

OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

for the

SARE PROGRAM

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

Authorized in

Subtitle B, Chapter XVI

Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990

Amended in

Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996

And

Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008

And

Agricultural Act of 2014

National Institute of Food and Agriculture  
United States Department of Agriculture  
Washington DC, 20250-2200

Revised 9 March 2021

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## OVERVIEW

### Background

The program that is now known as Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) was first authorized as Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) in the Food Security Act of 1985. Implementation was begun in 1988 when Congress first appropriated funds for the program.

In 1990, LISA was changed to SARE upon enactment of Title XVI of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990 (FACTA). Subtitle B of Title XVI authorized research and education programs in Sustainable Agriculture under three chapters. Chapter 1 (“Best Utilization of Biological Applications”) authorized the overall program structure of regional Administrative Councils (AC) and host institutions, and competitive grants for research and extension. It also authorized a Federal-State matching grant program (7USC 5813) which has not yet been funded nor implemented. Chapter 2 authorized a program of integrated resource management which has never been funded nor implemented, and is not addressed in these guidelines. Chapter 3 (“Sustainable Agriculture Technology Development and Transfer Program”) authorized Technical Guides and Handbooks that are produced by SARE Outreach, and a National Training Program that has been implemented as the SARE Professional Development Program (PDP).

The United States Code, Title 7, sections 5801 to 5832, contain the SARE statutory language (<http://uscode.house.gov/browse/prelim@title7/chapter88/subchapter1&edition=prelim>).

Part A, sections 5811-5814, contains the Research and Extension (R&E) provisions often referred to as “Chapter 1.” Part C, sections 5831 and 5832, contains the provisions for publication of technical guides and handbooks and the PDP program often referred to as “Chapter 3.” References in this document in the form of “(7 USC xx)” refer to this code.

As a program of USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), SARE adheres to regulations and procedures relevant to the agency and USDA, most notably the Uniform Guidance, (2CFR 200 - UNIFORM ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS, COST PRINCIPLES, AND AUDIT REQUIREMENTS FOR FEDERAL AWARDS) which specifies procedures for grants and cooperative agreements.

The purpose of these guidelines is to be a reference to describe program requirements as well as procedures which have evolved to help operate the program. They do not supersede any statutory or regulatory requirements. These guidelines are meant to replace previous versions of the guidelines.

### Definition and Purpose

Sustainable agriculture is defined (7 USC 3103(19)) as an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long-term:

1. satisfy human food and fiber needs;
2. enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends;
3. make the most efficient use of non-renewable and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls;
4. sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and
5. enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole.

The purpose of the SARE program (7USC 5801(a)) is to encourage research designed to increase our knowledge concerning agricultural production systems that:

1. maintain and enhance the quality and productivity of the soil;
2. conserve soil, water, energy, natural resources, and fish and wildlife habitat;
3. maintain and enhance the quality of surface and ground water;
4. protect the health and safety of persons involved in the food and farm system;
5. promote the well-being of animals;
6. increase employment opportunities in agriculture.

### **Operating Principles**

These Operational Guidelines outline a coordinated process for administering Chapter 1 (R&E; 7 USC 5811-14) and Chapter 3 (PDP; 7 USC 5831-5832) in a manner that makes the results of research programs available to the entire United States agricultural and food community.

These guidelines are based on the principle that the goals of sustainable agriculture will be most effectively attained through regional mechanisms that include a diversity of committees, programs, projects and participants. The guidelines provide for involvement of public and private sectors in a coordinated multi-organizational management plan. The management plan is designed to enhance partnerships among farmers and ranchers, non-profit organizations, agribusiness, academia, and Federal and state government, resulting in productive agricultural systems that are socially, economically, and environmentally sound.

### **Regional Innovation in Program Delivery**

The regional structure of SARE fosters place-based creativity for the development and implementation of grants and other program activities, within the guidelines established by the authorizing legislation. While fulfilling the primary goals of the national program, each region can develop unique approaches that are customized to meet the needs of its people, landscape, and agricultural enterprises. These approaches may or may not be adopted by other regions, depending on their efficacy and applicability. Regional innovation and cross-region communication strengthen the SARE program by developing effective ‘best management practices’ derived from making grants and delivering information to diverse audiences across a wide variety of locations and contexts.

### **Management Structure**

The SARE program is a national program that is implemented regionally. It is managed cooperatively by USDA-NIFA in conjunction with a regional AC, a host institution, a regional R&E coordinator (RC), and a regional PDP coordinator (RCPDP) in each of four regions. The program also includes PDP coordinators in each state, also known as State Coordinators.

### **USDA-NIFA Responsibilities (7 USC 5812(a))**

The USDA responsibilities are conducted by NIFA on behalf of the Secretary of Agriculture. The National Program Leader for Sustainable Agriculture in NIFA serves as the SARE Director. The program has a regional structure (7 USC 5812(a)(2)) wherein USDA shall establish a minimum of four regional ACs. ACs have been established in the North Central, Northeast, South, and Western regions. At its discretion, USDA may establish additional regional ACs.

USDA shall, in conjunction with these regional ACs, identify the regional host institutions required to carry out the program and projects. NIFA also maintains a cooperative agreement for a National Reporting, Coordination, and Communications Office (NRCCO).

NIFA works through the regional host institutions to implement the PDP program. The host institutions contract with the RCPDP's home organization to provide leadership and oversight of the PDP activities in their regions.

Operations Committee: The NIFA SARE Director chairs the Operations Committee which oversees national activities, facilitates program implementation, and promotes cross regional sharing in consultation with other Federal agencies. The purpose of the Operations Committee is to allocate annual funding among the regional and national activities, to share information about program activities in each region, and to coordinate policies, procedures, and communications across and among regions. The Operations Committee convenes twice yearly, either in person or by virtual meeting. Voting members include the four RCs, the four RCPDPs, the four AC Chairs, the National SARE Director or alternative NIFA representative, and one representative from each of the following: USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS), US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and an 1890 institution. Voting members may be represented by designees with prior notification and approval of the NIFA SARE Director.

## **REGIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCILS**

The enabling legislation requires a minimum of four Regional ACs and specifies the core membership and responsibilities for these councils.

### **AC Membership**

The Regional AC membership is specified by the enabling legislation (7 USC 5812(b)(1)). Thus, each Regional AC is required to include the following representation:

1. Agricultural Research Service
2. NIFA
3. State Cooperative Extension Services
4. State Agricultural Experiment Station
5. Natural Resources Conservation Service
6. State Departments engaged in sustainable agriculture programs
7. Nonprofit organizations with demonstrable expertise
8. Farmers using systems and practices of sustainable agriculture
9. Agribusiness
10. State or United States Geological Survey
11. Other persons knowledgeable about sustainable agriculture and its impact on the environment and rural communities.

The original list included several Federal organizations that have since consolidated or changed names. Each region, with concurrence from NIFA, may choose to add additional representatives to their council. For example, each region now includes a representative from the Environmental Protection Agency and has expanded their Regional AC beyond the required representation to be inclusive of additional perspectives such as rural sociology, additional producer representatives, or minority serving institutions.

In concurrence with NIFA, the ACs established by USDA are to be primarily self-sustaining with the requirements that each AC has and follows specific membership nomination processes, specific term lengths and limits, and that opportunities for nominations for any open position on the AC are widely and appropriately publicized.

### **AC Responsibilities (7 USC 5812(b)(2))**

The regional ACs work in conjunction with the regional host institution and NIFA. The ACs are responsible for guiding the regional implementation of the SARE program including allocating resources among project types and evaluating and selecting individual proposals for funding. The specific responsibilities of the ACs are:

1. Promote the SARE program at the regional level
2. Establish goals and criteria for the selection of projects within the applicable region
3. Appoint a Technical Committee (TC) to evaluate proposals to be considered by the AC
4. Review and act upon the recommendations of the TC and coordinate its activities with the regional host institution
5. Prepare and make available an annual report concerning regional activities in sustainable agriculture together with an evaluation of the project activity.

In practice the regional ACs have found that the TCs provide a very good opportunity to orient potential AC members to the function and demands of the AC. For this reason it is advisable that the opportunity to serve on the TC also be widely and appropriately publicized.

The regional ACs may also coordinate with NIFA to review both the R&E and the PDP programs (see Appendix A) to determine if performance expectations are being met.

## **REGIONAL HOST INSTITUTIONS**

The regional host institutions have the operational responsibility to conduct competitive grants programs and other activities on behalf of NIFA and their AC. Each regional host institution employs a RC and employs or contracts with other persons as necessary to carry out the responsibilities of the program.

### **Host Institution Responsibilities**

The regional host institutions, through the RC, convene AC meetings and provide staff support to implement the SARE program in each region. They enter into cooperative agreements with NIFA to carry out the competitive grants programs and other activities specified by the AC, including the awarding and oversight of sub-awards to grant recipients.

Cooperative Agreements with NIFA: Cooperative agreements are awarded to the host institutions based on proposals submitted to NIFA in response to a Request for Applications (RFA) that NIFA publishes each year based on the program's actual or anticipated annual appropriations. These cooperative agreements are subject to the requirements of the Uniform Guidance (2CFR 200 - UNIFORM ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS, COST PRINCIPLES, AND AUDIT REQUIREMENTS FOR FEDERAL AWARDS) and the terms and conditions of the NIFA Awards Management Division (AMD). The cooperative agreements and grants include "streamline" provisions for most SARE regional programs such that the process of soliciting, reviewing, and selecting proposals and administering sub-awards may be conducted at the regional level rather than being done directly by NIFA.

Streamlining Agreements: Cooperative agreements are awarded annually by NIFA as new agreements with a maximum 5-year time period. Cooperative agreement proposals submitted in response to the annual RFA should include a Regional administrative budget and budget justification and a list of all AC members including their term and year in that term. Each

competitive grant sub-award program (e.g. Research and Education Grants, Producer Grants, and PDP) should include budgeted amounts, call(s) for proposals, a description of the technical review process, and a list of technical reviewers. It should also include work plans and budget justifications for any projects or activities awarded non-competitively. After AC approval of the projects for the “streamlined” competitive grant programs, a list of the funded projects should be sent to NIFA in the subsequent year’s proposal.

### **The Professional Development Program (PDP)**

As part of the cooperative agreement with NIFA, the regional host institutions currently contract with the RCPDP’s home organizations to provide leadership and oversight of the PDP activities in their regions.

Although the National Training Program created in Chapter 3 (7USC 5832) does not stipulate any AC authority for the PDP program, NIFA has implemented the program by working through the regional host institutions with guidance by the regional ACs so that the PDP is implemented as an integral component of the regional SARE program.

Funding for the PDP (Chapter 3) activities used to come as a single appropriations line, separate from the R&E (Chapter 1) activities. In 2014, funding for the two programs was combined into a single appropriations line under R&E. The 2014 and all subsequent annual appropriations have included the stipulation that NIFA continue both program activities. The 75%/25% ratio between the Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 activities in 2014 is an appropriate target ratio to maintain.

### **Replacing Host Institutions**

As the sponsoring agency for the SARE program, NIFA will periodically require, a competition for the host institution. NIFA held an open competition in 2018, the first since the program’s inception, for the opportunity to serve as a regional host institution for five years (2018-2023). Since this was the first competition for host institutions, further details about the process used in 2018 are provided in Appendix D.

Based on the experience in 2018, the process outlined below will be used to select a host institution when NIFA requires a competition to occur, if NIFA in conjunction with the regional AC determines that a new host institution is needed, or if the current host institution decides to relinquish its role.

1. NIFA, in cooperation with the AC, will initiate an open competition for a host institution within the region (or as part of a process of competing all four regional host institutions). Any organization that meets the eligibility requirements and can demonstrate the capacity to fulfill NIFA’s program management requirements can submit proposals.
2. As with the 2018 RFA, NIFA will solicit stakeholder input prior to releasing an RFA to select the host institutions. The RFA will describe the application requirements, the rating criteria, and the selection process that would include coordinated reviews by both the ACs and NIFA. At a minimum, a host institution proposal must include the name and qualifications of the proposed RC and RCPDP, a management plan for the program, and a detailed transition plan, along with any other information requested by the AC or NIFA.
3. Completed applications will be shared with the appropriate regional ACs to be rated independently by each council member followed by a discussion by the full AC to create a collective rating. (Note: members of the ACs are expected to abide by NIFA confidentiality requirements in relation to proposal evaluations). All individual AC member comments as well as the summary of the full AC discussion for each proposal

will be packaged for review by an expert peer review panel convened by NIFA. NIFA's expert panel will follow established procedures, with selection of an external panel manager and other highly qualified reviewers. The panel members will review and rate each application independently, review AC comments, and convene as a full panel to discuss and rank all proposals received for each of the four regions.

4. The AC and the NIFA expert panel will collectively identify up to three applicants from each region to interview. Both the AC and the NIFA expert panel will participate in the virtual interviews in a manner that will not disclose the identity of the NIFA expert panel members. A summary of the AC's discussion of each interview will be shared with the NIFA expert panel. The expert panel will discuss the interviews, give a final ranking, and make a recommendation to NIFA's SARE Director about which applicant to select in each region.
5. Based on the proposal reviews, interviews, and recommendation from the expert panel, the NIFA SARE Director, in cooperation with the AC, will make a recommendation to NIFA leadership regarding selection of a host institution.
6. If a change is made in the host institution, the newly appointed host institution will assure sufficient overlap with the outgoing host institution, as well as the PDP organization, to maintain program integrity.

### **Replacing the Regional Coordinator**

When the RC resigns by choice or at the request of the AC following a formal review process, NIFA, in conjunction with the AC, shall work with the host institution to solicit candidates internally or through an external search, or to initiate a search for a new host institution. Searches for a new RC will be conducted in a manner that is in line with the host institution's HR policies.

The Dean/Director at the current host institution may first seek one or more internal candidates to be screened by a search committee which should include the NIFA SARE director and one or more AC members. If no internal applications are put forward or none of the internal candidates are acceptable to NIFA and the AC, the Dean/Director shall form a new search committee and conduct a national search following the host institution's HR policies. This committee shall include the same representation as described above and may or may not include members from the original committee.

If one of the candidates, either from the host institution or a national search, is acceptable to NIFA and the AC, the host institution should strive for sufficient overlap between the appointments of the incoming and outgoing RCs to maintain program continuity.

If neither search process for a new RC (at the current host institution or through a national search) is successful, a search for a new host institution and RC may be initiated and the search for a new host institution will follow the established process for competitive selection of host institutions.

### **Replacing the Regional PDP Coordinator**

When a RCPDP resigns by choice or at the request of the AC following a formal review process, the RC, in conjunction with the AC, will initiate the search for a replacement and include the chair of the AC, the RC, NIFA's SARE Director, and, if desired, other members of the AC in the selection process. In situations where there is more than one RCPDP in a region, the search may be to replace the responsibilities of just the resigning coordinator. The position should be advertised at the regional or national level, and the applicants should identify an institution within the region that will be willing to host them and include a letter of support from that institution in their application package.

## **Qualifications for the RC and the RCPDP**

The RC and the RCPDP must have a demonstrated understanding of sustainable agriculture principles and practices. They must also have significant professional experience in the area of sustainable agriculture, as an educator, researcher, and/or administrator. They must be committed to engaging with a diversity of views and be able to communicate with a wide range of stakeholders. They must have strong organizational and people management skills. They must be employed by a college, university, or other non-profit institution with an educational and/or scientific mission related to agriculture. The institution where the RC works must have demonstrated capacity to serve as the fiscal agent for the regional program including management of a large number of subawards. They should be respected members of their institution and professional community. PDP coordinators must have a strong record of effective outreach in the agricultural community.

## **Miscellaneous**

Indirect Costs: The allowable indirect cost rate is specified in the annual appropriations bill.

No-Cost Extensions – By convention SARE cooperative agreements are now written for five years. No extension can be granted beyond five years from the initial starting date.

Sub-Awards: The host institution must supply the same Terms and Conditions to the sub-awards that are issued under the cooperative agreements. The host institution may include additional requirements providing that all NIFA requirements remain in place.

For additional information and interpretation regarding terms and conditions and Uniform Federal Assistance Regulations, contact Mark Heap (816-926-7019; [Mark.Heap@usda.gov](mailto:Mark.Heap@usda.gov)) or Janette Jensen (816-926-2629; [Janette.Jensen@usda.gov](mailto:Janette.Jensen@usda.gov)) who are with NIFA's Awards Management Division (AMD). Copy emails to [awards@nifa.usda.gov](mailto:awards@nifa.usda.gov).

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST POLICY**

The authorizing legislation states that a member of the AC or the TC may not participate in the discussion or recommendation of proposed projects if the member has or had a professional or business interest in, including the provision of consultancy services, the organization whose grant application is under review (7 USC 5812(b)(3)). At a minimum, each region's Conflict of Interest (COI) policy should align with that used by NIFA's Agricultural and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) although a more stringent policy can be adopted by individual ACs if desired.

To avoid any COI, a member of the AC, TC, any AC appointed committees or panels, or staff may not review or participate in the discussion or recommendation regarding any competitive grant proposal with any of the following characteristics:

1. From that member's institution or organization;
2. From institutions or organizations for which he/she acts as a paid consultant, or board member;
3. From applicants for whom he/she has served as a thesis advisor (or advisee) or postdoctoral advisor (or advisee); for thesis committee members the restriction is three years from the time the degree was awarded;
4. From applicants with whom he/she has served as a collaborator on a research proposal or publication within the past three years;

5. From applicants for whom he/she has acted as a paid consultant within the past three years;
6. From applicants for whom he/she will be a project participant during the current grant cycle;

In addition:

7. The members of the AC, TC, OC, any AC-appointed committees or panels, or regional and national staff may not be listed as participants on competitive grant proposals under consideration by the committee or panel on which the person serves when they could potentially gain monetary benefits to themselves or their program (benefits do not mean compensation for travel or per diem);
8. The statement applies to current members. Those wanting to submit proposals must resign their memberships.

Process:

1. During the discussion or recommendation of proposed projects, any members with a conflict of interest must leave the room. This applies to the regional coordinators and senior staff.
2. Discussion and recommendations should involve individual projects. When a large slate of projects (for example the farmer grants) is being voted upon -- and individual projects are not being discussed -- members with a conflict of interest do not need to leave the room.

## **RESEARCH AND EDUCATION GUIDELINES (Chapter 1)**

### **Purpose and Scope**

Under Chapter 1 (7 USC 5811), USDA is to enter into agreements to conduct research and extension projects to obtain data, develop conclusions, demonstrate technologies, and conduct educational activities that promote the following purposes:

1. Facilitate and increase scientific investigation and education in order to:
  - a. reduce to the extent feasible and practicable, the use of chemical pesticides, fertilizers, and toxic natural materials in agricultural production;
  - b. improve low-input farm/ranch management to enhance agricultural productivity, profitability, and competitiveness; and
  - c. promote crop, livestock, and enterprise diversification; and
2. Facilitate the conduct of projects in order to:
  - a. study, to the extent practicable, agricultural production systems that are located in areas that possess various soil, climate, and physical characteristics;
  - b. study farms and ranches that have been, and will continue to be, managed using farm production practices that rely on low-input and conservation practices;
  - c. take advantage of the experience and expertise of farmers and ranchers through their direct participation and leadership in projects;
  - d. transfer practical, reliable and timely information to farmers and ranchers concerning low-input sustainable farming practices and systems: and
  - e. promote a partnership between farmers/ranchers, nonprofit organizations, agribusiness, and public and private research and extension institutions.

SARE projects conducted under Chapter 1 should include activities that represent the full diversity of United States agriculture including production on family farms, mixed crop and livestock farms, and dairy operations. The projects may involve on-farm research and

demonstration activities. Impact studies on national and regional economies, global competitiveness, and the social, economic, and environmental implications of the adoption of low-input sustainable agriculture practices and systems are also encouraged. (7 USC 5811(d), (e), (f))

### **Eligibility**

Chapter 1 projects will be implemented through agreements by USDA-NIFA with land-grant colleges or universities, other universities, State agricultural experiment stations, State cooperative extension services, nonprofit organizations with demonstrable expertise, and Federal or State government entities. (7 USC 5811(b)) Regional host institutions may make sub-awards to these and other appropriate recipients, such as farmers and ranchers.

### **Criteria for Evaluation of Projects**

Priority for funding projects under Chapter 1 will be based on needs and opportunities identified by the Regional ACs. Project selection (7 USC 5811(c)(1)) should be on the basis of:

1. relevance of the project to the purposes of the program;
2. appropriateness of the design of the project;
3. likelihood of obtaining the objectives of the project; and
4. national or regional applicability of the findings and outcomes of the project.

Priority should be given (7 USC 5811(c)(2)) to projects that:

1. closely coordinate research and extension activities;
2. indicate how findings will be made readily usable by farmers/ranchers and other intended audiences;
3. maximize the involvement and cooperation of farmers/ranchers including projects involving on-farm research and demonstration;
4. use an inter-disciplinary systems approach; and
5. involve cooperation between farms/ranches, non-profit organizations, colleges and universities, and government agencies.

Proposal application and evaluation procedures are developed by each AC, subject to review and approval by NIFA. These procedures vary among the regions and by the type of project being considered.

### **Duration of Projects**

Activities authorized under Chapter 1 may be funded for more than one fiscal year. The duration of each project should be appropriate to the question being studied, with adequate oversight to ensure that progress is being made toward project goals. In the case of projects requiring planting of a sequence of crops, the project duration should be appropriate for the crop rotation. (7 USC 5811(g)) Since individual projects are constrained by the 5-year limit on cooperative agreements, projects with longer rotations may be conducted as separate consecutive projects, each subject to the competitive grant process under the applicable cooperative agreement.

### **Public Access and Indemnification**

Research projects conducted under this section should be open for public observation at specified times. (7 USC 5811(h)). The Secretary may indemnify the operator of a project for damage incurred or undue losses sustained as a result of a rigid requirement of research or demonstration

under such project that is not experienced in normal farming operations. (7 USC 5811 (i)(1)) Such an indemnity payment shall be subject to any agreement between a project grantee and operator entered into prior to the initiation of such project. (7 USC 5811 (i)(2))

### **Program Funding**

An annual appropriation of \$40,000,000 is authorized (7 USC 5814) for implementation of Chapter 1. When Chapter 1 (7USC 5811 through 5814) funding exceeds \$15,000,000, funding can be used for the Federal-State Matching Grant program (7USC 5813), provided that the greater of \$15,000,000 or two thirds of the total is reserved for the other sections in Chapter 1.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM GUIDELINES (Chapter 3)**

### **Purpose and Scope**

The Sustainable Agriculture Technology Development and Transfer Program has two key parts. One is the production of technical guides and handbooks which is done by SARE Outreach. The other is a National Training Program, known as the Professional Development Program, or PDP. The PDP is a train-the-trainer program designed to provide education and training for extension agents and other professionals involved in education and transfer of technical information. It is intended to develop their understanding, competence and ability to teach other extension agents, farmers, and urban residents about sustainable agriculture.

The components of the Chapter include:

1. Technical Guides and Handbooks (7USC 5831)
2. National Training Program (7USC 5832)
  - a. Regional Training Centers (7USC 5832(d))
  - b. Competitive grants (7USC 5832(e))
  - c. Regional Specialists (7USC 5832(f))
  - d. Information Dissemination (7USC 5832(g))

### **Technical Guides and Handbooks (7USC 5831)**

Chapter 3 authorizes the development of technical guides, handbooks, and other educational materials describing sustainable agriculture production systems and practices, as researched and developed under SARE, water quality, and other appropriate research programs at the USDA. It directs USDA to ensure these materials are widely available to the agricultural community and the public through colleges and universities, Cooperative Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service, other state and federal agencies and any other appropriate entities.

The development of the technical guides, handbooks and educational materials is to be directed by NIFA in consultation with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and other appropriate entities. In practice, this component is performed by SARE Outreach under a grant from NIFA to the University of Maryland.

This effort is intended to be supportive of other USDA activities in areas such as integrated pest management, water quality, wetlands, wildlife, etc. The handbooks and guides, and other educational materials, will be designed to provide practical instructions, and be organized in a way that enables agricultural producers to adopt sustainable agriculture practices and systems, to address site specific environmental and resource management issues and to sustain farm and ranch profitability. Topics to be addressed include:

1. enhancing and maintaining the fertility, productivity and conservation of farmland and ranch soils, ranges, pastures, and wildlife;
2. attaining efficient and effective use of agricultural inputs;
3. protecting or enhancing the quality of water resources; and
4. optimizing the use of on-farm/ranch and nonrenewable resources.

Program Funding: The enabling legislation (7USC 5831(f)) authorizes “such sums as may be necessary” for the development of these handbooks and guides. Prior to 2014 annual funding for this activity was included with funding for the National Training Program (i.e. PDP) in a single appropriations line item for sustainable agriculture program extension activities. Funding for the R&E activities and the Extension activities used to come as two separate appropriations lines which were combined into one line under R&E in 2014. The 2014 and all subsequent annual appropriations legislation has included the stipulation that NIFA continue both program activities. The 75%/25% ratio between the Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 activities in 2014 is the appropriate target ratio to maintain. The allocation of this single funding line between the R&E Program, SARE Outreach for Handbooks and Guides, and the PDP National Training Program is determined annually by the Operations Committee.

### **National Training Program**

A National Training Program in Sustainable Agriculture is to be organized and administered by NIFA in cooperation with other appropriate Federal Agencies (7 USC 5832(a&b)). Training will be available for Cooperative Extension Service agents, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency staff, and other professionals involved in the education and transfer of technical information concerning sustainable agriculture. The purpose of the training is to develop the trainees understanding, competence, and ability to teach concepts of sustainable agriculture to Cooperative Extension Service agents, farmers, and urban residents who need information on sustainable agriculture. All agricultural Extension staff are to have completed this training and new staff must receive training in sustainable agriculture within 18 months from their date of employment.

Training in sustainable agriculture should incorporate proven adult education methods and practices, including the development of national and regional curriculum-based educational materials designed to lead toward the successful integration of methods and practices that enhance development of sustainable systems. Producers’ (farmers and ranchers) knowledge, expertise, and experiences shall be a fundamental element of curriculum development and delivery. Regional training programs involving intensive classroom and field training will be available for Extension specialists, county, district, and area staff, Natural Resources Conservation Service field staff, and other professionals (including agribusiness representatives and the financial community.)

State or multi-state short courses, workshops, and educational opportunities will be used to provide emphasis on specific localized applications and problems. Curriculum-based programs will also be made available through video, satellite, internet, teleconference, and social media.

### ***Regional Training Centers (Consortia)***

The legislation authorizes not less than two regional training centers (7 USC 5832(d)(1)) to coordinate and administer educational activities in sustainable agriculture. The regional centers are implemented in the four SARE regions through sub-awards from the host institution and led by RCPDPs. The RCPDP is responsible for development and implementation of PDP programs

throughout the Region. The RCPDP works in close cooperation with the RC and with guidance from the regional AC.

The regional PDP consortia offer intensive educational programs involving classroom and field training for extension specialists and other individuals required to extend technical information. The centers/consortia are located at existing facilities and administered by organizations with demonstrated capability in sustainable agriculture. No funds appropriated for this program shall be used for facility construction (7 USC 5832(d)(3)).

### ***Competitive Grants***

A Competitive Grants Program is authorized under Chapter 3 (7 USC 5832 (e)) to make awards to organizations, including Land-Grant colleges and universities, to carry out sustainable agriculture training for county Extension staff and other individuals, including the general public, that need basic information about sustainable agricultural practices. The purpose of the grant program is to make short courses and workshops in sustainable agriculture available in various regions of the United States. These educational programs must be designed to familiarize participants with the concepts and importance of sustainable agriculture.

### ***State Coordinators and Resource Specialists***

The program requires designation of an individual from the Cooperative Extension Service in each state to coordinate the National Training Program within that State (7 USC 5832(b)). In practice, the Extension Deans/Directors work with the RCPDP to designate the State PDP Coordinator to fulfill these responsibilities (Appendix C). State means each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands of the United States, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, or federally recognized Indian tribes (7 USC 5801).

State Resource (District, Area, Multicounty) Specialists in Sustainable Agriculture may be designated to assist county agents and farmers/ranchers in implementing production practices developed under SARE and other appropriate programs. The Specialists will report to their State PDP Coordinator. The Specialists will be responsible for developing and coordinating local dissemination of sustainable agriculture information in a manner that is useful to the farmers/ranchers of the region. (7 USC 5832 (f))

### ***Information Dissemination*** (7 USC 5832 (g))

The Cooperative Extension Service within each state shall transfer information developed under this subtitle, and other appropriate research programs of the Department through a program that shall:

1. Assist in developing farmer to farmer networks
2. Help coordinate farm tours and field days
3. Plan for Extension programming with farmer input
4. Provide technical assistance
5. Consult closely with NRCS
6. Develop educational and outreach programs for groundwater protection
7. Develop information sources relating to crop diversification, alternative crops, on-farm processing, and on-farm energy generation
8. Establish a program to educate people about well-water testing
9. Provide information on water quality practices, nutrient management, and whole farm management systems developed through SARE research grants and other USDA programs.

10. Provide information on nutrient management practices
11. Provide information concerning whole farm management systems based on research performed through SARE and other USDA research programs.

***Program Funding***

An appropriation of \$20,000,000 is authorized for the National Training Program ((7 USC 5832)). Prior to 2014 annual funding for this activity was included with funding for the Technical Guides and Handbooks in a single appropriations line item for sustainable agriculture program extension activities. Funding for the R&E activities and the Extension activities used to come as two separate appropriations lines which were combined into one line under R&E in 2014. The 2014 and all subsequent annual appropriations legislation has included the stipulation that NIFA continue both program activities. The 75%/25% ratio between the Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 activities in 2014 is an appropriate target ratio to maintain. The allocation of this single funding line at the national level between the R&E Program, SARE Outreach for Handbooks and Guides and the PDP National Training Program is determined annually by the Operations Committee.

## **Appendix A. Host Institution Review (Research and Education and Professional Development Program)**

Prior to the host institution competition in 2018 the SARE ACs were required to review their host institutions at least every five years to determine if the following performance expectations were being met. This survey instrument may be used as the foundation for interim host institution reviews if desired by NIFA and/or the AC.

### Staff Responsibilities

1. Management of AC
  - a. Meetings – planning and conducting
  - b. Committees – provide logistical support
  - c. Solicitation and nomination of new members
2. Management of Grants Process
  - a. Solicitation of proposals – produce and distribute calls for proposals
  - b. Facilitation of review process (comprehensive and fair)
3. Administration of the Grant Awards
  - a. Coordinate and communicate with NIFA regarding cooperative agreement
  - b. Communication with sponsored program office
  - c. Communication with grant recipients
  - d. Account management, develop budgets and track project expenditures
  - e. Maintain program files and records
4. Administration of Outreach
  - a. Publicize project results and information products

Host institutions provide administrative support and services to enable the SARE regional staff to perform the day-to-day functions described above. The following services are critical to the function of the regional SARE staff and will be part of the host institution review.

1. Sponsored Program Office – processing of awards and subawards
2. Accounts Payable – payment of invoices
3. Facilities – condition of equipment and facilities
4. Professional development and training

### Staff Review

Staff reviews are conducted by the regional staff member's employer as part of the employee performance process. The AC has no formal oversight of university human resources issues or fiscal procedures but can and do monitor if those things are being handled in a satisfactory manner through host institution reviews.

### Grant Application Process – to be conducted outside of the host institution review

1. Funding opportunity information
2. Application process
3. Application status
4. Staff interactions
5. Post project assessment – to cover things like reporting

The national staff will work with the regional executive committees to conduct the host institution review using the baseline questions below.

### Administrative Council Survey

1. Meetings - Planning and Conducting
  - a. I receive timely notifications of meetings and events
  - b. Staff are knowledgeable and helpful when called upon
  - c. Staff are well prepared for meetings
  - d. Staff make proper preparations for meetings so they are an efficient use of my time
  - e. My travel arrangements are handled well
  - f. I get reimbursed for expenses in a timely manner
  - g. I value my involvement in SARE
2. Committees - provide logistical support
  - a. Staff provide appropriate support for committees to function effectively
3. Solicitation and selection of new members
  - a. Staff publicize AC positions to appropriate venues to bring in quality applications
4. Develop and distribute calls for proposals
  - a. I have adequate opportunities to provide input in the development and refinement of the calls for proposals
  - b. Staff promote the availability of different grant opportunities to all stakeholders
5. Facilitation of review process (comprehensive and fair)
  - a. I feel informed about the expectations as a reviewer
  - b. I have easy access to the proposals
  - c. I have adequate time to review the proposals
  - d. The proposal rating is straightforward and appropriate
  - e. I have an appropriate number of proposals to review
  - f. There are an appropriate number of reviewers for each proposal
  - g. I feel there is adequate time during the AC meeting to discuss proposals
  - h. The procedures for selecting proposals to fund by the AC are clearly understood and documented
  - i. The staff and reviewer responsibilities during the AC meeting have been adequately considered for each grant program and staff take an appropriate role in the review process
6. Publicize project results and informational products
  - a. Staff do a good job disseminating research results from the funded projects
  - b. Staff do a good job promoting SARE educational products - manuals, fact sheets, etc.
  - c. I find the website easy to use
  - d. I find the newsletter useful
  - e. I share/forward the newsletter to colleagues and other interested parties

#### Staff Survey

1. The Sponsored Programs Office is able to explain processes and requirements for awards and subawards
2. The Sponsored Programs Office sends out contracts in a timely manner
3. Invoices get paid within the timeframe set by the policies in the agreements section of the contract
4. There is support for finding answers and making sure processes are compliant with University and USDA regulations

5. Staff are able to receive adequate training to perform their duties
6. The host institution equipment and facilities are adequate so that I'm able to accomplish my work efficiently

#### State Coordinator Survey

1. There is appropriate leadership to encourage multi-state and regional cooperation
2. The PDP program is functioning well and producing results
3. PDP staff are knowledgeable and helpful when called upon
4. PDP staff are well prepared for meetings to efficiently make use of my time
5. I have adequate opportunities to provide input on PDP programs
6. I value my involvement in the PDP program
7. The PDP program facilitates training of a range of ag professionals in addition to Extension
8. The PDP program is impacting the adoption of sustainable ag practices through PDP training efforts

## **Appendix B: Federal-State Matching Grant Program**

Establishment of a Federal-State Matching Grant Program (7USC 5813) is authorized under Chapter 1 to provide resources to states to assist in the creation or enhancement of state, research, extension, and education programs in sustainable agriculture. Funds for this program will not become available until appropriations for Chapter 1 exceed \$15,000,000 and will not in any case exceed one-third of the appropriation for any fiscal year.

Participating states are required to provide at least 50% matching funds, and to have direct multi-organizational participation of farmers or ranchers and other appropriate organizations. This should include meaningful involvement of these organizations in the development, implementation or evaluation of the program. States eligible to receive a grant under this section may conduct a variety of activities, including:

1. encouraging the incorporation and integration of sustainable agriculture concerns in all State research, extension, and education projects.
2. educational programs for farmers/ranchers, educators, and the public.
3. development and funding of innovative research, extension, and education programs regarding sustainable agriculture.
4. conduct research and demonstration projects.
5. provide technical assistance to farmers and researchers.
6. activities that encourage farmer-to-farmer and rancher-to-rancher information exchanges.
7. incorporation of sustainable agriculture studies in undergraduate and graduate degree programs.
8. other activities that are appropriate to the agricultural concerns of the State that are consistent with the purpose of this chapter.

## **Appendix C: State Extension Professional Development Program Coordinators Guidance and Expectations in Sustainable Agriculture**

### **Legislation**

The position of the State Extension Professional Development Coordinator (PDP) is a result of Public Law 101-624 (Nov. 28, 1990), or the 1990 “Farm Bill.” As part of the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program (7 USC 5801-5832), a National Training Program was established (7USC 5832). The Secretary was directed to “designate an individual from the Cooperative Extension Service in each state to coordinate the National Training Program.” (Historically, states have generally appointed coordinators from each Land Grant institution.)

### **Responsibilities**

The state PDP coordinator is “responsible, in cooperation with appropriate federal and state agencies, for developing and implementing a statewide training program for appropriate field office personnel. Such personnel were defined as including employees of the Extension Service, Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS), and other appropriate Department of Agriculture personnel, as determined by the Secretary, whose activities involve the provision of agricultural production and conservation information to agricultural producers.”

### ***What are some general expectations for the state PDP coordinators?***

Day-to-day activities to fulfill the duties of the state PDP coordinator would likely include these main areas:

1. Training program development and delivery
2. Promotion, networking, and coordination, especially of SARE-related activities
3. Communication, reporting, and evaluation

### ***What are specific ideas to meet these expectations?***

Guidance and ideas for suggested activities and work elements in these three areas may include, but are not limited to, those listed below. State PDP coordinators may modify or add to this list to meet their specific local needs. Setting priorities and activities should be guided by planning and coordination that take into account appropriate agencies and interested parties within the state.

1. Training Program Development and Delivery:
  - a. Provide annual sustainable agriculture training and educational program opportunities for all new appropriate field office personnel
  - b. Develop and implement updated sustainable agriculture training and education opportunities for current staff

Additional related opportunities for consideration:

- c. Maintain a listing of state producer grant cooperators and involve them and other farmers and ranchers in sustainable agriculture training and education
  - d. Develop and/or partner with NGOs or farmer organizations in offering farms tours and field days
2. Promotion, Networking, and Coordination
  - a. Promote the availability of SARE Chapter 1, PDP, producer grant, and other funding opportunities within the state
  - b. Promote regional SARE program activities and opportunities

- c. Promote the availability of SARE Outreach educational materials and services, as well as those of ATTRA, state Food and Agriculture Councils (FACs), and other sources through conferences, field days, and workshops.
- d. Seek input annually from and coordinate regularly with NRCS, FSA, and Rural Development personnel about sustainable agriculture training needs and shared educational program opportunities. This input should be shared regularly with the regional AC.

Additional related opportunities for consideration:

- e. Promote on-farm research and demonstration projects and programs
- f. Offer SARE Outreach, as well AFSIC, ATTRA, the National Agroforestry Center, FSA, NRCS, Rural Development and Risk Management Agency, educational materials (books, brochures, etc.) through the Extension system or other in-state networks.

3. Communication, Reporting, and Evaluation:

- a. Develop and submit timely reports of state sustainable agriculture programs, impacts, and activities to the required RCPDP.
- b. Submit documentation forms and develop ongoing evaluation of sustainable agriculture training programs to the RCPDP.
- c. Inform SARE regional coordinators of changes in PDP state personnel or contacts.
- d. Participate in regional PDP activities

Additional related opportunities for consideration:

- e. Inform state Extension agriculture and natural resources program leaders or appropriate Extension administrators and Experiment Station Directors about SARE opportunities, materials, and activities.
- f. Participate in the PDP electronic mail groups to communicate with and respond to other state PDP representatives

4. Specified training (7USC 5832(g)) in the National Training Program includes:

- a. Assistance in developing farmer-to-farmer information exchange networks
- b. Coordination and publicizing sustainable agriculture farm tours and field days
- c. Extension program planning involving extensive farmer input and feedback in the design of new and ongoing research endeavors related to sustainable agriculture
- d. Technical assistance to farmers for strategies in making a transition to a more sustainable agriculture
- e. Consultation and close work with NRCS and FSA in carrying out related programs
- f. Developing and targeting areas highly susceptible to ground water contamination
- g. Developing information sources related to crop diversification, alternative crops, on-farm food or commodity processing and on-farm energy generation
- h. Establishing an educational program about well-water testing
- i. Providing specific information on water quality practices (BMPs), nutrient management practices, and whole-farm management systems.

## **Appendix D: 2018 Host Institution Search Process**

The four original SARE host institutions were selected in 1990 without competition and there had been only four host institution transfers prior to 2018. USDA Departmental regulations (7 CFR 3015.158) require competition for discretionary grants and cooperative agreements greater than \$75,000. To comply, NIFA held an open competition in 2018 for the opportunity to serve as a regional host institution for the next five years.

The SARE legislation requires that USDA work in conjunction with the regional ACs to select the host institutions. NIFA consulted with the ACs and others to establish a new multistep process to select the host institutions. After this consultation, NIFA published an RFA describing the application requirements, the rating criteria, and the selection process that would include coordinated reviews by both the ACs and NIFA.

Applicants were given 90 days to prepare applications. Completed applications were shared with the appropriate regional ACs to be rated independently by each council member and then to be discussed and rated collectively by the full AC. Members of the ACs were expected to abide by NIFA confidentiality requirements. The individual AC member comments and a summary of the full AC discussion of each proposal was then packaged for review by an expert peer review panel convened by NIFA.

NIFA's expert panel followed NIFA's established procedures for selection of an external panel manager and highly qualified reviewers, as well as conflict of interest and confidentiality restrictions. The panel members reviewed and rated each application independently, reviewed the AC comments, and then convened as a full panel to discuss and rank all the proposals received for each of the four regions.

Both the AC and the NIFA expert panel identified applicants they wanted to interview, with up to three interviews to be accommodated per region. Both the AC and the NIFA expert panel participated in the virtual interviews in a manner that would not disclose the identity of the NIFA expert panel members. A summary of the AC's discussion of each interview was shared with the NIFA expert panel which then discussed the interviews, performed a final ranking, and made a recommendation to NIFA leadership about which applicant to select in each region.

After the selection process, NIFA sought input from parties engaged in the selection to improve future competitions. The biggest concern was the uncertainty between announcing the decision to compete and posting the competitive RFA. There were also concerns about frequency of the competition. Some commented that five years was an appropriate competition frequency, others recommended issuing RFAs every five years with options for multi-year extensions, and still others thought the frequency of RFAs should be every ten to twenty years. The new process was effective and its use in the 2023 competition will eliminate much of the delay and uncertainty associated with the first competition.

If a host institution relinquishes responsibility for administering the regional program during its five year competitively awarded tenure or NIFA and the AC determine that the host institution is not meeting the expectations based on a formal review process, a search for a new host institution may be triggered. Any such search will be administered competitively by NIFA using the established process for competitive selection of the host institutions.