

2026 SCBGP Phase I Grant Opportunity Request for Applications (RFA)

RFA# 2026SCBGP

Request for Applications

CATALOG OF FEDERAL DOMESTIC ASSISTANCE 10.170

Released:

October 28, 2026

Application available:

November 3, 2025

Phase I Concept Proposals Due:

By 5:00 p.m. EST on December 19, 2025

Late submissions will not be accepted.



STATE OF MAINE

Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Agriculture Resource Development Division

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About the Program

Purpose

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry (Department) is seeking Phase I Concept Proposals that, if approved, will move forward to Phase II Grant Applications. Projects that move forward through both Phases I and II will become part of a State Plan submitted for approval and funding from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) as defined in this Request for Applications (RFA) document. This document provides instructions for submitting a Phase I (Concept Proposal), the procedure, and criteria by which the awarded Applicant(s) will be selected, and the contractual terms that will govern the relationship between the State of Maine (State) and the Applicant(s).

The [Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004](#) (7 U.S.C. 1621 note) authorized the USDA to provide grants to State departments of agriculture to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry is eligible to submit a State Plan for these funds. The State Plan will include projects that are submitted, reviewed, and recommended to be approved by the USDA through this formal RFA process.

Phase I Concept Proposals Must:

- Demonstrate a concept plan for a proposed project with a high likelihood of success.
- Demonstrate a plan to implement a project that will benefit multiple specialty crop growers by enhancing the competitiveness of Maine [specialty crops](#)
- Identify the specific and existing issue, problem, or need the project will address.
- Demonstrate industry need and support.
- Demonstrate readiness to conduct outreach to encourage participants to participate in project-related activities.
- Demonstrate willingness to share project results and lessons learned with specialty crop growers. (Note that advertising is not considered outreach to industry.)

For examples of project types appropriate for each funding area, reference [Appendix B on pages 21-23](#) of this RFA.

Funding and Duration

Funding is contingent upon the passage of a Farm Bill and available funding and approval from the USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). The Department anticipates that up to \$500,000 will be awarded to projects enhancing the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops. Grant amounts will range from \$15,000 to

\$100,000. The grant duration will be two (2) years, and the grant performance period is anticipated to be September 30, 2026, through September 29, 2028. These dates are estimated and may be adjusted, as necessary, to comply with all procedural requirements associated with the RFA, the USDA review procedures, and the contracting process. The actual contract start date will be established by a completed and approved contract. The Department reserves the right to offer an award amount different than the amount requested.

Eligibility

Non-profit and for-profit organizations; local, state, and federal government entities, including Tribal governments (federally and non-federally recognized); and public or private colleges and universities are eligible to apply. Individuals are not eligible to apply. One applicant entity will not be selected to receive more than 30% of the total amount awarded.

Scoring

Applications will be evaluated and scored by a team of 3-7 trained evaluators, comprising of at least one subject matter expert and one financial expert. The scoring rubric is provided within the How to Apply section of this RFA. The total base scoring points available are 50 points. The total bonus points available are 5. Up to 5 bonus points may be awarded to applicants proposing projects in Funding Area II: Access, Education, and Training. The total maximum score an applicant may receive is 55.

How to Apply

Applicants must apply online using the link provided on the [SCBGP website](#). It is recommended that the following sample application questions be copied and pasted into a word processing file to be completed prior to copying/pasting into the online application form. The questions and/or their order may vary in the online application. The applicant is responsible for responding to the questions and formatting as provided in the online application. Below is a breakdown of all questions that will be asked.

General Information

Project Title:

Concisely describe the project in 15 words or less, with a unique and descriptive title

Applicant Organization:

Legal name of the organization that will lead the project and receive and oversee the use of grant funds.

Unique Entity Identifier (UEI)

Enter the applicant's UEI number, if known. To obtain a UEI, please visit the [System for Award Management](#) website.

Physical Address:

Enter the applicant's physical address of where their headquarters is located.

Mailing Address:

Enter the applicant's mailing address, if it differs from the physical address.

Organization Type

Select the organization type that best describes the application.

Submitter

Select the category that best describes the person completing the application.

Primary Point of Contact

Please enter contact information for the individual(s) responsible for the project's success and a backup if that individual should be unreachable.

Project Purpose (10 points)

Clearly and succinctly address each of the following in 2,000 characters or less:

- A. Identify the specific and existing problem or need the project will address and explain how the proposed project will solve the problem or fill the need.
- B. Explain how the project will benefit multiple specialty crop growers and why the

project is important and timely for enhancing the competitiveness of Maine's specialty crops.

Project Purpose (up to 10 points)	Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal states the specific issue, problem, or need the project will address, and the likeliness to influence the competitiveness of one or more Maine specialty crops.			
	0 points	1 point	3 points	5 points
<i>Part A Problem or Need</i>	The applicant does not identify a specific problem or need	The applicant identifies a specific problem or need but does not describe how the project will solve the problem or fill the need.	The applicant begins to describe a problem/need and begins to demonstrate how the project will respond.	The applicant fully articulates a problem /need related to a Maine specialty crop(s) and clearly demonstrates how the project will seek to resolve the issue.
<i>Part B Impact on Maine's Specialty Crops</i>	The applicant does not demonstrate how the project will enhance the competitiveness of one or more Maine specialty crops.	The project will benefit only 2-3 specialty crop producers and will not likely influence the overall competitiveness of Maine specialty crops	The application begins to demonstrate benefit to multiple specialty crop growers but lacks clarity about the impact and/or the importance/ timeliness of the project.	The applicant describes a project plan with the potential to benefit all Maine producers of the specific crop(s) and has articulated why the project is important, right now, to Maine's specialty crop industry.

Program Priorities (8 points)

Clearly and succinctly address the following in 2,000 characters or less:

- A. Funding Area (See RFA [Appendix A on page 19](#) for the list of 2026 Funding Areas)

Select the most relevant funding area for the project. Describe what this project seeks to achieve in this funding area.

- B. Focus Area (See RFA [Appendix A on page 20](#) for the list of 2026 Focus Areas)

Select the most relevant focus area. Describe what this project seeks to achieve in this focus area.

Program Priorities (up to 10 points)	Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal aligns with the selected funding and focus areas and the likelihood of generating positive change in these areas.			
	0 points	1 point	2 points	4 points
Part A Funding Area	The applicant does not identify a specific funding area	The applicant does not describe what the project will achieve in this area.	The applicant begins to describe and demonstrate how the project will generate positive outcomes related to the funding area.	The applicant fully articulates how the project aligns with and seeks to make meaningful and measurable change within the funding area.
Part B Focus Area	The applicant does not identify a specific focus area	The applicant does not describe what the project will achieve in this area.	The applicant begins to describe and demonstrate how the project will generate positive outcomes related to the focus area.	The applicant fully articulates how the project aligns with and seeks to make meaningful and measurable change within the focus area

Project Sustainability (4 points)

SCBGP projects should have a long-term impact without relying indefinitely on grant funding. Clearly and succinctly address the following in 2,000 characters or less:

- A. The likelihood of the project resulting in future activities that will benefit Maine specialty crops, without dependence on public or private grant funds.
- B. The project's likely benefit(s) to Maine's specialty crop industry that will continue beyond the grant duration.

Project Sustainability (up to 5 points)	<i>Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on the extent to which the proposal demonstrates the project will have a long-term impact on the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops without reliance on future grant funding.</i>		
	0 points	1 point	2 points
Part A Future Activities	The applicant will likely rely on future funding to continue related activities.	The applicant begins to demonstrate how the project will result in future activities regardless of future funding.	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for how the project will lead to future activities regardless of future funding.
Part B Future Benefit	The project will not have any lasting benefit beyond the grant.	The applicant begins to demonstrate how the project will have lasting benefits.	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for how the project will result in future benefits beyond the grant.

Project Impact (10 points)

Clearly and succinctly address each of the following in 2,000 characters or less:

- A. Identify the types of people (e.g. consumers, students, producers) and quantify the estimated number of people the project will likely impact. The number cited should be a reasonable estimate of the number of individuals that could realistically be **directly impacted** by the results of the project.
- B. How will you measure and track this number? Applicants must be able to demonstrate that this number is trackable and reportable **within the project duration**.
- C. Identify and quantify the estimated businesses, farms, and/or organizations that will benefit from the project and describe the way in which they will benefit.
- D. List the specific Maine specialty crops that the project will attempt to increase the competitiveness of.
- E. List the specific specialty crop stakeholders, other than the applicant and individuals and organizations involved in the project, that are aware of your project and could provide a letter of support, if requested in Phase II.

Project Impact	Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on how clearly the proposal identifies and quantifies the beneficiaries and crops that will directly benefit from the project, and the likelihood of the proposal to improve specialty crop competitiveness through the proposed project impact measures		
	0 points	1 point	2 points
<i>Part A</i> <i>Number of People</i>	The applicant does not identify the types of people impacted, and/or the project will likely impact 10 or fewer people.	The applicant begins to identify the types of people impacted, and/or the project will likely impact 10-50 people.	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for the types of people to be impacted, and the project will likely impact 50 or more people.
<i>Part B</i> <i>Tracking Impact on People</i>	The applicant has not yet determined a measurement plan.	The applicant begins to demonstrate how the project's impact on people will be measured.	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for who the project will impact and how this will be measured.
<i>Part C</i> <i>Business & Industry Impact</i>	The applicant does not identify the types of businesses or organizations impacted, and/or the project will likely impact 2 or fewer businesses/organizations.	The applicant begins to identify the types of businesses and organizations, and/or the project will likely benefit only some of Maine's specialty crop producers in the project sector(s).	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for the types of businesses and organizations that will benefit, and the project will likely benefit all of Maine's specialty crop producers in the project sector(s).
<i>Part D</i> <i>Specialty Crops</i>	The applicant does not identify specific Maine specialty crops.	n/a	The applicant identifies the specific Maine specialty crops that the project seeks to enhance the competitiveness of.
<i>Part E</i>	The applicant does not list any supporters other than the applicant.	The applicant begins to demonstrate stakeholder awareness and support.	The applicant fully describes stakeholders who are aware of and in support of the project.

Continuation of Project and Funding

Prior Year SCBGP Projects (not a scored question):

Please indicate if this project is related to or build upon a SCBGP award granted in a prior year. If "No," please indicate "No." If "Yes," all of the following must be completed

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as well:

- A. Provide the SCBGP contract number(s) and project name(s).
- B. Describe how the project differs from and builds upon the previous funded project. Projects may not duplicate or replicate the work of prior projects.
- C. If the prior project has finished, please briefly describe lessons learned from that project and what improvements are being incorporated in this project.

Note: Funding decisions may be based on the past performance of applicants with regard to prior USDA funded grant projects and contracts.

Other Funding from Federal or State Grant Program (not a scored question):

Activities funded under the SCBGP cannot duplicate activities funded by another federal or state grant program. If the project has been or will be submitted to or funded by another Federal or State grant program, all of the following must be addressed:

- A. Identify the Federal or State grant program and the agency administering the program.
- B. List the amount of grant funds requested or awarded by the program.
- C. Describe how this proposed project supplements rather than duplicates the efforts funded by the other Federal or State grant program.

Outcome Measures (4 points)

Select appropriate outcome measures. Clearly and succinctly address the following in 2,000 characters or fewer: describe how the outcome measure aligns with the project's funding and focus areas and how you will collect data to measure results (e.g., survey, QR code, attendance, sales metrics, etc.).

Please note that all selected outcome measures must be achievable during the grant period. Applicants are only required to select one outcome in Phase I. Outcome measures and the associated indicators were developed by the USDA and the Office of Management and Budget and cannot be altered or amended in any way. Altering the language of the outcomes or indicators or providing responses in a format other than that described in the document, may result in the disqualification of an application.

Reference [Appendix C on page 24](#) of this RFA for the list of outcome measures.

Outcome Measures	Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on how well the selected outcome measure(s) align with the project's funding and focus areas and the likeliness the applicant will be able to collect data to measure results.			
	0 points	1 point	2 points	4 points
Outcome Measures	The applicant did not select an outcome measure.	The applicant selected an outcome measure but did not describe how it aligns with the project's funding and focus areas and/or does not describe how data will be collected.	The applicant begins to describe project outcome(s), alignment, and data collection.	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for how the project relates to the selected outcome(s), funding area, and focus area, and a plan to collect and measure data.

Work Plan (9 points)

Clearly and succinctly address each of the following in 2,000 characters or less: (Note: In Phase I, this section is intended to demonstrate that the applicant has begun to form a project plan. A complete work plan describing specific tasks, timelines, and measurable indicators will be required in the Phase II Grant Application.

- A. List the project activities that will be necessary to accomplish the project and achieve intended outcomes.
- B. Describe a general plan to how you will encourage participants/participation.
- C. Describe how the project results will be shared with a specific target audience, stakeholders, and other interested parties beyond those directly involved in the project. (E.g, presentations at professional conferences or producer meetings, publication of articles in professional journals or the agricultural press, educational brochures, websites, etc.).

Work Plan (up to 9 points)	Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on the clarity of the work plan, the relevance of the specific project activities to the project purpose, and how well the project outlines a plan to encourage participation and share project results.		
	0 points	1 point	3 points
Part A Project Activities	The applicant does not provide a clear list of anticipated activities.	n/a	The applicant provides a clear list of anticipated activities that are relevant to the project's purpose and intended outcomes.
Part B Participation	The applicant does not provide a clear plan to recruit and encourage participation.	The applicant begins to demonstrate a plan to recruit and encourage participation.	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for recruiting and encouraging participation.
Part C Sharing Results	The applicant does not provide a clear plan to share results.	The applicant begins to demonstrate a plan to share results	The applicant demonstrates a clear vision for sharing results with specific target audiences and stakeholders that may benefit from the knowledge shared.

Budget (5 points)

The total amount of SCBGP funds requested must range from \$15,000 to \$100,000.

All budget items must support enhancing the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops and correlate to the goal(s) of the project. Before completing the budget section, review the [Allowable and Unallowable Costs and Activity Table \(pages 13-23\)](#). For each budget category listed below, enter the amount of SCBGP funds requested (rounded to the nearest whole dollar) and a brief description (2,000 characters or less) of the related activities. A description is required for each budget category.

Salary and wages, fringe benefits, travel, supplies, and other direct costs for individuals not employed by the applicant organization must be listed under category *F*.
Contractual.

A. Salary and Wages

Estimate the total cost of salary and wages for time spent on the project by individuals employed by the applicant organization. In the description, list the project activities to be assigned to the staff.

B. Fringe Benefits

Estimate the total cost of fringe benefits for time spent on the project by individuals employed by the applicant organization in accordance with the applicant organization's established fringe benefits policy. In the description, list the approximate fringe benefit rate and types of benefits included in the applicant organization's established fringe benefits policy.

C. Travel

Estimate the total cost of project related travel for all personnel except those listed as contractual. In the description, briefly describe what type of travel might occur and why travel is necessary to accomplish the overall objectives of the project. Travel costs must comply with the rates established by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) available on the [GSA website](#), or the applicant organization's established travel policy. Reference pages 13-23 of the [Allowable and Unallowable Costs and Activities Table](#)

D. Supplies

Estimate the total cost to purchase supplies necessary to achieve project objectives. Supplies are items with an acquisition cost of less than \$10,000 per unit that are used exclusively for the objectives of the project. In the description, list the types of supplies that you might need to purchase. Describe why these supplies are needed to achieve project objectives. General use office supplies (paper, printer ink, pens, etc.), facilities costs (telephone, internet, etc.), and administrative costs are considered indirect and should not be included.

E. Contractual

Estimate the total cost of work on the project that will be performed by individuals/organizations other than the applicant (e.g., consultants, contractors, partner organizations, etc.). This amount should include all associated salary and wages, fringe benefits, travel, supplies, and other direct costs. In the description, explain the need and impact the contractor will have on the project.

F. Other

Estimate the total cost of all other project-related expenses. Expenses typically listed under category *G. Other* include registration fees to attend professional conferences, speaker/trainer fees, stipends, fees to publish in academic journals, fees for data collection and laboratory analysis, meeting space or equipment rentals, subscriptions, etc. In the description, provide a list of the specific expenses necessary to accomplish the project objectives.

G. SCBGP Funds Requested

Total SCBGP funds requested will automatically be calculated using the amounts requested for categories A through F. Please ensure that the total matches the award requested amount listed in the Application Summary section.

H. Program Income

Estimate the amount of income (if any) that may be generated by a supported activity or earned as a result of project funding. In the text box, explain how program income might be generated and how it will be used to further support the project. Program income must be spent on activities that support the goals and objectives of the project during the grant performance period and must comply with restrictions on allowable and unallowable costs and activities.

Budget	Scoring Criteria: Scoring will be based on the extent to which the budget is reasonable and appropriate to achieve the project purpose and the degree to which the project expenses will produce a measurable benefit to the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops in relation to each dollar spent.		
	0 points	3 points	5 points
Budget	The budget includes unallowable costs and/or is incomplete or impossible to understand due to errors.	The budget has minor errors or is unclear on how the budget items align with the project purpose, anticipated outcomes, and measurable benefit to the competitiveness of a Maine specialty crop(s).	The budget is free of errors and unallowable costs. The budget clearly aligns with the project purpose, anticipated outcomes, and measurable benefits to the competitiveness of a Maine specialty crop(s).

Phase I Concept Proposal Scoring Rubric

Phase I Concept Proposal Scoring Rubric	
Application Section	Maximum Points Available
Project Purpose	10
Program Priorities	8
Project Sustainability	4
Project Impact	10
Continuation of Project and Funding (Not scored but must be completed for the application to be considered complete.)	-
Outcome Measures	4
Work Plan	9
Budget	5
Total Base Points Available	50
Bonus Points	
5 bonus points may be awarded to applicants who fully articulate how the project aligns with and seeks to make meaningful and measurable change within Funding Area II: Access, Education, and Training	5
Total Available Points	55

Solicitation Process and Timeline

Phase I: Concept Proposal

The Department's SCBGP consists of a two-phase solicitation process. During Phase I, applicants must submit a Concept Proposal (i.e., an overview of their application) online using the link provided on the [SCBGP website](#) to answer all questions. The Department will review, score, and advise all Phase I applicants on the outcome of the Concept Proposal submitted. Phase I applicants will be selected based on their evaluation scores and the funds available to receive an invitation to Phase II.

Phase II: Grant Application

For Phase II, the highest-scoring Phase I applicants will be invited to submit a Grant Proposal (i.e., a more detailed description of their application) by answering all additional questions online using a link that will be provided. The Department will provide applicants with specific Phase II requirements, instructions, and the invitation to submit a Grant Proposal. Phase II applications will not be scored by the Department. Department staff will provide the technical assistance necessary to support Phase II applicants in preparing a proposal to be reviewed by the USDA AMS SCBGP staff. All applicants will be advised of the outcome of the USDA review process.

Schedule for Phase I: Concept Proposal

Phase I	Date
Release Request for Concept Proposals	October 28, 2025
Q & A Webinars	November 12, 2025, 9:00 a.m. November 24, 2025, 11:00 a.m. December 9, 2025, 2:00 p.m.
Written Questions Deadline	December 11, 2025
Concept Proposals Due	December 19, 2025, 5:00 p.m.

Schedule for Phase II: Grant Application (by invitation only)

Phase II	Date
Invitation to Submit Grant Proposals	February 2026
Grant Proposals Due	April 2026
Grant Proposals to USDA for Approval	May 2026

Schedule for Awards

Awards	Date
Announce and Award Funding	Fall 2026

Assistance and Questions

Q & A Webinars

Questions about the 2026 Maine SCBGP solicitation process must be submitted either in one of the Q & A webinars or in writing. The Department will conduct three Q & A webinars on the 2026 SCBGP solicitation process. Please visit the Maine [SCBGP website](#) for confirmed dates, times, and how to attend. All potential applicants are encouraged to participate in a webinar.

Responses to all questions received during the webinars will be posted to the [SCBGP website](#) according to the following schedule:

Anticipated Schedule for Q&A Webinars:

Questions Received During Webinar on:	Answers Posted by:
November 12, 2025, 9:00 a.m. EST	November 14, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST
November 24, 2025, 11:00 a.m. EST	November 26, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST
December 9, 2025, 2:00 p.m. EST	December 12, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST

Written Questions and Answers

Questions about the 2026 Maine SCBGP solicitation process must be submitted either in one of the Q & A webinars or in writing. Written questions about this RFA must be emailed to: specialtycropblockgrant@maine.gov with the subject line **SCBGP26 Questions**. Written questions sent to any other email address or sent without the required subject line may not receive a response.

Responses to written questions will be posted to the [SCBGP website](#) according to the following schedule:

Anticipated Schedule for Written Question:

Written Questions Received by:	Answers Posted by:
November 13, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST	November 14, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST
November 25, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST	November 26, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST
December 11, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST	December 12, 2025, 5:00 p.m. EST

The final deadline to submit written questions is December 11, 2025, at 5:00 p.m. EST.

To maintain the integrity of the competitive grant process, the Department is unable to advise and/or provide individuals with any information regarding specific proposals during the Phase I solicitation process.

Evaluation and Selection

Review Criteria

The Department intends to fund projects that will produce the highest degree of measurable benefit to the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops in relation to each dollar spent. Applicants' Concept Proposals will be evaluated on the criteria set forth in the [How to Apply on pages 5- 14](#) of this RFA.

Review Process

The Department will conduct two levels of review during the Concept Proposal process. The first level is an administrative review to determine if the application is complete and whether Concept Proposal requirements are met and, if applicable, assess an applicant's past grant performance. This level of review will result in a pass, fail, or pass with scoring qualifications related to prior performance. Ineligible, late, incomplete, or incorrectly formatted applications may be disqualified from team review.

The second level review will evaluate the merits of the Concept Proposal. The Department SCBGP evaluation team, composed of qualified reviewers, will score the applications received in accordance with the criteria defined in the RFA. The Department reserves the right to communicate and/or schedule interviews/presentations with Applicants to obtain clarification of information contained in the applications received. The Department may revise the scores assigned in the initial evaluation to reflect those communications and/or interviews/presentations. Changes to applications, including updating or adding information, will not be permitted after application submission or during any interview/presentation process, and therefore, Applicants must submit proposals that present their proposal and estimated budget as clearly and completely as possible.

Progress from Phase I to Phase II

The evaluation team will use a team approach to evaluate and score all Phase I applications in accordance with the criteria defined in this RFA. Applications will NOT be scored for writing quality, including grammar, spelling, and punctuation, provided that the applicant fully responds to each required application question and the writing quality does not obscure the meaning of the content of the application. Members of the evaluation team will first score the applications individually. Applications receiving a score of 30 points or less from each individual evaluator score may be determined ineligible to move forward. Then, the evaluation team will review both individual and average scores. The evaluation team will arrive at a consensus to assign final points for each application.

Based on the evaluation team's scoring and evaluation, invitations to submit a Phase II Grant Application will be made to a selection of Phase I applicants to be determined by the highest evaluation scores and the amount of funds available.

The evaluation team has the right to establish a minimum score required for selection to Phase II (e.g. only applications with a minimum score of 85). The minimum score only establishes an additional pass/fail threshold to inform the evaluation team's final recommendations and does not provide a guarantee that applicants scoring equal to or greater than the minimum score required will be recommended for an award.

Applicants will be selected for Phase II in the order of highest to lowest eligible score until available funds are exhausted, even if the lowest applicant score recommended is higher than the minimum qualifying score. Further, the Department withholds the right to retain all or a portion of available funds from this application period to be utilized for internally selected projects and/or future use rather than be awarded through this competitive RFA process.

Notification Procedure

- The evaluation of Phase I Concept Proposals will be completed no later than January 31, 2026.
- Phase I applicants will be informed in writing if they have been selected, or not selected, to move forward to Phase II by no later than February 7, 2026.
- Final decision-making authority for awarding grants rests with the Commissioner, based upon the grant criteria set forth by the grant solicitation and the recommendations of the Review Committee.
- The issuance of a grant solicitation or any grant award decision does not obligate the Department to make any award. Nor does it obligate the Department to make an award in the amount requested, provided that in such instances where the amount awarded is different than what was sought by the applicant, the Department will provide a written explanation for the record.
- The issuance of a grant solicitation or any grant award decision does not obligate the Department to make any award. Nor does it obligate the Department to make an award in the amount requested, provided that in such instances where the amount awarded is different than what was sought by the applicant, the Department will provide a written explanation for the record.
- Advancement to Phase II does not guarantee funding.

To ensure all communications are received, points of contact listed in the application should add specialtycropblockgrant@maine.gov to their email safe senders list, address book, or contact list.

Appendix A: Funding Areas and Focus Areas

The Department has developed three funding areas and five focus areas. In practice, Projects might seem to address elements from multiple funding and/or focus areas; however, applicants must select the one funding area and the one focus area that best identify the primary scope of their Project.

Funding Area I: Market Enhancement

Applications in this funding area will focus on increasing sales of Maine specialty crops through promotion of the unique qualities of specialty crops grown in Maine, developing new markets, increasing opportunities in existing markets, improving availability, and/or increasing demand. The Department will consider applications that enhance the marketability and long-term competitiveness of specialty crops by leveraging the unique qualities of specialty crops grown in Maine. Specifically, these proposals should seek to increase the awareness and consumption of specialty crop products through the development of markets (local, regional, institutional, national, and international) for all Maine producers through cooperative promotion and partnerships. Applicants awarded in this category must plan to report on changes in sales metrics resulting from the enhanced marketing activities.

Funding Area II: Access, Education, and Training

Proposals in this funding area will focus on improving the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops by increasing child and adult nutrition knowledge and consumption of Maine specialty crops through consumer education and/or training for producers and growers to equip them for current and future challenges in specialty crop production or food safety.

Note: This year's competitive funding area preference will be placed on Funding Area II: Access, Education, and Training. All applications proposing a project in this funding area will receive five (5) bonus points.

Funding Area III: Research

Proposals in this funding area will focus on improving the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops through projects that invest in specialty crop research, including research that focuses on conservation and environmental outcomes, pest and disease control, developing new and improved specialty crop seed varieties, and/or sustainable production practices.

Focus Areas (Maine Priority Areas)

Focus Area I: Local Food Consumption

Projects that impact the Maine Won't Wait Plan for Climate Action Plan efforts to strengthen Maine's food economy by increasing the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers to 30% by 2030

Focus Area II: Specialty Crop Production

Projects that pilot new specialty crop growing and/or harvesting innovations or test specialty crop production processes for a new production scale or market channel.

Focus Area III: Specialty Crop Resiliency

Projects that develop strategies and tools to help specialty crop producers increase resiliency amidst environmental challenges and/or natural disasters.

Focus Area IV: Specialty Crop Workforce Training

Projects that create and implement workforce training programs to develop and maintain the technical skills required to keep the specialty crops sector competitive.

Focus Area V: Specialty Crop Supply Chain

Projects that alleviate supply chain disruptions for specialty crop inputs, processing, or distribution.

Appendix B: Project Examples

Funding Area I: Market Enhancement

- A project that seeks to increase the sales of specialty crops through multi-commodity promotions that leverage the unique qualities of specialty crops grown in Maine.
- A project that creates economic opportunities for specialty crop producers through commodity content development and social media activities leveraging the unique qualities of specialty crops grown in Maine.
- Development of specialty crop marketing concepts that target the unique characteristics of Maine specialty crops in domestic and international markets.
- Development of marketing concepts that promote the nutrition and/or healthy lifestyle benefits of specialty crops grown in Maine.
- A project that develops relationships between specialty crop producers and institutional buyers or other specific new or enhanced market channels.

Funding Area II: Access, Education, and Training

- A project that will increase child nutritional knowledge through classroom education about Maine specialty crops.
- A project that will increase interest in and knowledge specialty crop production through experiential learning (such as school gardens).
- Development of training or demonstrations to educate families to increase the consumption of specialty crops in their diets.
- A project that will improve knowledge of the health benefits of specialty crops among children, seniors, and caregivers.
- A project that will strengthen the local food system in underserved communities by supporting production, distribution, access points, and consumption of specialty crops.
- A project to address “food deserts” with improved access to specialty crops at farmers' markets, corner stores, grocery stores, food hubs, or other systems.
- A project that seeks to utilize regional, local, or native crops to address disparities in access.
- A project to design and implement culturally appropriate business skills training for underserved specialty crop farmers.
- A project to recruit and train new specialty crop farmers in the skills for

sustainable food production.

- A project that builds partnerships between culturally relevant specialty crop producers and schools, food pantries, and/or community centers.
- A project that offers training to help specialty crop farmers to develop and implement sustainable farming practices and beneficial management practice tools that improve farm viability and the agricultural economy, as well as the environment.

Funding Area III: Research

- Research to develop new technologies to improve water use efficiency and drought resiliency (such as improving the water holding capacity of soil) in specialty crop production.
- Research to improve the environmental sustainability of specialty crop products through development of farming or processing methods that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- Projects that assist communities in implementing climate smart agriculture planning for specialty crops in Maine.
- Development of tools and programs that improve environmentally sustainable farming practices for specialty crop growers in Maine.
- Project that will enhance the speed and reliability of detection methods for pests affecting specialty crops.
- Development of new tools for the eradication of pests affecting specialty crops.
- Research to develop specialty crops resistant to pests and diseases.
- Research to develop secondary inspection and detection capacity for pests affecting specialty crops.
- Projects that ascertain the threat of pests and/or spread of threat to specialty crops.
- Projects that develop pest protocol programs for a subsector of specialty crops.

Examples of Unacceptable Projects

- Projects that are more relevant for other federal grant programs (e.g. the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, the Farmers market Promotion Program, the Local Food Promotion Program, and the Regional Food System Partnerships Program)
- A Project to purchase starter plants or equipment used to plant, cultivate, and grow a specialty crop to make a profit, or to expand production of a single business or organization.
- A Project of a non-profit organization to purchase produce to sell to other entities at cost or a higher price than the purchase price while competing with

other private companies who sell produce in the area.

- A sole proprietor requests grant funds to redesign their logo in order to make just their specialty crop value-added product stand out at the local farmers' market.
- A specialty crop organization requests grant funds to market its organization so that it can increase its membership.
- An organization requests grant funds to purchase food or services to donate to other recipients or organizations.
- An organization requests grant funds to provide training stipends to individuals in exchange for the individuals receiving education or training on specialty crop related topics. Small stipends designed to offset the cost of attending training may be allowed with sufficient justification. Stipends may not be provided solely for the benefit of the individual(s) receiving the stipend.

Appendix C: Outcome Measures

The USDA has specific performance measures for all Specialty Crop projects. Below is the list of outcomes that can be chosen. It is recommended that no more than two outcomes be chosen. Indicators will be chosen in Phase II.

Outcome 1: Increase Consumption and Consumer Purchasing of Specialty Crops

Outcome 2: Increase Access to Specialty Crops and Expanding Specialty Crop Production and Distribution

Outcome 3: Increase Food Safety Knowledge and Processes

Outcome 4: Improve Pest and Disease Control Processes

Outcome 5: Develop New Seed Varieties and Specialty Crops

Outcome 6: Expand Specialty Crop Research and Development

Outcome 7: Improve Environmental Sustainability of Specialty Crops

Please refer to [USDA Outcomes and Indicators](#) for a complete list of all outcomes and indicators and suggestions for data collection.

Appendix D: Requirements, Limitations, Provisions

Reporting Farm Bill and USDA Guidance

Authorization for this program was established under the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004 and continues under authorization from the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (commonly referred to as the “Farm Bill”). While the Department anticipates continued funding for the program as described in the 2018 Farm Bill, grant awards will only be offered if continuing authorization for the program is established and funds are made available by the USDA, AMS.

As of the date of this publication, the USDA has not provided the Department or any other state department of agriculture with a Request for Applications (RFA) or Terms and Conditions for the 2026 SCBGP. If necessary, the Department will prepare and make available a supplement to this document to advise applicants of any changes to the program upon receipt of guidance from the USDA. The Department and all applicants will be subject to the terms of the USDA.

Federal Cost Principles

Federal cost principles are regulations based on organization type used to determine allowable costs and ensure consistent treatment of costs. Applicants are responsible for identifying the federal cost principles appropriate to their organization, consistent application of cost principles to the SCBGP grant funds, and ensuring contractors or consultants comply with federal cost principle requirements.

- State, local, or Tribal governments; non-profit organizations; and colleges and universities will be subject to [2 CFR 200](#).
- For-profit organizations will be subject to [48 CFR Subpart 31.2](#)

Unallowable Costs

The USDA has developed an [Allowable and Unallowable Costs and Activities Table](#). The table provides overall guidance for the handling of common costs specific to this program. This list may be updated once the 2026 grant terms and conditions are published. Proposals with unallowable costs may be subject to disqualification as described below.

Indirect Costs

Indirect costs (also known as “facilities and administrative costs”) are costs incurred for common or joint objectives that cannot be identified specifically with a particular project, program, or organizational activity. Indirect costs are unallowable for this Maine program and will not be funded.

Travel

The maximum travel rates allowable are the rates in effect at the time of travel as established by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), available on the [GSA website](#) or the Recipient's established travel policy. Applicants without a formal travel policy, must apply the current government mileage rate for personally owned vehicles used for travel related to the project; this rate is available on the [IRS website](#).

Consideration should be given to the use of alternative technologies such as teleconferencing or videoconferencing if they are available, appropriate for the project, and less costly, particularly for international travel.

Note: International travel must comply with the [Fly America Act, 49 U.S.C. 40118](#) and [Foreign Travel Per Diem Allowances](#).

General Provisions

Communications

- From the time this RFA is issued until award notification is made, all contact with the State regarding this RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified on the [cover page](#) of this RFA. No other person/State employee is empowered to make binding statements regarding this RFA. Violation of this provision may lead to disqualification from the application process at the State's discretion.

Application Requirements and Understandings

- Applicants must complete and submit a Phase I Concept Proposal using the application link provided. Only applications received this way will be considered.
- All applications must adhere to the instructions and format requirements outlined in the RFA and all written supplements and amendments (such as the Summary of Questions and Answers) issued by the Department.
- Failure to use the instructions specified in this RFA, or failure to respond to all questions and instructions throughout the RFA and online application process, may result in the application being disqualified as non-responsive or receiving a reduced score. The Department and its evaluation team have sole discretion to determine whether a variance from the RFA specifications will result in either disqualification or a reduction in the scoring of an application.
- The online application will automatically save and can be reopened using the same link and computer. Once the application has been submitted, no changes can be made. Proof of timely submission is automatically recorded using an electronic date/time stamp generated when the application is successfully received.
- The Applicant will receive an email confirmation as proof of their submission.

- The Department will consider materials provided in the application, information obtained through interviews/presentations (if any), and internal Departmental information of previous contract history with the Applicant (if any). The Department also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the Applicant's experience and capabilities.
- The RFA and the awarded Applicant's application, including all appendices, attachments, or updated documents requested by the Department or the USDA will be the basis for the final contract, as determined by the Department.
- The Department, at its sole discretion, reserves the right to recognize and waive minor informalities and irregularities found in applications received in response to the RFA.
- There is no limit on the number of Concept Proposals an applicant may submit; however, each Concept Proposal must be for a distinct project.
- A project is a set of interrelated tasks with a cohesive, distinct, specified, and defined goal. It follows a planned, organized approach over a fixed period and within specific limitations (cost, performance/quality, etc.). Additionally, a project uses resources specifically allocated to the project's work and usually involves a team of people. Projects are different from other ongoing operations in an organization because, unlike operations, projects have a limited duration with a definitive beginning and end. A project will also have an overarching goal that the applicant wants to accomplish through a series of individual activities or tasks. This means it has unique goals, deliverables, and characteristics that set it apart from similar initiatives. Thus, it essentially signifies a unique undertaking with its own parameters and objectives.
- All applicable laws and requirements, whether or not herein contained, shall be included by this reference. It shall be the Applicant's responsibility to determine the applicability and requirements of any such laws, terms, conditions, and/or rules and to abide by them.

Award Determination

- Grant funds will not be awarded for projects that directly benefit or provide a profit to a single organization, institution, or individual. For example, the program will not fund a project to start or expand a farm or business venture.
- Grant funds cannot be used to compete unfairly with private companies that offer equivalent products or services.
- Projects must enhance the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops.
- Projects benefiting non-[specialty crops](#) will not be selected for funding.
- Projects must address one funding area and one focus area identified by the Department. To view these, reference [Appendix A, pages 19-20 of this RFA](#)

- Issuance of the RFA does not commit the Department to issue an award or to pay expenses incurred by an Applicant in the preparation of a response to the RFA. This includes attendance at personal interviews or other meetings, where applicable.

Disqualifications

The following may result in the disqualification of an application:

- Incomplete proposals: proposals with one or more unanswered questions or only minimal responses.
- Proposals that include activities outside the grant duration.
- Proposals for less than the minimum award amount or more than the maximum award amount.
- Proposals with unallowable costs or activities unnecessary to complete the project objectives.
- Proposals with budgets that include expenses that do not have a specific and direct project purpose.
- Proposals with indirect costs.
- Projects that do not demonstrate a likeliness to produce measurable benefit to the competitiveness of Maine specialty crops.
- A project whose products or services promote or provide profit that solely benefits a single organization, institution, or individual. Single organizations, institutions, and individuals are encouraged to apply as project partners.
- A project that requests grant funds to market its organization to increase membership.
- Projects that will compete unfairly with companies that provide equivalent products or services.
- Applications containing links to file-sharing sites or online file repositories will not be accepted as submissions.
- Encrypted attachments received that require opening attachments and logging into a proprietary system will not be accepted as submissions. It is the Applicant's responsibility to check with its organization's information technology team to ensure that security settings will not encrypt its application submission.
- Applicants must not provide additional attachments or online links beyond those specified in the RFA to extend their response. Additional materials not requested will not be considered part of the application and will not be evaluated. Include any forms provided in the submission package or reproduce those forms as closely as possible.

Appeal Rights

- An aggrieved applicant (Petitioner) may request an appeal hearing on a grant award decision by submitting a request for appeal to the Department Commissioner, in writing, no later than fifteen (15) calendar days from the date of the award decision (date applicant is notified if they have been selected, or not selected, to move forward to Phase II). The written request for appeal must identify one or more of the appeal indicators listed below and must describe the specific nature of the grievance. The Commissioner shall grant an appeal hearing unless it is determined that:
 - i. The petitioner is not an aggrieved person; or
 - ii. The written request for appeal was submitted more than fifteen (15) calendar days after notification of award.
- The burden of proof within the hearing of appeal lies with the petitioner. The evidence presented must specifically address and be limited to one or more of the following appeal indicators:
 - i. Violation of law.
 - ii. Irregularities creating fundamental unfairness; or
 - iii. Arbitrary or capricious award.
- Notice of the appeal proceeding shall follow the requirements of 5 M.R.S. § 9051-A(2) and be provided to those entities as determined applicable by the Commissioner. The notification must include the date and location of the hearing and the name of the Hearing Officer. Appeal proceedings may be held in person, virtually, or in a hybrid format at the discretion of the Hearing Officer. Failure to appear for a scheduled hearing may be grounds for default.

Appendix E: Phase I Concept Proposal Tips

To help ensure that an application is accurately submitted and well prepared for the evaluation committee, please consider the following advice when composing the Phase I Concept Proposal:

- Do not wait until the last minute to prepare or submit the application. Allow ample time for composition, questions and answers, proof reading, and submittal. Copy and paste the RFA Concept Proposal Questions and Scoring in a word processing document and compose your application there first so it can be checked for grammar, spelling, syntax, and overall clarity before entering it into the online application.
- Keep application responses clear and concise. Consider if a friend, family member, or application evaluator will be able to understand your application if they are unfamiliar with your business, organization, or industry?
- Double-check the project budget against the [Allowable and Unallowable Cost and Activates Table on pages 13-23](#) of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) General Terms and Conditions. Unallowable costs listed in the budget may result in disqualification.
- Attend the Q&A webinars and submit written questions according to the timeline provided in this RFA.
- Review the Q&As posted on the [SCBGP website](#) prior to submission.
- Double-check to ensure the most appropriate funding area and focus area have been selected for the project. Identifying the most appropriate area ensures applications are evaluated by reviewers with the most relevant expertise.
- Keep in mind that changes cannot be made after the application is submitted.

Appendix F: Terms/Acronyms with Definitions

AMS	The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is a division of the USDA that administers the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.
Application	A completed package containing all elements detailed in the RFA.
Department or DACF	Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry
GSA	U.S. General Services Administration
Indicators	The Agricultural Marketing Service lists measurable indicators for each possible project Outcome. Eligible projects must address at least one indicator for each relevant Outcome.
Indirect Costs	“Costs of doing business,” such as utilities, rent, and furnishings, are indirect costs, and may not be included in the project budget.
Outcomes	The Agricultural Marketing Service lists seven possible Outcomes (listed in Part IV of the RFA) that SCBGP projects may address. Eligible projects must address at least one AMS Outcome.
RFA	Request for Applications
SCBGP	Specialty Crop Block Grant Program
Specialty Crop	<u>Section 101 of the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004</u> (7 U.S.C. 1621 note) and amended under section 10010 of the Agricultural Act of 2014, Public Law 113-79 (the Farm Bill) <u>defines specialty crops</u> as “fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture).” Eligible plants must be cultivated or managed and used by people for food, medicinal purposes, and/or aesthetic gratification to be considered specialty crops. Processed products shall consist of greater than 50% of the specialty crop by weight, exclusive of added water.
State	State of Maine
USDA	United State Department of Agriculture