Guidelines for Seeking *Center of Excellence* Status in USDA Proposals

Complied March 12, 2021

**Background**

Following a mandate established by Congress in the 2018 Farm Bill, the USDA is required to offer competitive funding priority to Centers of Excellence (COE). COE status is available in the following programs:

* Agriculture and Food Research Initiative – Foundational and Applied Science; Sustainable Agricultural Systems
* Aquaculture Research
* Biomass Research and Development Initiative
* Biotechnology Risk Assessment Research Grants Program
* Children, Youth, and Families at Risk
* Crop Protection/Pest Management
* Farm Business Management and Benchmarking
* Farm Safety and Youth Farm Safety Education and Certification
* Methyl Bromide Transition
* Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative
* Organic Transition Program
* Rural Health and Safety Program
* Specialty Crop Research Initiative

The following characterizes the program as it is relevant to grant proposals

*PRIORITY CONSIDERATION After all eligible applicants have been competitively peer reviewed and ranked in accordance with the program’s standard evaluation criteria, priority in funding will be provided to applications determined to have met the criteria for centers of excellence. Applications that rank as highly meritorious and request consideration as centers of excellence will be further evaluated by peer panels to determine whether they have met the support criteria described above. In instances where they are found to be equally meritorious with applications that are not determined to be centers of excellence, selection for funding will be based on peer review and weighed in favor of applicants meeting centers of excellence criteria. NIFA will effectively use the centers of excellence prioritization to ensure these most critical research, education, and extension initiatives are being supported.*

**Justification for consideration as a Center of Excellence should be added as a brief section within the project narrative, and will count against any page limits placed on that narrative.**

There are several elements that *must be* included within this statement:

• The ability of a center of excellence to ensure coordination and cost effectiveness by reducing unnecessarily duplicative efforts regarding research, education, and extension.

• The ability of a center of excellence to leverage available resources by using public-private partnerships among agricultural industry groups, institutions of higher education, and the federal government, in addition to any applicable matching requirements. Resources leveraged should be commensurate with the size of the award.

• The planned scope and capability of a center of excellence to implement teaching initiatives to increase awareness and effectively disseminate solutions to target audiences through extension activities.

• The ability or capacity of a center of excellence to increase economic returns to rural communities by identifying, attracting, and directing funds to high-priority agricultural issues.

The following *should be* included within this statement where applicable:

• Describe proposed efforts to improve teaching capacity and infrastructure at colleges and universities, including land-grant colleges and universities, certified non-land-grant colleges of agriculture, cooperating forestry schools, and schools of veterinary medicine.

**Template for Center of Excellence Justification Status**

The [UMaine entity] seeks recognition as a Center of Excellence for the [field of excellence]. [Entity] has a demonstrated capacity of coordinating research, education, and extension efforts and has ensured cost effectiveness and eliminated duplicative efforts. This has been documented in multiple federal [and state?] grants and programs, conducted over [time duration]. [Entity] has longstanding relationships with vital stakeholders in [field of excellence]. These include proven partnerships with [name relevant state and/or federal agencies], [name agricultural producers or industry groups], [name other research institutions]. [Entity] is well-equipped to leverage these resources to meet any matching requirements, to ensure the rapid dissemination of appropriate products, and to strengthen the productive capacity of [field of excellence]. Key stakeholder education, long a part of [Entity’s] place within Maine’s flagship land grant institution’s mission, will continue to be conducted for the duration of the requested support. The [characterize Extension] resources available to [Entity], ensure that solutions developed within this program will be rapidly conveyed to [name stakeholders/roles/groups]. Promoting the economic wellbeing of rural communities is of central importance to [Entity]. Selection for this funding opportunity will contribute to the economic vitality of Maine’s rural communities and high-priority agricultural issues facing the region. [IF APPLICABLE : Support through this program, as a Center of Excellence, will allow [Entity] to continue developing the educational infrastructure of the UMaine and UMaine Cooperative Extension ecosystem. [Entity] has conducted [name educational activity], which serves to advance the teaching-and-learning environment available to [Entity’s core student constituencies].