EN_GrantStakeholderCall

Good afternoon. Good morning, everybody. My name is Rob Willis And as Wendy indicated, I'm here to help moderate the conversation today. I just want to reiterate a couple of notes from Wendy's introduction. The first is please, please, please be pretty active in muting and unmuting yourself, as we've got close to 40 folks on this call.

And again, for the folks who are just calling in on the telephone and are not able to see the slides, *6 is what mutes and unmutes your phone. And as Wendy indicated, the hand raise feature is in your toolbar up at the top. And then there is also one other feature up there that I want to draw your attention to, and it is the conversation chat feature. And it's the one that's got the-- looks like the small call out box. And I want to encourage folks to please use the conversation feature. If you have questions, to put them in there, and also any feedback as well.

One thing that's really important for us is to understand who we have on the call. And Kristin, if you could please switch on to the next slide, that would be great. And to give folks a little bit of practice in using either the chat feature or the unmute feature, if you are only called in on the telephone, if you could practice hitting *6 to unmute yourself and let us know what organization you're with, that would be great.

If you are logged onto the Teams interface, I'd like to ask you to go to the chat feature or the conversation feature and just type in what organization you are with. So please go ahead and do that now. And we won't take more than one minute of your time doing this.

Thank you, Montana. Perfect. I see them rolling in.

This is the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources called in on on the phone.

Welcome, Louisiana.

Hope you guys are--

And hope you are--

Sorry, I was going to say the same thing. Hope you're doing OK down there.

Yeah.

We are. Doing OK so far, we think.

OK, perfect. So Erin, why don't we go and begin both the recording, make sure that you-- oh, I see that you've started it. And if you want to jump in, please jump in. Again, I want to invite folks, as you have questions, please raise your hand, and we will call on you and you can unmute yourself or put the questions or comments in the chat. All of those are methods that we want to go ahead and encourage.

So we're going to give Kristin another 20 seconds here to keep catching up with the attendees.

Hey, Rob, can we do a quick unmute for the four folks that are on the phone so they can let us-- I know we got Louisiana. Anybody else?

Hi, this is a Northern Arizona University, ITEP.

Great, welcome.

So this is Robin Clark. I'm also on the meeting, but I'm using the phone for--

Perfect.

--to talk into here. So you'll see that number too.

OK, great. Thank you. Welcome.

Yeah, this is Steve Masterman with the state of Alaska. I am also on the Teams meeting, but my computer doesn't have audio, so I'm also on the phone.

Welcome.

You're [INAUDIBLE] Steve.

OK, well, why don't we jump into it? And so Erin, why don't you pick up on slide 5?

Great, thank you, Rob. Thank you to everybody for joining today's session. We're really excited to hear from you. So before we jump into the feedback part of this, we want to just give a really quick overview and kind of reminder of this last grant cycle. So for anybody who's not familiar, the EN is a collaborative partnership of EPA, states, territories, and tribes designed to foster better environmental management and decision making through increased access to timely, high-quality environmental information.

And of course there is an affiliated grant program with that. And the grant funding purpose which complements that is to develop technologies to share data among partners in the Exchange Network, develop underlying shared or reusable services that provide the foundation of EN operations. And of course I've got the bar on the very bottom and I can't read my thing. Make data available-- can someone read that for me? I'm so sorry.

Yeah, it's to make data more available within your organizations, across partnerships, and with other communities of interest. I think I'm ad libbing on that, but close enough.

Thank you, Wendy. Sorry about that, all. We can go ahead and move to the next slide.

OK, so a very brief summary of this most recent exchange network grant cycle. So fiscal year 2020 was the 19th year that EPA awarded competitive funding to our eligible partners for

projects through our grant program. Between this last year and the start of our grants program in 2002, the EPA has awarded approximately $243 million for state, tribal, and territorial awards and associated program support within the Exchange Network grant program.

And we anticipate awarding over $7 million in grant funding this year to 32 grantees. And currently we are kind of in the final part of that award process. It's with our grants office at the moment, and hopefully folks who are receiving grand awards will see that notification of award very soon. I think we're aiming for end of September on that, at the latest.

So I just have two slides here that are just very quick reminders of some of the changes that you probably saw in the fiscal year 20 solicitation notice. So one of the changes that we did is we actually removed the mentorship requirement. This was something that used to be a requirement for first-time tribal and territorial applicants, and we actually took that out of that specific priority, which is priority five, and we just made it kind of a blanket suggestion for anybody who's a first-time applicant. It's just something that we encourage.

So that was removed from under a specific funding opportunity and put into section 1-F. And we provided some information there about how potential applicants could identify mentors. We also had two new sets of funding opportunities, so we saw the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund and the Clean Water State Revolving Fund be added into last year's notice.

And we also had the Underground Injection Control Data Availability Project be added back in. That was something that was available a couple of years ago. It wasn't available for a few years, and that did get added back in as a funding opportunity in fiscal year 20. Next slide.

And then, as Wendy already talked about a little bit, we also tried to expand the applicant guidance that we had within our solicitation notice. So most notably, we had optional templates that were provided for the project narrative, which was in Appendix H, and the budget narrative in Appendix I. And we'll talk a little bit more about that in subsequent slides and hopefully get some feedback on that because that's something we're very interested to hear if these new tools were helpful for applicants.

So next slide, please. OK, Rob, I'll hand this back over to you for quick reminders.

Great. And so, again, you guys are doing a fabulous job. A-plus, gold stars, all those things, on remaining muted unless you're speaking. And a reminder, the mute is the little microphone icon in the toolbar you may or may not be able to move and then the *6. And then again, we encourage you to use the hand raise feature and a Q&A.

And so at this point, what I'd like to do is if folks have any questions about some of that background material, we do have some focused questions we plan to get to for feedback, but I wanted to provide just a little bit of space here if folks had any questions about the background that Erin just presented. So please put your question into chat or raise your hand.

And Rob, I would just like to say quickly that Eric Cleckler gets the award for best chat message. If folks are having trouble seeing the slides, you should be able to click off that recording, like

the warning at the top that says hey, it's, being recorded. And that'll give you a little bit more screen real estate.

And if Eric wanted to share whatever he chants, the magic spell, that would be great.

[LAUGHING]

OK, well Kristin, why don't we move on to the next slide? The first area that we are interested in getting some feedback on is the application process itself. And so what Erin is going to do is she's going to quickly share and remind folks what are in some of the appendices. And then the questions that I'm going to come back to the group with are up there on the slide deck. And so you can keep those in your front of your brains there while Erin reviews this.

And again, I'm encouraging folks to raise their hand or enter any feedback, answers to the questions in the chat.

Great. Thank you, Rob. So as we briefly mentioned before, we definitely tried to bulk out the applicant guidance in the fiscal year 20 solicitation notice. And so we're going to go ahead and take a look at those specific-- or I'm going to remind you about those specific appendices, and hopefully that'll generate some good conversations about what we could maybe do better in future years.

So Appendix E, that was our detailed instructions for preparing and submitting the application. And that contained a lot of good information. That had an overview of what should be in the cover letter, an overview of what should be in the project narrative, or the work plan that's submitted. And then it also listed out the mandatory grant attachments.

So in addition to the project narrative, that would be your 424 forms there. And then also additional attachments as applicable. So if you were charging indirect costs, the indirect cost rate would be an additional attachment that was requested. And then that also provided the language from our grants office in terms of how to submit your application through grants.gov.

Appendix F is just a pre-submission checklist. And this was just kind of a little tool that we hoped would be helpful where, through the different mandatory attachments and additional attachments, there were just little checks. So this was based off of common errors that we've seen in past years and just little-- did you make sure that you included x, y, and z within your project narrative?

And if you have sub awards in your grant application, did you make sure you put that under the cost category of "other," rather than "contractual." Little checks like that to try to help the applicant prepare the best application possible and also to try to save some work on our end when we're going to process with some of these errors that we see commonly.

Appendix G is the cover letter template. And that's something that has been included in prior years. So that was probably familiar to a lot of folks who have applied for multiple EN grants over the years. Appendix H, however, was kind of our new big optional template that we put in

there. And that was the project narrative template. And so what we did is we-- and again, this was optional to all users-- but we did try to provide a template of what your 10-page project narrative or work plan might look like.

And we suggested language in there that would help applicants make sure that they address all aspects that are scored through our evaluation criteria and make sure that it's to the level of detail that we need to do the processing and everything.

Appendix I also included a new optional template, and that was the budget narrative attachment. So that summarizes a lot of the budget information for your grant application. And that's a required document from the grants office. And so we provided that in the hopes that we would lessen the amount of corrections we would have during processing and also make sure that we get the level of detail that we need to get a good sense of the project you're proposing.

And then finally Appendix J, that's been in there in prior years. That's just the glossary of terms. The major change we did this year is we did some revisions. We added some new definitions. And we also tried to hyperlink words and phrases throughout the entire solicitation notice in the hopes that it would be a little bit more user friendly because it is a fairly long document.

So hopefully that little summary helps. If there was something I didn't explain well, please let me know or type it in the chat and I'll try to address it. Thank you.

Thank you, Erin. So now it's you all's turn to do some of the talking here. And the feedback that EPA is really interested in getting has to do with the improvements that EPA could consider for fiscal year 21 to improve the clarity of the usability of the solicitation notice or any feedback on the provided applicant guidance. Was it useful? How could it be more useful? What's not useful?

So, again, please provide any feedback that you might have on the clarity, usability of the solicitation notice or of the applicant guided feedback?

[BEEPING]

I'm not sure what happens when the chiming stops, maybe something exciting. I have a raised hand. Jennifer Gumert, please.

Hi, I'm Jen from Pennsylvania DEP. I just wanted to say that I used the appendices this year extensively. I found them very helpful that once we had the application finished, we went through and formatted everything to conform to the templates. So I thought they were a really nice addition to the notice this year.

Great. Thank you. Other comments or thoughts?

I would say likewise from Louisiana's perspective. This was our first time in our agency applying for the grant, and really the solicitation, this was our first introduction to it. And the appendices were extremely informative and very helpful in crafting a grant that we were entirely unfamiliar with. So that was a huge tool to us.

Thank you.

Jennifer [? Attlee. ?] [? Athy, ?] I'm sorry. Jennifer [? Athy. ?]

Yeah, no problem. It's actually [? Athy. ?]

[? Athy, ?] thank you.

Yeah, so I found the templates very helpful. I guess I had feedback in three different places, one of them on the narrative template. Because there is a page limit there and there is a lot of information, potentially, you want to add. I thought the template was very helpful. But in some places, particularly when you're adding additional informal project partners or repeating sections of the template, it was hard to get that information in there and then all of the other important information that you'd need to add to the narrative as well.

So it's an optional template, so people can kind of decide how much of that they want to add. But that made things a little bit tricky for me. Another piece of feedback is on the budget template, I believe. We needed to add a percentage of the amount of time that the person would be on the project. And I didn't realize that that was used in the calculations for checking the amount of money. And so if that were known that that needed to be a good representative number and not just rounded off, that would be helpful.

Great. Thank you, Jennifer. Sorry about butchering your name. I apologize.

No worries.

OK. Again encouraging folks-- and thank you for the folks that are providing feedback in the chat as well. So if folks have other comments, please put them in the chat or raise your hand. I'm going to give it another 15 or 20 seconds here.

So Rob, in the chat just really quickly, we've got a couple of bits of feedback. Feedback positive-- the templates were very helpful. The appendices were great and helpful for coordination. Same thing appreciating the budget narrative, and the 10-page project narrative templates-- found them to be quite helpful. So both bits of feedback in the chat are positive.

Thank you. OK, Erin and Kristin, why don't we move on to the next slide?

OK, so on this slide, we're looking for feedback on the evaluation criteria. So this is the kind of rubric in which the applications are scored. And so we have kind of the bigger-- what am I looking for? Kind of subject headers here and the points associated with that. But I'm going to go ahead and just talk through some of the sub-points to the evaluation criteria to hopefully remind the group what that all is comprised of.

So I'm going to kind of just go ahead and talk through that, and then hopefully that will generate some thoughts and comments. So the first item is the project outputs and outcomes leading to environmental results. There's 10 points associated with that. And that's comprised of two pieces,

supporting EPA strategic goals and environmental outcomes, and also tracking, evaluating, and measuring progress. Each of those are worth 5 points for a total of 10.

The second section is project feasibility and approach, which is worth a total of 12 points. And that includes project roles and responsibilities, programmatic involvement, and also the commitment to registering new and/or reused resources. And so that final one, the commitment to registering, that's only worth-- that's 2 points, and the other points, which were the project roles and responsibilities and programmatic involvement each had 5 points associated with them.

The third section, which is the Exchange Network/E-Enterprise priorities, this is definitely the bulk of the applicant's score. So this is worth a total of 46 points. And this includes defining project goals and outputs, aligning goals with EN program priorities, connecting goals to business and administrative needs, demonstrating technical understanding, enhancing data sharing and availability, a commitment to reuse existing resources, and then finally using and/or developing shared services. And the applicable shared services for that are those that are found in Appendix B.

The fourth kind of section of our evaluation criteria were budget, resources, and key personnel. There was 20 points associated with that. And within these sections, we asked folks to clearly state a detailed budget, also list the qualifications of the project manager and key personnel. We have a section on appropriate budgeting and also managing funds efficiently and timely. So each of those were worth 5 points for a total of 20.

And then the last section, the remaining points, there's 12 points associated with past performance. So for anybody who has received an Exchange Network grant before, a prior grantee, there was kind of three factors that we were looking at to comprise that 12 points. And that includes the overall percentage of progress reports submitted by due date, semiannual reports demonstrating sufficient project progress, and then also the registration of IT components, which is one of the requirements of our grant program.

For anybody who hasn't received an EN grant before, there's a neutral score that kicks in. And basically we asked applicants to just state that they had never received an EN grant, and they could receive 6 points for that.

So I know that was a lot of information. If there's any questions on that or if you need me to repeat anything, please let me know. And you can find the full breakdown of this on pages 24 to 27 of our SN. There's definitely even more details than what I just talked out with the group.

Great. Thank you, Erin. So again, we are asking folks, similar to what we did before, to please raise your hand. Provide feedback, comments. And if there are any clarification questions, right now is the time. So via the chat or the raised hand feature. Those that are on the phone, please just unmute yourself and provide your feedback.

I'll give it just another maybe 20 seconds here or 30 seconds. See if anything is coming in people are fiercely typing in.

OK, going once. Going twice.

We have one comment, just really quick, that the criteria is fair and reasonable.

Thank you, Kristin.

No problem.

OK, well, why don't we flip to the slide on the priorities here?

We have one more comment that came through, Kristin, if you want to read that before moving on.

Thank you. So that comment is just to say not to get rid of the section. It uses the final pass to make sure all criteria are met.

Thank you.

Is this me, Rob?

Yep, this is all you, Erin.

OK, so now our next section, we're looking for feedback on our Exchange Network priorities and the funding opportunities that fall within the solicitation notice. And specifically do the funding opportunities within the fiscal year 20 SN reflect current stakeholder interest areas?

So on this graphic that we have here on the page, you can see we have five Exchange Network priorities. And our funding opportunities fall within one of these five priority areas. So I'm going to go ahead and just kind of speak to the group and give a few more details about each of these EN priorities and give a few examples of the funding opportunities that fall within them.

So for priority one, this is integrate foundational EN services into business processes. And so funding opportunities under this priority include the foundational Exchange Network shared services. These services enable individual organizations to avoid costs associated with building, securing, and maintaining the data and technology infrastructure, supporting the implementation of program missions.

Examples include VES, or Virtual Exchange Services, and SCS, the Shared CROMERR Services. And for those of you who are familiar with our SN, these are the opportunities that are listed within Appendix B of our solicitation notice.

Moving on to priority two, which is to eliminate industry paper reporting and expand e-reporting among co-regulators. Funding opportunities within this priority enable the submittal of data to priority data systems. Examples include AQS, or Air Quality System, WQX, Water Quality Exchange, and the Radon data exchange. And again, for those of you who are familiar with our SN, these opportunities are listed within Appendix A of our solicitation notice.

Looking at priority three, expand data access and availability, the funding opportunities under this priority, they really stress delivering automated access to environmental data with the goal of sharing data across programs within organizations, across agencies, and/or with the EPA. In support of cross-program data integration and more efficient environmental business processes, opportunities under this priority focus on data availability and geospatial projects.

And then looking at priority four, which is to improve environmental management through advanced data monitoring and transmittal processes, the funding opportunities under this priority encourage incorporating innovative monitoring and field data collection approaches into program business processes. So this includes the continuous water quality monitoring and also the field data collection collaborative pilots opportunity, which leverages the facility registry services and substance registry services APIs to review and correct locations and substance identities.

Sorry, a lot of information there. Finally, priority five is to augment the information management capacity of EN partners. Funding opportunities under this priority are open to our territories, tribes, and intertribal consortia with the object of enhancing tribal and territorial environmental programs and increasing the ability to manage and share environmental data electronically across organizations, consortiums, and the EN community. And we do have awards under this priority that can be made for individuals, with maximum funding of $200,000 and then collaborative partnership with the funding threshold of $400,000.

And before we open this up, I think we really want to stress that even though these are named priority one, priority two, priority three, neither of them comes before the other priorities. They could just as easily be called priority A, B, C, D, and E. So there's not one of these that is more likely to get funding than the other. This is just how we've broken down our EN program priorities and the funding opportunities that fall within them. So thank you.

Fantastic. Thank you, Erin. OK, so here's your opportunity to provide feedback to EPA on whether or not these priority areas reflect your interest areas. And if they do, that's great and want to know why. And if they don't, also share what might be some of your interest areas. And so, as we should be pretty used to now, I'm going to be asking folks to either raise their hand so I can get you into the queue, or please provide your comments via the check functionality.

Or if you're on the phone, feel free to just unmute yourself.

Thank you, Kristin.

Yeah, Stephen. Please.

So I'm going to be the most unpopular person on the call right now, but I guess I look at the priorities, and I think they're OK. But I think one of the big things is when you match them with the purposes provided earlier on the EN grants, I think there is a gap between what we're seeing in terms of priorities and those goals.

And what I mean specifically is the reusability really doesn't happen. And I know that one of the things in the new digital strategy is trying to encourage that even more and really go into an

information-centric kind of looks a little bit like the three and five. But I think, I guess my feedback would be to lean in and be more specific on how that's going to happen. And that not just that-- and I'll use the state of Montana because we were a great offender for many years, of we will create a little computer system that will do x. And by the way, it integrates into a foundational EN grant service, or EN service.

But really, its reusability is extremely limited in terms of unless you do things in the Montana way, you pretty much, you're not going to reuse it. We've gone now to more cloud-oriented, OK, you can just take our configuration that we've developed and moved somewhere else, which we're seeing a lot of sharing going on with. So I think leaning into that even more, or maybe unifying these priorities, I think would be very, very, very helpful.

And my second bit is, for a good grant writer-- and we have a couple on my staff-- you can gussy up a whole host of sins underneath the priorities. So I would encourage being even more specific about what either the states, tribes, territories as a whole have talked about or what the EPA would like to see so that it doesn't just become a, oh, yeah, this is a backfill or free money or anything of that nature, which is not the intent of it. But it can dip into there if we're not careful. That's just my feedback.

Fantastic. Thank you, Stephen.

And you're definitely not unpopular. Appreciate it. We'd love more unpopular feedback, I must say.

Yes, so please feel free to raise your hand or drop your comment into the chat.

So what I'd like to do now is just to open it up. We try to provide you opportunities for some focused feedback on the usability, on the criteria, and the priority areas, but we don't want to limit your feedback to that if you have other feedback. And so I'm going to provide a little space here on the call, either, again, via the hand raise or the chat.

If there's any other feedback or comments for EPA as they begin the process of working on the-- comments or feedback on EPA on the fiscal year 20 solicitation notice as they begin the process of pulling together the fiscal year 21. So please, either raise your hand or via chat.

Rob, we've got a hand raised.

Oh, great. Thank you. Fred, please.

So a few years back, we had talked about, with the Exchange Network grants, that if we were an EPA contractor, that there was a way to funnel part of the grant directly to the contractor. Because I don't know about other states, but once we get a grant, if we have a contractor we're working with, we have to wind up going with sole source justification and going through our board of public works. So is there a process like that still available?

This is Wendy Blake-Coleman. Usually we call those in-kind grants, and usually-- not usually, virtually always-- it's associated with a specific project and a specific program. So I can think of a couple. In the past, [INAUDIBLE], when they were doing a lot of development work, had a-- it was a multi-vendor contract. And grantees were able to apply to use all or a portion of their funding to go into that vendor to develop those pieces of the super system they were working on.

And we're not doing that this year because [INAUDIBLE] is in transition. I think once ISIS [INAUDIBLE] had the same thing many years before I was around. It's not a common practice, but I would say it depends what you're working on and whether or not the program office at EPA has a enterprise contract that anybody who's applying for such a grant could use.

So if I could follow up, in our case, we were working with Gold Systems, who was a contractor working on WQX. And the application that we were looking to enhance would have funded-- well, the grant would have funded enhancement of that application. So it would have saved us a lot of difficulty if that part of the funding or that part of the development could have been funneled directly to. So is that--

I think we probably should take this-- I think we should probably take this offline, and I'm happy to talk to you about it. There are many grants in the past who actually do use AQIS And there have been some instances where particularly partnerships or consortia are working to enhance that system into different media. So I'm not sure if you're affiliated with that, and I think it would be best to probably get into the details of this in a subsequent call.

At the end, you'll see my email, and Erica and I will follow up with you.

Thank you.

Thank you, Wendy. OK, other folks have questions, and I know we had something come in via the chat. And so please continue to provide any other feedback. This is now your opportunity as well to speak up.

And in the chat, we have a comment about appreciating the opportunity to improve data capture and sharing efficiency and for data to be made more easily usable and shareable. Folks don't often have time and resources to make these needed improvements.

Thank you, Kristin.

OK, why don't we flip to the last slide here? And so Wendy, I want to turn it over to you to bring this call to a conclusion.

If you could flip the last bit. So thank you, everybody. I know sometimes it's hard to speak out on these calls. We welcome additional feedback in writing if you so desire or if there are other things you didn't feel comfortable saying on the phone. If you send your emails to Erin McGown. And she says before but I say by September 9. She's going on a long-deserved vacation.

We would love to hear more from you, and we'll take all of these comments into consideration as we re-tweak or redraft the solicitation notice for this year. I will say that if you want to take a closer look at this year's solicitation notice, it is on our website. And that might fuel some more additional thoughts that you might have.

We're interested in all aspects of your comment. Everything from the suggestions like Steve had on how to better align our priorities, to some of the usage issues. So we're very interested in hearing back from you. And Erin's email is at top. Erika Beasley is our EN grant program manager. Her address is here, as this mine, Wendy Blake-Coleman.

And again, I really do appreciate everybody coming on. And I hope that in fiscal year 21, many of you will apply for grants. Anything else, Erin or Erika?

No, just to echo what Wendy was saying, we definitely are very open to hearing more feedback. And so please go ahead and if you have anything that comes to mind after this call, if there's more specific feedback about anything, really, please feel free to send me an email. That would be great. Thank you so much.

Yeah, I just had a-- so I noticed one of the callers, they had a question. They said they said something about the percentage of time that was for the personnel. So we will work with that and do examples. But this year, we noticed that a lot of people were only-- well, they normally do just amount of time devoted to one of the grants or time devoted to the grant. They are not physically working on it 100% of the time.

So we do know going forward that we will add that, to give you examples if you're only working 10% of the time and how to do the calculations on that. So I thought that was helpful feedback. I didn't want to chime in at the time. But thank you for that comment earlier. That's it. Thank you.

And that was Erika Beasley, our grant program manager. OK, thank you, everybody.

Thank you, Wendy. We'll talk to everyone later. Take it easy.

Yep, take care.

Bye.

Thank you, everyone.