

Frequently Asked Questions for the Regional Innovation Strategies Program

***Updated August 20, 2015

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1. PROGRAM OVERVIEW

a) What is the objective of the Regional Innovation Strategies (RIS) Program?

The objective of the RIS Program is to make funding available for capacity-building activities that include proof of concept and commercialization programs and centers, including the scaling up of existing commercialization programs and centers, and supporting opportunities to close the funding gap for early-stage companies.

b) What are the two competitions being offered through this program?

Under this program, EDA is soliciting applications for two separate competitions:

- the 2015 i6 Challenge; and
- the Seed Fund Support (SFS) Grants competition (formerly the Cluster Grants for Seed Capital Funds competition in 2014).

c) What is the i6 challenge?

The i6 Challenge, in its fifth iteration, is a leading national initiative designed to support the creation of centers for innovation and entrepreneurship that increase the commercialization of innovations, ideas, intellectual property, and research into viable companies.

d) What is the Seed Fund Support (SFS) Grants Competition?

EDA SFS grants support the technical assistance, feasibility studies, marketing, and outreach related to the planning, formation, or launch of cluster-based seed capital funds to be deployed in support of innovation-based startups with a potential for high growth. These funds must be equity-based, thus, revolving loan funds or similar operations do not qualify.

e) Where can I find examples of past projects that qualified for these types of grants?

Information on past projects can be found on EDA's website at <http://www.eda.gov/oie/ris/>.

f) What is the anticipated duration for each project period?

For the i6 Challenge, the anticipated award will have an initial project period of three years with an estimated start date on or about 150 days after the October 5th application period deadline.

For the SFS competition, the anticipated award will have an initial project period of two years with an estimated start date on or about 150 days the October 5th application period deadline.

g) What is EDA's definition of a cluster?

EDA defines clusters as geographic concentrations of firms, workers, and industries that do business with each other and have common needs for talent, technology, and infrastructure. Clusters are essentially networks of similar, synergistic, or complementary entities that are engaged in or with a particular industry sector; have active channels for business transactions and communication; share specialized infrastructure, labor markets, and services; and leverage the region's unique competitive strengths to stimulate innovation and create jobs. Clusters may cross municipal, county, and other jurisdictional boundaries.

h) How do you define a rural community? *NEW*

For the purposes of these competitions, a “rural community” or “rural area” is any area OTHER THAN (i) a city or town that has a population greater than 50,000 inhabitants; and (ii) the urbanized area contiguous with and adjacent to such a city or town. The applicant organization need not necessarily be *located* in a rural community or rural areas, but, to qualify as offering services *primarily* to rural communities, a program or project must demonstrate that substantial benefits will accrue to individuals and firms that reside in rural communities.

2. ELIGIBILITY

a) Who is eligible to apply for funding?

1. a State;
2. an Indian tribe;
3. a city or other political subdivision of a State;
4. an entity that—
 - a. is a nonprofit organization, an institution of higher education, a public-private partnership, a science or research park, a Federal laboratory, or an economic development organization or similar entity; and
 - b. has an application that is supported by a State or a political subdivision of a State; or
5. a consortium of any of the entities described in subparagraphs (1) through (4).

Note that EDA is **NOT** authorized to provide grants or cooperative agreements to individuals.

b) Can previous i6 recipients be eligible for this competition?

Previous recipients may apply if their project period has closed, or will close, before the 2015 awards are made (estimated to be January 2016).

c) My organization has previously received an EDA grant; will that affect my eligibility for these new competitions?

No; however, the Grants Officer may take into consideration past performance on previous awards when making final selections.

d) What distress criteria must be met in order to be eligible to receive EDA funding?

Unlike EDA’s other programs authorized under the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965 (codified at 42 U.S.C §3121 et seq.), the RIS Program is authorized under Section 27 of the Stevenson-Wydler Technology Innovation Act (codified at 15 U.S.C. §3722) (Stevenson-Wydler), and does not require applicants to meet the distress criteria to be considered eligible.

e) Can projects contain construction activity?

There is no funding available for construction projects under this program, including projects related to the design or renovation of buildings.

f) What if an applicant’s region has a population greater than 50K (collectively), but the region is made up of multiple rural counties that have populations less than 50K. Are we still eligible to apply as a rural community? *NEW*

Yes, per section 1.h. above – applicants that serve multiple rural communities are eligible, as long as the majority of those services go toward rural communities.

3. APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION

a) Are applicants required to submit a separate application for each competition?

If you do plan to apply to more than one competition, you must submit a separate application packet for each competition. Applicants may, but are not required to, submit proposals for more than one competition under the RIS Program.

b) How do I obtain an application package?

An applicant may obtain the appropriate application package electronically at www.grants.gov (Grants.gov). Applicants may search for this funding opportunity on Grants.gov using Funding Opportunity Number EDA-HDQ-OIE-2015-2004566.

c) When is the deadline for submission and where do I submit the application package?

The closing date for receipt of applications for both competitions is October 5, 2015. Applications should be submitted electronically via www.grants.gov (Grants.gov) and must be received by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on Monday, October 5, 2015. EDA will not accept paper, facsimile or email transmissions of applications for this program.

Applications received after the closing date and time will not be considered for funding.

d) Are institutions limited to submitting one application per competition?

Applicants may submit applications to each competition (i6 and SFS) and there are no limits to the number of applications an organization may submit; however, applicants should clearly indicate that they are submitting multiple different proposals, rather than changes to a previously submitted application. If an applicant submits multiple versions of the same application, EDA will review only the most recently submitted application, unless otherwise requested in writing by the applicant. Organizations intending to submit multiple applications should also keep in mind that the Grants Officer will take into consideration the extent to which the project supports EDA's goals of geographic balance in distribution of program funds, project types, organizational type (including smaller and rural organizations), and the overall portfolio of awards when making final selections; therefore, multiple proposals for the same competition are not likely to be funded.

e) Can applications be submitted on paper and in person to an EDA Regional Office? ***NEW***

No, applications will only be accepted electronically through www.grants.gov (Grants.gov). Applicants are advised to carefully read the application and submission information provided in Section 4 of the FFO.

f) Are there restrictions on file names for any attachment I include with my application package? ***NEW***

Please limit file names to 50 characters and do not use special characters (example: &, -, *, %, /, #) in attachment names and application form fields (including periods (.), blank spaces, and accent marks) or attaching documents with the same name. An underscore (example: `my_Attached_File.pdf`) may be used to separate a file name. Please note that if these guidelines are not followed, your application may be rejected.

4. FUNDING AND MATCH

a) How much funding is available for the i6 Challenge competition?

The 2015 i6 Challenge will award up to \$8 million. Individual i6 grants will be no more than \$500,000, but have no lower limit.

b) How much funding is available for the SFS Grants competition?

The SFS Grants competition will award up to \$2 million. Individual SFS grants will be no more than \$250,000, but have no lower limit.

c) Can applicants apply for less than the grant maximum amount?

Yes, an applicant can apply for less than the maximum amount stated in the FFO. For example, SFS applicants may request \$125,000, or i6 applicants may request \$250,000, if their proposed project requires less funding than the grant maximum.

d) What is the minimum match required?

For these two competitions, the amount of an EDA grant may not exceed 50 percent of the total cost of each project. For example, if the total cost of the project is \$500,000 then EDA would contribute 50 percent of the project cost (\$250,000) and the recipients would be required to match those funds with an additional \$250,000.

Applicants must demonstrate a matching share (cash, in-kind, or a combination of cash and in-kind contributions) that is available, unencumbered, and committed to the project. Applicants should also consider the nature of the cash, as many federal grants cannot be considered as matching funds for other federal projects, but some exceptions do apply.

EDA may give preference to proposals with higher matching shares to further leverage federal funds and help ensure additional project impact.

e) What can be considered in-kind contributions?

In-kind contributions may provide the required non-Federal share of the total project cost and can consist of non-cash contributions directly related to the proposed project, such as space, equipment, or services. In general, the market value of the space can be used as in-kind contribution for the life of the project. The most common in-kind contributions are space (leasing a building, office space, meeting area) and/or in some cases personnel time/employee salaries that are directly related to the project.

f) Can an applicant's match be all in-kind contributions? ***NEW***

Yes, an applicant's match can be all in-kind contributions. Applicants should clearly state the breakdown of in-kind match in the budget narrative, including itemized valuations of any in-kind contributions (e.g. a staffing plan for personnel). However as noted in 4.d above, EDA will consider the nature of the contribution (cash or in-kind) and EDA may give preference to applications with higher matching shares.

g) Can Federal dollars be used as a match? ***NEW***

In most cases, other Federal grant dollars cannot be used as matching dollars for the RIS program. By definition, cost sharing or matching means the portion of project costs not paid by Federal funds, except where the Federal statute authorizing a program specifically provides that Federal funds made available for such program can be applied to matching or cost sharing requirements of other Federal programs. For additional questions, see the federal regulations for **Cost sharing and matching 2 C.F.R Part §200.306.**

h) For SFS grants, can capital currently invested or committed to a seed capital fund serve as matching funds to the federal grant dollars? ***NEW***

No, current investment funds, or capital committed to be invested, cannot serve as matching funds for this project. The non-federal share of this project is subject to the same guidelines of the Federal share, and EDA funds cannot be awarded as prize money or investments to private businesses. Please note that this does not prohibit a recipient from contracting out a portion of the scope of work. See section 5. part b. of these FAQs for more information on award procurement requirements.

i) Is there a limit on the indirect cost rate?

Indirect costs are allowable based on the rate approved by your cognizant agency. If applicants are new to the Federal grant process, or do not have a current indirect cost rate, we encourage them to discuss this process with their designated EDA regional point-of-contact (see 13.a.). EDA has experienced this to be one of the more technical parts of the budget plan, and strongly encourages applicants not to wait until the end of the application window to discuss this with their regional POC.

j) Does EDA allow program income to be considered a match or an addition to the award?

EDA does not allow for program income to be considered as match under RIS.

k) I know that for some EDA programs applicants may be eligible for a maximum investment rate of 80% based on relative need - is that the case with this program? ***NEW***

No. RIS is authorized under Stevenson-Wydler, which has different matching share requirements than other EDA programs and requires a strict 1:1 match, also referred to as 50% of the total project cost. For example, if you request \$400,000 in federal funds for the 2015 i6 program, you will need to match that request with a minimum of \$400,000, for a total project cost of \$800,000.

l) If our match cannot be committed for three years, can we apply for less money and a shorter time period? ***NEW***

This program has specific timeframes and project periods cannot be reduced:

- For the **i6 Challenge**, the anticipated award will have an initial project period of three years with an estimated start date on or about 150 days after the application closing date, October 5th.
- For the **SFS Grants** competition, the anticipated award will have an initial project period of two years with an estimated start date on or about 150 days after the application closing date, October 5th.

EDA expects all projects to proceed efficiently and expeditiously, and EDA expects applicants to clearly document a reasonable and appropriate timeline for the start and completion of the proposed scope of work.

Applicants are encouraged to apply for a level of funding that is appropriate considering their program needs and capabilities. While there is a maximum level of federal funding, there is no set minimum, other than what an applicant's matching capabilities determine.

m) When you say the match must be "unencumbered" and "unrestricted", how do you define each of these? ***NEW***

Under the FFO, applicants must demonstrate **AT THE TIME OF APPLICATION** a matching share from non-Federal sources (unless otherwise authorized by Federal statute) that will: (i) be **COMMITTED** to the project

for the project period, (ii) be AVAILABLE as needed, and (iii) NOT BE CONDITIONED OR ENCUMBERED in any way that may preclude its use consistent with the requirements of EDA investment assistance.

n) **What is the best way for an organization to document match commitments? *NEW***

Depending on the type of match proposed, the best way for an organization to document the source of matching funds is generally with a Letter of Commitment signed by an official who can bind the organization providing match. *Note:* the amount committed in the letter should match the budget narrative.

o) **Can matching funds come from non-profit organizations or only for-profit entities? *NEW***

Matching funds can be committed to the project from either non- or for-profit entities.

5. CO-APPLICANTS

a) **How do you determine who the co-applicant is and what forms are they required to submit?**

If another entity will be partnered with the lead applicant in the management of the grant, responsible for project outcomes, or will have direct access to the grant award funds in the form of direct transfers of the proceeds of the award, then that entity may be considered a co-applicant. For assistance identifying co-applicants, please reach out to your **regional point-of-contact** (See Section 8 of the FFO or last page of this document). Co-applicants are required to provide all the forms that the primary applicant must provide (see Section 4(b)(i) of the FFO), but the primary and co-applicants will share the project and budget narratives, and Form SF-424A Budget Information for Non-Construction Programs.

b) **What if my organization is planning on subcontracting out a portion of the work? Is the subcontractor considered a co-applicant?**

If your organization intends to enter into a contractual relationship to accomplish a discrete portion of the scope of work, then only the organization that remains responsible for the overall project is required to submit application forms and documents and the subcontractor would not be considered a co-applicant. However, the services to be retained will need to be acquired under an open and free competitive process that is in compliance with the procurement standards set out in the Uniform Administrative Requirements (see 2 C.F.R. §§ 200.317 – 200.326).

6. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON SEED FUND SUPPORT GRANTS

a) **How Is the SFS Grants Competition different from programs offered by the Small Business Administration (SBA)?**

While the SBA's Small Business Investment Company (SBIC) program funds ultimately pass to startup companies, funding awarded through the SFS Grants competition cannot. Instead, applicants may request funding to support the feasibility studies, planning, and formation of seed capital funding programs and direct supporting programs. Additional information about SBA's SBIC program can be found on SBA's website: <http://www.sba.gov>.

b) **Can we use the SFS Grants to support/market a revolving loan or other small loan program?**

The SFS competition supports programs that take an equity position in businesses in exchange for capital investments. Projects should focus on investing equity capital rather than debt, therefore loan or revolving loan programs would not meet that criteria and would not qualify for a grant. However, funds that deploy convertible notes as part of their investment strategy do qualify as equity-based, because those debt instruments are intended to convert to equity.

c) Can a non-profit applicant for the SFS Grants competition be associated with a for-profit fund?

Funds awarded through the SFS competition under 15 U.S.C. § 3722 can be used for activities of the non-profit applicant that support the “feasibility, planning, formation, or launch” of a cluster-based seed capital fund. Where a for-profit seed capital fund will be supported, funds going to the non-profit applicant cannot be used to augment the seed capital fund or pass-thru to the for-profit entity. EDA, in its discretion, reserves the right to request additional information and documentation from the non-profit applicant to examine the relationship between the non-profit applicant and the for-profit seed capital fund.

7. APPLICATION PACKAGE

a) What Is Required for a Complete Application??

In order to be considered for funding, applicants must submit a complete application package for each competition to which they are applying that includes all required documents outlined under the FFO's Section 4(b)(i), in addition Appendix C of the FFO contains an *Optional Checklist-style Guide for Required Documents*.

b) The FFO indicates that a 1-2 page resume should be included for each key personnel involved in the project. Are these resumes included in the 12-page maximum?

Key personnel resumes can be uploaded as an attachment to the Grants.gov application and are not included in the project narrative. The project narrative, however, should include an overall description of personnel roles, activities, deliverables, and overall purpose.

c) The FFO indicates that applicants must include a budget narrative, but the required SF-424A Budget Information Non-Construction Programs form seems to cover that information – are those the same?

No, the Budget Narrative is different from Form SF-424A (*Budget Information for Non-Construction Programs*) and both are required. Form SF-424A requires the applicant to identify and provide a cost estimate for each budget line item. In contrast, in the budget narrative, which must be included in the project proposal, the applicant should provide a clear budget justification of each line item and describe how each budget category will be used to support the proposed project. The budget narrative should be no longer than two pages. Applicants are strongly encouraged to review the “Application and Submission Information” section in the FFO for further guidance.

d) Should we hire a professional grant writer for these grants? ***NEW***

Whether you hire a professional grant writer for this grant proposal is entirely up to your organization. Please note: **ANY** costs incurred prior to award **CANNOT** be charged to the project.

e) Are there any samples of problem statements, narratives, and budget that have been successful and can be a reference for us? ***NEW***

EDA cannot distribute previously submitted applications, but we encourage applicants to visit EDA's website for information on the 2010-2012 i6 challenge and 2014 RIS awardees.

f) What documentation is required to show that “an application is supported by a State or a political subdivision of a State;”? ***NEW***

A signed letter from an authorized representative of a State or a political subdivision of a State official is sufficient to document this requirement. EDA may, in its sole discretion, request additional information to verify State or political subdivision support.

8. OPTIONAL PRE-SUBMISSION TECHNICAL REVIEW

a) Can I receive technical assistance on my grant proposal?

OIE partnered with project officers from all six regional offices who are available to provide technical assistance to prospective recipients. They will be available to discuss applications in general terms; however, they cannot assist you in a manner that may be perceived as providing an unfair competitive advantage over other applicants. Additionally, they will not be able to provide any assessment of the project's competitiveness.

b) What is the optional pre-submission technical review?

Applicants may submit a copy of their application and receive feedback on their application before the deadline. Applicants who submit complete applications for pre-submission technical review will be informed whether their application is technically complete. EDA staff will attempt to provide pre-submission technical review within two weeks of receipt of a request thereof; however, such review is not guaranteed, may not be comprehensive, and does not guarantee or suggest that the final submitted application will be forwarded to a Merit Review Panel or selected for funding. Applicants are strongly encouraged to seek this technical feedback from EDA no later than August 31, 2015, in order to allow adequate time to address any technical issues before final submission.

c) The deadline for pre-submission review is Aug 31, but the application deadline is Oct. 5 why such a short deadline? ***NEW***

The August 31st deadline is just for the optional pre-submission review of the application package, however applicants may ask technical questions to EDA on an ongoing basis.

9. PROJECT EVALUATIONS

a) How are applications reviewed?

Applications will be reviewed based on the process outlined in Section 5(a) of the FFO, using the evaluation criteria outlined below and in detailed in Sections 5(a)(i) (for i6 Challenge applications) and 5(a)(ii) (for SFS Grant competition applications).

b) What are the evaluation criteria for the i6 Challenge competition?

For the 2015 i6 Challenge, the following five factors will be considered, totaling a maximum of 100 possible points: Approach (20 points), Planning & Feasibility (30 points), Personnel & Resources (20 points), Sustainability (10 points), and Impact (20 points).

c) What are the evaluation criteria for the SFS Grants competition?

For the SFS Grants competition, the following five factors will be considered, totaling a maximum of 100 possible points: Focus & Structure (15 points), Planning & Feasibility (20 points), Personnel & Resources (20 points), Community & Infrastructure (20 points), and Impact (25 points).

10. AWARD NOTIFICATIONS

a) How are applicants notified if they are selected for a grant under the RIS Program?

After the Grants Officer selects the applicants to receive grants, notification of the awards will be issued. The grant award notification (via Form CD-450) will be transmitted to the selected applicant electronically through Grants Online. This form must be electronically signed in Grants Online, without modification, by an authorized representative of the selected applicant and submitted back to EDA within 30 days after

receipt. Unsuccessful applicants will be notified that their application was not selected for funding via e-mail.

b) Will EDA provide any feedback on unsuccessful grant applications? *NEW*

On May 28, 2015, OIE hosted a 2014 RIS Debrief webinar to provide general insight on application trends, technical issues and provide guidance on ways to improve applications. A link to this webinar can be found on the [RIS webpage](#) under the 2014 RIS Program Competition labeled **2014 RIS Applicant Debrief**.

OIE may conduct a similar webinar after the 2015 RIS application round is complete and awards are announced.

11. FUTURE RIS GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

a) We've just learned of the i6 grant opportunity. We want to submit a quality application but don't feel we can do that by the Application Deadline. Will this funding opportunity be offered again?

Unfortunately, we will not know the answer to this question until Congress has appropriated funding to EDA for the 2016 fiscal year.

12. INFORMATIONAL WEBINAR

b) Will EDA conduct an informational webinar?

EDA will conduct two informational webinars:

Regional Innovation Strategies Program –Webinar for **All** Prospective Applicants will take place on August 13th at 4 p.m. EDT. Watch the [RECORDING HERE](#).

Regional Innovation Strategies Program – Webinar for **Rural-focused** Prospective Applicant will take place on August 18th at 2:30 pm EST. Click [HERE](#) to register.

Links to recordings of these webinars will be made available on the [OIE website](#).

13. CONTACT US

a) What is the easiest way to contact the Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship (OIE)?

If you require additional information, please contact OIE by email at oie@eda.gov and/or reach out to your regional points-of-contact (listed below),

Regional Office	RO RIS POC(s)	Email	Phone
Atlanta	Robin Cooley	RCooley@eda.gov	(803) 253-3640
Austin	Chris Rys	crys@eda.gov	(512) 381-8157
Chicago	Bill Warren	wwarren@eda.gov	(312) 789-9758
Denver	Justin Fazzari	jfazzari@eda.gov	(303) 844-4089
Philadelphia	Chivas Grannum	cgrannum@eda.gov	(215) 316-2759
Seattle	Brian Parker	bparker2@eda.gov	(206) 220-7675