Should applicants interpret local research capacity building (e.g., LMIC university partnerships, graduate training, institutional strengthening) as a core priority for this competition, or is it considered secondary relative to other objectives?

Answer 57: Capacity development is referenced among key issues in SOI Section C.2. Please refer to the Objectives in the SOI solicitation, noting “The overarching objectives and areas of inquiry of the program will benefit the American people and the people in the countries in which we provide assistance”.

Question 58: Area of Inquiry 2.1: Area of Inquiry 2.1 begins with “improving breeding activities,” yet the listed examples include supply chains, food loss and waste, food processing and preservation, food safety, value addition, and financing/incentives—many of which are not breeding-related. Should applicants interpret Area 2.1 as broadly

inclusive of nutrition, food systems, and food safety research beyond breeding? Specifically, does DOS welcome research on non-breeding pathways to improved nutrition—such as diet quality, consumer demand and behavior, food environments, affordability, fortification, safety risk perceptions, and policy or market incentives—as fully responsive under Objective 2?

Answer 58: Please see page 10 of the SOI document, “Additionally, the description of the areas of inquiry are illustrative and may not include topics that reasonably fit within the area of inquiry. Applicants may suggest topics that fit within the area of inquiry that are not listed.”

Question 59: Are there any restrictions on food processing technologies?

Answer 59: Please see page 10 of the SOI document, “Additionally, the description of the areas of inquiry are illustrative and may not include topics that reasonably fit within the area of inquiry. Applicants may suggest topics that fit within the area of inquiry that are not listed.” Note, any technologies proposed must conform to the rules and regulations of both the US and target country they are practiced or researched in.

Question 60: Should the Innovation Lab focus on foods imported into the US?

Answer 60: Applicants should prioritize activities, crops, commodities, foods or agricultural systems based on the ability to meet one or both of the objectives of the program outlined in Section C.1 of the SOI solicitation.

Question 61: What are the commodities and cropping systems of interest?

Answer 61: See Answer 60 above.

Key Personnel

Question 62: Does the Department of State require (and/or prefer) the inclusion of key personnel, for example a Lab/Program Director or Manager? If so, what is the required level of effort for this (these) role(s)?

Answer 62: The application contents in Section D.1.e requires that applicants: “Identify organization name, point of contact, point of contact information (phone and email), federal share to be award by the pass-through entity, cost-share (if applicable), and a summary of proposed roles and responsibilities. Include a summary of the management structure and the broad approach to coordination. *Note: This should be a brief, preliminary characterization of roles and responsibilities that may evolve significantly during the subsequent phase.*” Key personnel are not required at this phase. Following the merit review, the subset of applicants invited to submit a full proposal will be

provided with additional instructions regarding the requirements for that phase.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Question 63: What indicators will be prioritized (e.g., yield, income, nutrition, trade value, U.S. export growth, etc.) for the MEL Framework?

Answer 63: Specific indicators are not required for this phase of the solicitation. Please refer to the SOI Section C “Program Description” as well as Section F “Application Review Information” to support your planning.

Question 64: Will there be required cross-lab indicators that we should consider?

Answer 64: Specific indicators are not required for this phase of the solicitation. Please refer to the SOI Section C “Program Description” section as well as Section F “Application Review Information” to support your planning.

Question 65: How much emphasis will be placed on measurable “quick wins”?

Answer 65: Applications will be reviewed for how they meet the entirety of the review criteria. Please refer to the review criteria in Section F.1 of the SOI which explain how concept notes will be reviewed. Also refer to Section D Application Contents and Format - Anticipated Outcomes and Results: “Identify the specific outcomes and results the approach/activities seeks to achieve and define “success.” Identify Outcomes and results that can be achieved during the program’s lifetime as well as any potential “quick wins” that may be delivered in the earlier phases of the work. The nature, scope, and sustainability of outcomes and results will be critical to assessing the costs and benefits – and determining whether the SOI will proceed to the next stage of the merit review process.”

Statement of Interest Application / Submission Guidelines

Question 66: Page 9: “Applicants may submit up to *two* (2) applications as the Management Entity (ME).” Is this limit at the stage of this Phase 1 (SOI) or the Phase 2 (Full proposal)?

Answer 66: Institutions responding to this call for Statements of Interest may: a) submit up to two SOI applications as the lead applicant (ME) at this phase; and additionally b) participate as a sub-awardee on multiple submissions if desired.

Question 67: Should the SOI be submitted as one PDF file with all the content (technical and budget) or in other format (e.g., MS Word for technical sections and MS Excel for Budget)?

Answer 67: The SOI and all accompanying documents can be combined into a single document for submission, in a searchable and editable PDF or Word format, with the exception of the required form SF-424. The Application for Federal Assistance (SF-424) must be submitted separately, with any applicable attachments added within the form where indicated.

Question 68: Does the 8-page limit include the table listing that is required as mentioned on page # 13 of the document?

Answer 68: The 8-page limit does not include the table listing that is required as mentioned on page #13 of the document.

Question 69: Is there a set format for the Past Performance that you would like the applicants to follow? Or can we create our own template with the information required in section g under Application Content and Format?

Answer 69: There is not a required format for the requested Past Performance information, and applicants may create their own template that includes the information required under Application Content and Format.

Question 70: Is the table with the critical details considered the first page or cover page, and does it count towards the 8-page limit?

Answer 70: The table with critical details may be considered the cover page and does not count toward the 8-page limit.

Question 71: On page 9 of the NOFO, it states “Applicants may submit up to two (2) applications as the Management Entity (ME).” Does the word “applications” in this context mean the “statement of interest” that is due April 3rd? Or does it mean full applications after SOI review and selection to submit a full proposal?

Answer 71: The term “applications” in this context refers to the submission of statements of interest that are described in Section D.1 and due on April 9, 2026.

Question 72: For *Phase 1 – Statement of Interest (SOI)*, the required information list includes:

- a. Table Listing of Critical Details:
- b. Issues/challenges/opportunities
- c. Proposed solution/activities
- d. Anticipated outcomes and results
- e. list of partner roles and responsibilities
- f. Resource contributions and/or cost share from non-federal sources
- g. Relevant past performance annex (not counted towards 8-page limit)
- h. SF-424 (Application for Federal Assistance) (not counted towards 8-page limit)

In which section of this requested information should we include the budget? Is the budget to be submitted part of the 8-page content limit?

Answer 72: Budget information should be included in Application for Federal Assistance Form SF-424, which does not count toward the page limit. The budget information must include the cumulative Total Federal Share requested for the applicant and for any proposed subaward organizations.

A Summary Budget should also be provided as an Annex, which does not count toward the page limit. See also Answer 6 above.

Geographic Focus / Location

Question 73: The solicitation notes that geographic target areas should reflect activities and partnerships in “low- to middle-income countries.” Could you please confirm whether this includes all middle-income countries, or if the eligibility is intended to be limited specifically to low-income and lower-middle-income countries, excluding upper-middle-income contexts?

Answer 73: For the purposes of this solicitation, country income classifications are defined by the World Bank using the GNI per capita (Atlas method) -- see <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>. Therefore, “low- to middle-income countries” as referenced in the SOI Section C.3, refers to: low-income, lower-middle income, and upper-middle income countries.

Question 74: The opportunity document shows middle-income countries as possible target countries. Would this mean that countries in the Andean Region qualify? More specifically, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.

Answer 74: Applicants may propose activities in middle-income countries, noting the considerations listed in Section C.3 (i.e. alignment with foreign policy goals of the United States; opportunities to promote trade, cooperation, and investment; and ability to reduce requirements for foreign aid). Please also refer to the review criteria in Section F.1 of the SOI which explain how concept notes will be reviewed. Selection of geographic locations should also be considered with the lens of the review criteria.

Question 75: Will reviewers apply any preference to SOIs focused on countries in the

Western Hemisphere versus other low- and middle-income country regions prone to scarcity? We want to understand how reviewers will balance the program's food security objectives against current geographic foreign policy priorities when evaluating competing applications.

Answer 75: Applications will be reviewed for how they meet the entirety of the review criteria and meet the stated objectives. Please refer to the review criteria in Section F.1 of the SOI which explain how concept notes will be reviewed. Applicants should incorporate geographic priority suggestions as listed in Section C.3 (Priority Regions).

Question 76: Are there specific countries or sub-regions within the Western Hemisphere that the Department of State is particularly interested in seeing targeted in applications, given current foreign policy priorities?

Answer 76: See Answer 75 above.

Question 77: Does the “own hemisphere” imply countries in North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean?

Answer 77: The reference to “own hemisphere” on page 3 of the SOI document is referring to the Western Hemisphere. The SOI document has been amended on page 3 to reflect this clarification.

Question 78: Are countries with full or partial US travel bans eligible as target countries?

Answer 78: A U.S. travel ban or Level 4 advisory does not automatically make a country ineligible as a target for foreign assistance. However, such designations signal potentially serious concerns that may affect program design, approval, and implementation. Applicants may expect additional scrutiny, possible restrictions, and a requirement to demonstrate robust risk mitigation in any resultant award. Carefully review the SOI to make a determination before submitting a proposal. Be aware that approval is not guaranteed, and operational realities may prevent implementation if funding is awarded.

Question 79: Can applicants propose work in countries in which the State Department has issued a *Level 4: Do Not Travel* advisory?

Answer 79: Please see Answer 78 above.

Question 80: Do the countries need to be on the TAA compliant list?

Answer 80: No. Please refer to Section C.3 of the SOI for priority regions.

Question 81: To what extent should applicants consider previous Feed the Future target countries and investments in proposing new activities under this solicitation?

Answer 81: Applicants should consider geographic priorities as presented in Section C.3 of the SOI document (“Priority Regions”) and are not restricted to previous Feed the Future target countries.

Question 82: Is there a limit on the number of countries that should be included in a proposal?

Answer 82: There is not a limit on the number of countries that may be included in the proposal. Note that the review criteria will “consider the proposed staffing footprint, geographic locations and network/relationship maturity to ensure the ability to achieve objectives”.

Question 83: Will statements of interest that include work in Sub-Saharan Africa be viewed favorably?

Answer 83: Statements of interest that include work in Sub-Saharan Africa will be evaluated using the scoring criteria elaborated in the Statement of Interest document in Section F.1, and considering geographic priority suggestions in Section C.3 (Priority Regions).

Question 84: Any suggestions on target countries. This hemisphere is clear and by which I mean Central/South and not Western Africa which is in part in our hemisphere. But what countries in Africa or Asia are you looking to.

Answer 84: Applicants should consider geographic priorities as presented in Section C.3 of the SOI document (“Priority Regions”).

Question 85: Is there a preference for statements of interest that focus on a specific region or that take a global approach?

Answer 85: There is no stated preference for statements of interest that focus on a specific region or that take a global approach. Applicants should refer to Section C.3. of the SOI.

Question 86: Target Countries: The NOFO requires listing “Target Benefiting Country or Countries.” At the SOI stage, must applicants specify a fixed set of countries, or is it acceptable to propose a regional approach or an initial set of priority countries with flexibility for refinement during co-design in Phase 2? How specific should country selection be at this stage? If a preferred country list exists, can DOS share it?

Answer 86: It is acceptable at this stage to propose a regional approach or an initial set of priority countries. Please also refer to the review criteria in the SOI, which includes Program Planning/Ability to Achieve Objectives.

Question 87: Will the Merit Review Panel prioritize applications that focus geographic targeting on the Western Hemisphere, and how should applicants weight the impact on U.S. agricultural competitiveness versus host-country food security.

Answer 87: Applicants should consider geographic priorities as presented in Section C.3 of the SOI document (“Priority Regions”). Please also refer to the review criteria in the SOI, which includes Program Planning/Ability to Achieve Objectives.

Question 88: What countries/regions are of interest and/or priority? Section 3 mentions priority regions but there isn’t list of specific regions or countries, nor a link to a list. Is it more favorable to work in Central/South America?

Answer 88: Applicants should consider geographic priorities as presented in Section C.3 of the SOI document (“Priority Regions”). Please also refer to the review criteria in the SOI, which includes Program Planning/Ability to Achieve Objectives.

Question 89: Is there a list that constitutes the State Department’s definition of Lower- and Middle-Income countries?

Answer 89: Please see Answer 73 above.

Award Mechanism and Substantial Involvement

Question 90: Please provide examples of the “ongoing technical assistance and guidance integral to the project’s execution” that the Department of State may provide. Understanding this will help us build State Department review milestones appropriately into our project timeline and budget.

Answer 90: The Grants Officer will determine the appropriate level of substantial involvement based on the programmatic requirements of the award and include those elements of substantial involvement as needed. Additional information regarding substantial involvement will be provided during the request for full application stage for selected concepts.

Question 91: Assistance Mechanism: Although the assistance type is listed as “Grant or Cooperative Agreement,” the NOFO describes examples of substantial involvement. Should the SOI remain neutral pending final determination of the assistance mechanism or should applicants assume a cooperative agreement structure for planning purposes and propose governance mechanisms (e.g., joint steering committee, approval processes)?

Answer 91: The degree to which the government is potentially involved in the program would determine the mechanism between a Grant or Cooperative Agreement. Each eligible program will be evaluated, and substantial involvement will be determined in consultation with each implementer. Additional information regarding substantial involvement will be provided during the request for full application stage for selected concepts.

Question 92: Funding Mechanism: Grant vs Cooperative Agreement? The solicitation (p. 6) indicates that DoS will issue the new IL awards as either grants or cooperative agreements. What factors will DoS use to determine which of these two funding mechanisms they will use for a given award? (The “substantial involvement” provision on p.12 would seem to imply only Cooperative Agreements.)

Answer 92: Please see Answer 91 above.

Other

Question 93: Merit Review Panel (MRP) Composition: Sharing some general information

about the review panel can help applicants frame and communicate their intended program as clearly as possible to their audience—benefiting both applicants and DoS reviewers by more accurately communicating details of the proposed program in accessible terms, and allowing faster, more streamlined review. To this end, can DoS share any information regarding the general composition of the MRP? (e.g., will reviewers primarily consist of scientists with deep technical expertise in the relevant field? Diplomatic and development professionals from within the USG? etc.)

Answer 93: The Department will not provide specific details on the composition of this review panel. Merit review panels are generally composed of technical experts and stakeholders. Panelists must be impartial and possess enough expertise and knowledge of the program to be able to evaluate an application for its value, quality and likelihood of success. In most cases, merit review panels include representatives from the appropriate Department of State functional bureau and/or regional bureau (to include feedback from U.S. embassies). In some cases, additional panelists may participate, including from other Department of State bureaus or offices; U.S. government departments, agencies, or boards; representatives from partner governments; or representatives from entities that are in a public-private partnership with DoS. All panelists sign non-disclosure agreements and conflict of interest agreements.

Question 94: After receipt of Statements of Interest, will the Department of State conduct any match-making that may result in two or more applications being requested to combine for the full proposal?

Answer 94: The Department of State does not plan to conduct match-making and will not share applicant statements of interest with other applicants.

Question 95: Is there an expectation of a competitive call for proposal process after Innovation Labs are selected, or can a consortium approach be proposed?

Answer 95: As stated in SOI section B.3., coordination with other eligible applicants and use of a consortia approach is acceptable. See Answers 7 and 36 for information about competition.

Question 96: Is it anticipated that there will be additional requests for applications for innovation labs in FY2027 or future years?

Answer 96: Additional requests for applications for FtF Innovation Labs may be released in future years, subject to Congressional appropriations and availability of funding.

Question 97: Is it possible for the proposed innovation labs to be linked to the former USAID FtF innovation labs?

Answer 97: Previous experience implementing an FtF Innovation Lab and other programs that demonstrate organizational capacity to implement similar awards may be included in the requested Relevant Past Performance Annex.