Transcript of 12/20/19 EE Grant Webinar

Slide #1

Good afternoon, my name is Michael Band and I am an Education Grant Specialist with the EPA's Office of Environmental Education. Today we're going to be talking about the Environmental Education Local Grants Request for Applications.

Slide#2

This webinar provides a general overview of our Request for Applications. Throughout the presentation you will hear me mention Request for Application quite a bit, but you will also hear me say RFA, and perhaps even solicitation notice or funding opportunity, but not to worry, these terms all mean the same thing and can be used interchangeably. However, I will try to be consistent and stick with RFA.

Slide#3

I want you to read the RFA thoroughly and refer to it often when writing your application. Nothing my colleagues and I say today supersedes what is in the RFA.

This year we issued 10 RFAs, one in each of the EPA's 10 regions, the same structure that was used in 2018, which was the last year the EPA's Environmental Education Grant solicitation was released. You will find that all 10 RFAs are exactly the same except for their regional designations. You should apply to the region in which your project will be located, which is not necessarily the same region that you or your organization are located in. So, to reiterate, apply to the region where your environmental education project activities will take place.

And also note the January 6, 2020 deadline is the same for all 10 RFAs.

Slide#4

If you are listening through your computer today make sure your speakers are on and the volume is turned up. If you have trouble hearing, click "meeting", then "audio setup wizard" in the upper left-hand corner of your screen. If you continue to experience technical issues, you may want to try leaving the meeting and reentering the room or possibly closing some of your tabs if you have several open.

We do have a limited number of phone lines set up for those who continue to experience technical issues. If you still can't hear after attempting those trouble shooting ideas, indicate so by typing "What is the conference call-in information?" in the Q&A box and we will work on sending it to you.

A recording and transcript of this webinar will be posted on our website (https://www.epa.gov/education/environmental-education-ee-grants) after the presentation. And our aim is to have that up within a week. However, currently on our website, you can access the PowerPoint presentation and transcript from the webinar we held on December 2nd.

Slide#5

If you have any EE Grant related questions during this webinar, please type them into the box labeled Q & A, on the left-hand side of the screen. No questions will be taken through the Chat Box or phone line.

My colleagues and I will be responding to questions that come into the Q&A box in real time and we will also be spending the last part of today's webinar answering some questions of universal interest. However, because of time constraints we won't have the opportunity to answer every question. If we don't respond to your questions during this presentation, please send them to EEgrants@epa.gov and we will be sure to follow-up.

We also have a Frequently Asked Questions page on our website that you can refer to. In fact, I will be periodically sharing FAQs from this webpage during today's presentation.

Slide#6

Today's webinar will cover the basics of the EE Grant Program and the most important content of the 10 RFAs, including who and what we can and cannot fund, budget and cost issues, what we look for in applications, how we review and select award winners, where to find useful resources and tips to help you write a competitive application.

And again, my colleagues and I will conclude today's presentation by taking around 30 minutes to answer questions that were typed into the Q&A box.

Slide#7

As I have already mentioned, I include FAQs in each section of the presentation. These FAQs and the content I cover in each section may very well answer many of your questions and for this reason we ask you to please wait until I complete each section before you ask questions concerning the topic I am covering. Therefore, please hold off on asking questions related to the Basics of the EE Grant Program and the EE Local Grants RFAs until you see this screen, which indicates we are moving along to the next item on the agenda.

Slide#8

To begin the presentation, I will be speaking a bit about the basics of the EE Grant Program and the EE Local Grants RFA.

Slide#9

The overall mission of the Environmental Education Grant Program is to provide grants for projects that create and make available to their audiences' best practices in the field of environmental education.

Slide#10

The purpose of providing funds for environmental education projects is to educate the public about environmental and conservation issues and promote environmental stewardship and the conservation of natural resources. We expect the funded projects to not only convey information about these issues, but also help the public weigh the various sides of an issue and take responsible action.

Slide#11

The deadline for submitting an application to this funding opportunity is January 6, 2020 by 11:59 p.m. eastern time regardless of which region you are applying to.

Since we don't have a budget, we are estimating the amount of money we will have available. If our funding is close to what we have received in previous years, then we anticipate awarding three or four grants in each region, which would total about 30 to 40 grants nationwide. The amount of each award and the limits of what you can request in your application will be no less than $50,000 and no more than $100,000. I do want to mention here that this grant program is typically one of EPA's most popular and competitive. It's not uncommon to receive around 550 applications for all 10 regions. In 2018, we received 533 application submissions and were awarded 37 grants for a total of over $3.3 million dollars. (CONT.)

All projects that are funded by this grant program must include both educational and environmental goals, and priorities focused on local communities. We require both matching funds --what some people call a cost share—and a subaward programs. We will talk more about matching funds and subawards later in the presentation.

Slide#12

We are often asked how many applications each region receives, so we decided to add this slide to the presentation. This chart lists the number of grant applications that were submitted to each region during our last competition, which was in Fiscal Year 2018 along with the total number of awards that were granted in each of the 10 regions. It is important to note that the EE Grant awards for Fiscal year 2019 were given to applicants who submitted applications for FY2018. It is important to note that for Fiscal Year 2019 the Agency decided to fund the next top-ranking applications from the 2018 Request for Proposals.

36 grants were awarded in 2019 for a total over 3.2 million dollars.

Slide#13

In the RFA we say that locally focused projects help develop informed, knowledgeable and responsible citizens in the community or communities in which the project is located. Communities can be defined in a number of ways but generally are defined in geographic terms, that is, a defined geographic area or areas such as a city, county, state, or a collection of locations with some commonalities, like sharing the same watershed.

Slide#14

We are seeking applications to reach audiences in a variety of locations and representing a variety of demographics, which can include low income, minority, tribal and rural communities, as well as communities more likely to be affected in a negative way by an environmental problem.

We welcome audiences of all age groups and formal as well as nonformal educational settings.

Slide#15

We define several terms in the RFA including environmental education, environmental and conservation information, outreach, and conservation.

The most important part of any of these definitions to keep in mind as you write your application is that environmental education teaches people to think critically about an environmental issue so that they can be part of the decision-making process about how to solve that issue or problem

Slide#16

This FAQ and all the others you will see during this presentation come directly from our website. This this one specifically can be found in the 'Definitions of Terms' section of our site.

READ FAQ……. So, although information distribution and outreach are often part of an environmental education program, those components, without the critical thinking piece, would not be eligible to receive funding through this program.

Slide#17

As I previously mentioned, all applications to our program must contain at least one educational and one environmental priority. Section I (C) of the RFA lists what priorities you can choose from in each of those categories to address in your application.

Slide#18

This slide contains the educational priorities that we list in the RFA. The full explanations of each of these priorities are in Section I (C) of the RFA but basically you should know:

- Agricultural education, as we define it, is educating the public about environmental issues affecting agriculture and teaching them to think creatively about solutions to those issues.
- Community projects teach people through outdoor, place-based, experiential, service learning, or community collaboration activities to solve a locally relevant environmental or conservation issue.
- And career development teaches people about environmental or conservation issues for the purpose of encouraging them to pursue careers in those fields.

You must select at least one of these priorities to address in your application. You can select more than one, but your application should have a primary focus on one.

Slide#19

To be considered eligible, applicants must select at least one of these environmental priorities and specify a topic under the priority that your application will address. Note that Section I (C) of the RFA lists sample topics under each priority for illustrative purposes only. You may choose one of the sample topics listed in the RFA, which is what I copied and pasted in red font on this slide, or propose another topic relevant to your local area and consistent with the Administrator's priorities and the Agency's Strategic Plan. So, to clarify, all applicants must select an environmental priority, like revitalize land and prevent contamination, and a topic under that that priority, like work to manage food waste for environmental benefits.

The other environmental priorities are: improving air quality, ensuring clean and safe water, and ensuring the safety of chemicals. And again, Section I (C) of the RFA lists sample topics for each priority.

Slide#20

We do not require partnerships in this program, but we do think that they are important. So, we encourage you to either seek partners for your project or think through how you will conduct your project without a partner and be prepared to describe for us how you propose to conduct that program without a partner.

If you do form partnerships with other organizations, be sure to get a commitment letter from them that describes how they will contribute to the project, whether that's with monetary or in-kind services, providing expertise in the planning of the project, recruitment of participants, conducting activities, et cetera.

Slide#21

If you still have questions related to program basics, now is the time to type them into our Q&A box. Moving along in the agenda, I will focus on what this grant program can and cannot fund. And again, we politely ask that you wait to type in your funding related questions until I complete this section.

Determining whether or not you are eligible to apply for one of these grants is a crucial first step that you should take before you start writing your application. A full list of eligibility requirements can be found in Section 3 of the RFA, and I have listed most of them on this slide

Now before moving on, I want to quickly note a few things. EPA does not define what a local education agency is, that is done by each State's Department of Education. Most states define LEAs as school districts, but if you are not 100% positive how your state defines LEAs, please contact your State Department of Education directly. Another thing to note is that tribal education agencies that are eligible include schools, colleges and universities controlled by a tribe but not administered by the Bureau of Indian Education. Another thing to note is that nonprofits must be approved as a 501C3 by the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) to be deemed eligible.

Also, all applicant organizations must be located in the United States or one of its territories and the majority of the project's activities must also be located in the United States or one of its territories. The only other countries in which some of the project activities could take place are Canada and Mexico.

Further, individual people are not eligible to apply. For example, an individual teacher or individual student, an individual community leader, or an individual farmer would not be able to apply to this program. This also applies to for-profit companies as they are not eligible to apply as prime recipients either.

If you are an individual person or represent a for-profit company interested in this program you may want to consider approaching an organization, a school district, or one of the other eligible organizations with your idea.

Slide#23

Another questions we get asked quite frequently is whether or not Local government agencies are eligible to apply for a grant…. Read the answer

<u>**Slide#24**</u>

There are a number of other threshold eligibility criteria listed in the RFA. What we mean by threshold eligibility criteria are those criteria that you must meet. If you fail to meet them, you will be found ineligible and your application will not be reviewed. So, these are very important.

- Make sure you meet the deadline of January 6, 2020 @ 11:59pm EST
- Also your application must contain all of the required components as outlined in the RFA. Appendix C of the RFA contains a checklist intended to help you organize your application and assist you in submitting a complete and accurate application.
- You cannot request funds for an amount under $50,000 or over $100,000.
- You must have a minimum match of at least 25% of the total project budget. You must also demonstrate that you will use exactly 25% of the federal funds you receive from us for subawards in amounts of $5,000 or less. And again, I will be speaking more about these requirements in a few minutes.
- Your application must include both educational and environmental priorities, which we have already discussed.
- You must demonstrate that you have not received a grant from the EE Grant Program before, or if you have, that you are proposing a new project or expanding, building on, enhancing or otherwise modifying a project previously funded by EPA's EE Grant Program.
- And finally, you may submit more than one application to any one region, but if you do, each application must be for a different project and must be submitted separately. You may also submit applications to more than one region.

<u>**Slide#25**</u>

All applications we fund must be educational, must develop critical thinking skills, and must lead to responsible environmental actions. The latter is normally demonstrated by one or more stewardship activities conducted during the project.

We cannot fund advocacy projects, lobbying or political activities, non-education related research, the training of environmental professionals, or construction projects. If you propose one or more of those activities, you run the risk of being found ineligible.

<u>**Slide#26**</u>

Read FAQ

<u>**Slide#27**</u>

Read FAQ

<u>**Slide #28**</u>

Read FAQ

Slide#29

Again, at this time if you have any remaining questions related to what this program can and cannot fund, please type them into the Q&A box. While you do that, I am going to begin covering information related to budget and cost items.

Slide#30

This is an important section because we often find organizations are found ineligible when they figure out or calculate the budget and cost items incorrectly in their applications. And if they're not found ineligible, they often get low scores even if they get through the eligibility process.

So, we want to the make sure that when you do the required standard form 424A and your Detailed Budget that you are doing those very carefully and making sure that all the numbers match in the two different places where you are putting your budget. We often get budgets where the numbers don't match in those two documents which is an issue because we are then not clear how much you are asking for and what you are going to be spending in different categories in your budget. That does not usually bode well for scores that the reviewers are inclined to give you for the budget section of your application.

Also make sure that you know the difference between contracts and subawards. Contracts are for purchasing services that are readily available on the market and not tied directly to the accomplishment of your project's goals. An example would be leasing buses to transport students to a field site. Remember too that all contracts must be competed. Competition can often be demonstrated by getting three bids from three different entities for the same work.

Subawards do not have to be competed but they must go to eligible entities as defined in Section III of the RFA and the funds must go toward the planning or implementation of the main goals of the project. So referring back to the example we just used about students and transportation, leasing buses to transport students would most likely be paid for through a contract, but if in that same field site that you are going to, you hired a non-profit to provide expertise for the students who were transported there, most likely that expertise could come under the category of a subaward.

Indirect costs cannot be reimbursed and should not be included in your budget unless you have a negotiated indirect cost rate agreement in place with a federal agency. EPA does offer options to those who do not have a negotiated indirect cost rate agreement in place. You can access further information related to your indirect cost rate options by going to the URL listed on this slide.

Slide#31

Read FAQs

Slide#32

I have mentioned matching funds and subawards several times already in this presentation. Now we will take some time to talk about these two important requirements in more detail.

Matching funds, or what some people call cost share, must be provided in an amount equal to or greater than 25% of the total project budget. The match can be in cash or in-kind but cannot come from other federal funds.

I give you an example on this slide of what you need to provide in a match if the total budget for your project is $120,000.

So, calculating 25% of 120,000 which is 30,000. So, 30,000 would be the minimum match that you would be obligated to provide. If you do provide $30,000 then your request to EPA would be for $90,000. The match plus your request from the EPA would be $120,000 or your total project budget.

We also require that all grantees conduct a subaward program. This requirement states that all grantees must use exactly 25% of the funds they get from the EPA for subawards of $5,000 or less.

So, if we use the numbers in the previous example, 25% of that 90,000 you get from the EPA would be 22,500. This means that you must spend <u>exactly</u> $22,500 on subawards valued at $5,000 or less.

Be careful with your math calculations on both of these requirements because it's one of the most common areas where people have gotten tripped up and found ineligible. If you are found ineligible, your application won't even be evaluated and scored, so be very careful with those.

Slide#33

But applicants really don't need to worry about making math errors if they double check their math using the EE Grants Calculator on our website. If you go to the URL listed on this slide, you can simply type in the dollar amount you are requesting from the EPA, then click the "go" button and the calculator will show you the minimum non-federal match, the minimum total budget, and the required subaward total corresponding to your EPA funding request.

Slide#34

Read FAQ

Slide#35

A couple of other budget and cost items you should know about include program income and food and beverage costs. Program income is money earned by a grant recipient through grant-supported activities like fees charged for workshop participation.

Program income in most circumstances must be put back into the project. For example, if you charge workshop participants a fee, those fees should be put back into the project to cover expenses – like food or supplies at the workshop, a speaker at the workshop, or even other project expenses like development of materials or planning time for staff. However, it is important to mention that this income can also be used to meet the match requirement.

If you plan to hold a meeting, a conference, or workshop as part of your grant project, you should make that clear in your application and you should provide information about whether or not you intend to provide food or beverages for the participants in that meeting, conference, or workshop.

Using federal funds for food and beverages are generally allowed at "snack time", or for working breakfasts and lunches. Dinners are more complicated and should be discussed with the EPA before planning them. Evening receptions, banquets or events where alcohol is served, entertainment is provided, or funds are solicited are never allowed to be paid for with EPA funds.

Slide#36

Moving along, I am now going to discuss the contents of the RFA and how applications are reviewed and selected for Awards. Also, if you still have questions concerning budget and cost items, please ask them in the Q & A box now.

<u>**Slide#37**</u>

We do have very specific requirements as to what you must include in your application package. In fact, you can be found ineligible if you do not include all of the required content.

There are a couple of standard government forms. The SF-424 and the SF-424A. These can be found in the work space section on the grants.gov website. You must submit all applications through the grants.gov website. So, you should visit that site as soon as possible, as well as read the description of how to apply through grants.gov in Section 4 (B) of the RFA.

If you are having problems with Grants.gov, I recommend calling their hotline at 1-800-518-4726 (read number twice) or emailing them at <u>support@grants.gov (read twice)</u>. This contact information can also be found on our FAQs page.

The work plan portion of your application should be no more than eight pages and should contain your Executive summary (also known as the project summary), a detailed project description and a project evaluation. Note that I have included on this slide the number of points out of a possible 100 that you can receive for the various parts of your application.

The contents of all applications and the points assigned to the different parts of the application are described in detail in Sections 4 and 5 of the RFA.

The detailed budget that you submit should match the categories on the SF-424A except in much greater detail along with an explanation of each budget category, and as I said before, make sure your numbers match on all of the forms, the SF-424, 424A, and the detailed budget.

We also require that you include several appendices. There is no page limit for these or for the detailed budget. Appendices include a timeline, a logic model showing your expected outputs and outcomes, letters from your partners, descriptions of your capabilities to carry out the project and your past experience.

And as a reminder, Appendix C of the RFA contains a Grant application checklist designed to help applicants organize their applications. This checklist is not required and does not need to be submitted with the application if you decide to use it.

<u>**Slide#38**</u>

This is a fairly new FAQ so I want to quickly stress that attachments cannot be downloaded in bulk on our end, only individually. So, for example when an applicant submits their application as 15 or 20 different attachments, this adds time to processing and creates room for error on your end and ours.

So, the question is…. READ FAQ

Slide#39

All applications go through an eligibility determination. All applications that are found eligible are then evaluated by a panel of reviewers, usually including EPA staff, other government employees, and external reviewers approved by the EPA (i.e. experts from the conservation, environmental, and education fields)

Each region has its own selection officials who make the final selection of grant projects for funding after being briefed on the scores, the ranking of applications based on those scores, and other factors, like the distribution of educational and environmental priorities, geographic locations and types of audiences addressed in the highest-ranking applications.

Slide#40

Now let's chat a bit about what resources we have and where you can find them.

Slide#41

We do have some resources available for you to use if you plan to train educators or develop educational materials, copying and pasting the URL on this slide will take you the website where you can find these resources.

We require all grantees to evaluate their own projects and suggest visiting the MEERA website. The URL for this resource is also listed below.

If you are new to EE or to grant funding in this program, we recommend reading these materials while developing your application.

Slide#42

We've listed a lot of tips for you here on this slide, but first and foremost I just want to urge again that you read the RFA and our FAQs page thoroughly and carefully all the way through and refer to them as often as you need to while you are writing your application.

- Also, make sure to apply to the correct RFA! Apply to the region where most of your project activities will be taking place, which is not always the same region where you or your organization are located.
- Start early and leave time to review and edit your application – you may even want to seek reviewal from external sources
- Apply early. If you wait until the last minute to submit your application and then run into issues using grants.gov, you may very well miss the deadline.
- Show that the application fits the criteria of the EE Local Grants RFA by organizing your application around the scoring criteria.
- Check your math – and then check it again.
- Engage and include under-served populations, when possible

Slide#43

- Demonstrate adequate match and exact subaward amounts – which you can do by using the EE Grant Calculator
- Write simply and clearly –Be clear about what you want to accomplish in your project and how you will accomplish your goals. Do not leave out important details; but DO stick to page limits.
- Do not assume reviewer knowledge.
- Explain acronyms/terms.
- Show your qualifications and demonstrate past successes (in appendix)
- Demonstrate partner support, when appropriate (also in appendix)
- Include plan to measure and evaluate success.
- Try to limit the number of attachments to 6 or less when submitting your application on grants.gov. This will reduce room for error on both of our ends.

Slide#44

And by all means, start early. You will need the time to write the application, have it reviewed, and then submit it to the grants.gov website. There are a number of steps you need to go through before you can use the grants.gov website, such as obtaining a DUNS number and registering with the System for Award Management, which is often referred to as SAM. The process for registering in SAM.gov and receiving or verifying a DUNS number are both free of charge but can take a month or more to complete for some organizations.

You will have to select someone in your organization that will be referred to as the Authorized Organization Representative or AOR in grants.gov. That individual will have to register on the grants.gov website and make sure that that registration is complete and accepted before you start submitting your application on the website. If you haven't already done so, we recommend starting these registration and designation processes today seeing that the January 6th deadline is just two and a half weeks away.

Also, please do ask questions if you are unsure of what anything in the RFA means. You can send those questions to eegrants@epa.gov.

Slide#45

Read FAQs

Slide#46

We are almost at the conclusion of today's presentation, but before we begin answering some of your questions, I am going to quickly go over where you can find more information and how you can send follow-up questions.

Slide#47

The Environmental education grants program does have a website that answers a lot of questions that may arise when you are writing your application. The URL listed here takes you to our program webpage where you can find our Frequently Asked Questions (which is in the Helpful Resources tab, seen in the photo), Application Forms, information on Past EE Grants, a link to subscribe to the EE Grants newsletter so you can stay up-to-date on all EPA Environmental Education information, and lots more.

Slide#48

Our FAQs page is quite detailed and organized into categories like: eligibility, EPA priorities, application process, and so on. Please do read it after you have read the RFA in its entirety.

I want to emphasize the fact that today we are just trying to give you a general overview of the Environmental Education Grant Program and the application process.

We will be posting a copy of this presentation on our website, but keep in mind that nothing in the presentation is meant to supersede anything in the RFA.

Slide#49

Now on to your questions

Slide#50

Thank you to those who have been asking questions in the Q & A box. My colleagues and I will now spend the last portion of the webinar answering some of those questions. Before we begin, please keep in mind that due to our time constraint, we will not be able to answer all of the questions that came into the Q&A box today. If we do not have the chance to answer your question or questions before the conclusion of today's webinar, please send them to EEGrants@epa.gov before. Emails sent to this inbox come directly to me and are given high priority during an open solicitation.

Slide#51:

I want to remind you that we will be posting the transcript, slides, and the recording of this webinar on the EE Grants website within about a week. We'll try to get you all three, but we'll certainly get something up for you as soon as possible. Please feel free to spread the word among coworkers, friends, or anyone who might be interested in learning more about our current solicitation notice.

Thank you so much for joining us today and if you have any more questions, please send them to eegrants@epa.gov. Good luck in your applications and have a wonderful weekend.