

Other People's Money

What Makes a Grant Proposal Fundable

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A grant is other people's money, given for a result they already want. Whether you own the land, run the town, or keep the books for a small nonprofit, a fundable proposal settles four things before anything else: what will change, who already wants that change, what it will cost, and what you will owe when it ends. This guide takes them in that order, from the first idea to the final report. It goes deeper on the budget, part 14 of Guide 1, *Pride and Prescription*.

THE GOAL *More bobwhites on a working cattle ranch.* The destination. Objectives are what it takes to get there, and what a funder pays for.

TOO LOOSE TO FUND

"Improve bobwhite habitat on the ranch."

No place, no amount, no date, no measure: nothing for a reviewer to fund, and nothing to report at the end.

A FUNDABLE OBJECTIVE · RANKED 2 OF 3

"By March 2029, cut and burn eastern redcedar on 240 acres of the south pasture, reducing redcedar canopy cover from about 20 percent to under 5 percent, measured each summer on 20 fixed transects and photo points."

Why it is here: redcedar is closing over the south pasture and shading out the grass and forbs that bobwhites need.

THE PART	THE WORDS	WHAT IT PUTS IN THE BUDGET
When	<i>By March 2029</i>	the period of performance and report dates
What	<i>cut and burn eastern redcedar</i>	cutting and burn crews, and equipment
Where and how much	<i>240 acres of the south pasture</i>	the acreage that sets every cost
Baseline to target	<i>about 20 percent to under 5 percent</i>	a baseline survey before work begins
How you will know	<i>20 fixed transects and photo points</i>	monitoring time, stakes, and datasheets

An invented example, not a real project: objective 2 of the three in part 2 of Guide 1.

I Answer four questions first

START HERE

- 1 Are the objectives fundable?** Each is one change, in one place, by one date, measured one way, that the funder can see happen before the award ends.¹ Promise what you can measure while the money lasts: acres treated and cover changed, not birds on the ground in year ten.
- 2 Who already wants it?** Funders publish their priorities. The right program is the one whose own words describe your objectives before you ever write to them (page 2).
- 3 What does it cost, line by line?** Every dollar you ask for ties to a task in an objective, with a quote, a rate, or a record behind it (page 3).
- 4 What will you owe when it ends?** Reports, records, receipts, and the result itself. A funder who receives a clean final report is a funder who comes back (page 3).

If you cannot yet answer all four, you are not ready to write, and knowing that early is worth more than a polished draft.

Your objectives, one sentence each. By *the date*, do *what* on *where*, and *how much*, changing *what you measure* from *today's level* to *the target*, measured *how*, and *when*. Ranked objectives that each show why they are there are more likely to be funded. Too many is too much work, too few too little planning, and either is an immediate no. How many is part of the art, which is why the goal and objectives matter most: write them first, before you look for money, and everything after comes much easier.

II Find the program that already wants it

Size, left to right: small (under \$10,000), medium (\$10,000 to \$100,000), large (over \$100,000). The bar spans what a route typically gives; typical, not rules.

ROUTE	TENDS TO FUND	SIZE	MATCH	WHERE TO LOOK
Federal agencies	Competitive grants; cost-share for farm, ranch, and forest land		Often	Grants.gov and SAM.gov listings; your NRCS or FWS office
State agencies	Landowner cost-share; outdoor education; parks and trails		Often	The agency's grants pages; your area biologist
Regional and local government	Water districts, counties, cities: demonstrations, public works		Sometimes	The district's or city's grants page and agenda
Local foundations	Community foundations and hometown family funds		Rarely	The community foundation; 990-PF grant lists
State foundations	Statewide private foundations; some fund buildings and land		Sometimes	Guidelines and 990-PF grant lists
National funders	National conservation and animal funders		Sometimes	Program pages and past grantee lists
Corporate giving	Company and store programs; employers and energy firms near the project		Rarely	Company giving pages; the local manager
Clubs and associations	Service clubs, professional societies, conservation chapters, Scout projects		Sometimes	The club president or chapter committee

Eight routes to money. Size and match are typical, not rules; each program sets its own.

Fit before prose. Writing harder does not fix a poor fit: a program that already wants your objectives reads a plain proposal kindly, and one that does not turns down a polished one. Choose the program first, then polish.

Start with the cost-share you qualify for. If you own farm, ranch, or forest land, your first stop is usually a cost-share program, not a competitive grant: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program,² Partners for Fish and Wildlife,³ and your state's own programs. Texas's Landowner Incentive Program, for one, pays 50 to 75 percent of a project's cost and accepts materials or in-kind services as your share.⁴ Plan the cash: cost-share often pays after the work is done, though the Environmental Quality Incentives Program advances at least half to beginning, veteran, socially disadvantaged, and limited-resource producers.²

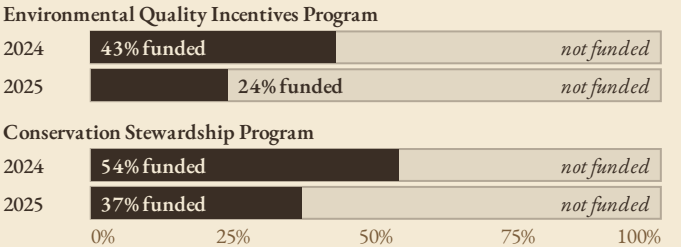
Read the rules and the past awards. A program's notice of funding opportunity says who may apply, what it pays for, the match, the deadline, and how proposals are scored. Its past awards show what it really funds: federal awards are public on USAspending.gov,⁵ and a private foundation lists its grants on its IRS Form 990-PF, searchable through ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer.⁶

Talk to the program officer. Before you write, send one paragraph: the objectives, the place, the cost, and a question about fit. A ten-minute call can save a hundred hours.

Do the pre-work before you write. The misstep I see most: every hour goes into the proposal and none into getting it where it needs to go. Federal money runs through SAM.gov, which takes up to 10 business days to activate, weeks or months if your information cannot be verified, and must be renewed yearly.^{7,8} USDA cost-share wants your farm records current with the Farm Service Agency before it can evaluate an application.⁹ Then learn the funder's portal: its accounts and roles, forms, file formats, and uploads. Universities keep a whole office for this; it takes professional-level knowledge, whoever applies and whoever funds.

Keep a funder calendar: each program's deadline, match, and contact. Many run yearly, so this year's list becomes next year's plan; confirm the dates.

HOW OFTEN APPLICATIONS ARE FUNDED



The two largest USDA conservation programs, fiscal years 2024 and 2025.¹⁰ The odds swing with each year's money, and many programs publish no rate: ask the program officer, and plan to apply more than once.

III Write it, price it, and report it

Write for the reviewer. Follow the instructions to the letter: the page limits, the fonts, the file formats, and every required section. Answer the review criteria in their own words and in their order, so a reviewer scoring against a list finds each answer where it belongs. The parts, in the order reviewers meet them: a summary, written last and read first; the need, with evidence; the objectives; the methods; a timeline; how you will know it worked; who you are and why you can do it; the budget and its justification; and what happens after the money. Show the logic from need to outcome in one paragraph or one picture.¹¹

Build the budget from the objectives. Every line ties to a task, and every number has a quote, a rate, or a record behind it; the budget justification says which. Do not pad and do not lowball: a reviewer who has priced a burn crew knows what one costs. Count your match honestly. Under federal rules, cash, labor, equipment, and materials count as match when they are in your records, needed for the work, and not counted toward another federal award.¹² An organization seeking federal money also budgets personnel, benefits, travel, and indirect costs. Without a negotiated rate, awards starting on or after 1 October 2024 allow indirect costs of up to 15 percent of the direct-cost base, and an item costing \$10,000 or more is equipment.¹³

When the answer is no. Ask for the reviews, fix what they found, and apply again. In one applied research record, two proposals turned down were each funded two years later by the same funder, for more money.

After the money arrives. The award is an agreement. Keep every receipt and timesheet; spend to the budget, and ask before you change it; report on schedule; and credit the funder on anything public. On a federal award, every final report is due within 120 calendar days after the period of performance ends.¹⁴ Funders remember: over twelve years of one applied research record, nine of sixteen funders came back with another award, and those return awards brought in about half of all the grant money. A clean final report is the best proposal you will ever write.

What a clean final report holds. The objectives and what happened to them, in the measures you promised; the money, budgeted against spent, with a line on anything that moved; the match, documented; photographs from the same points as the baseline; and what comes next.

IV Anyone can drive a tractor

No study backs this section. My mistakes do. My grandfather, Daddy Bob, held that an error uncorrected is a mistake, and a mistake not corrected is a failure.¹⁵ Run the work before a grant the way he ran his farm: every day, with intent. Plan, watch, and act. Be honest with yourself, weigh the ethics, and figure the economics first, always, and with stress. “Anyone can drive a tractor, Little B.A.,” he told me. His words, not mine; his source, sixty successful harvests. He was first on the tractor and last off. He meant: be the one who plans. That is the work. Show up prepared.

The ethics: take other people’s money, and you represent

them and what they stand for, so decide wisely. Integrity is like virginity: you only lose it once.¹⁶ People who ask for money, scientists or not, do not get the grace politicians get, and I suspect you will not either, whatever the situation.

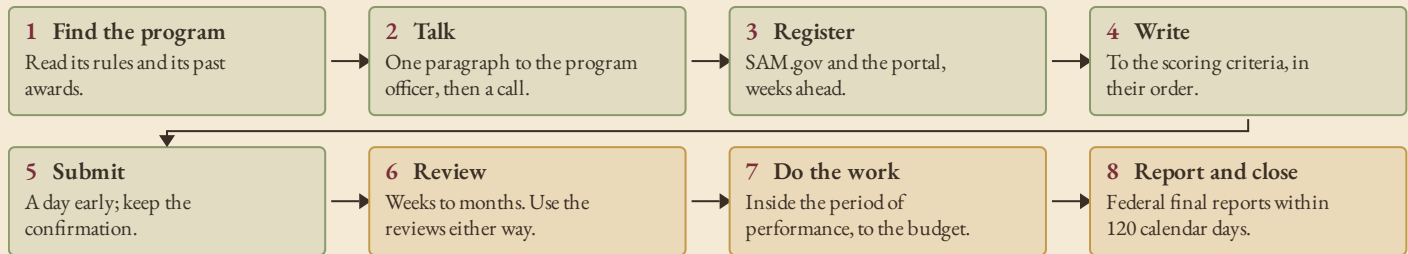
Once funded, I answered to everyone on the grant, from the undergraduate assistant to the coordinator the funder chose to supervise me, as if my aunt, Linda Smith, were in the room. Her expectations did not budge, and her rewards were earned. So I followed the rules, showed respect, did what the contract said, and said so. Funders came back, some for years.

THE SAME INVENTED PROJECT, PRICED		
Redcedar cutting (contractor)		\$24,000
Burn crew and equipment		\$6,000
Owner’s labor and equipment		\$5,000
Fire lines (contractor)		\$3,000
Monitoring supplies and days		\$2,000
Total project cost		\$40,000
The program pays 75 percent \$30,000		Owner’s 25% \$10,000

The owner’s share: \$5,000 of labor and equipment, documented as the work is done, and \$5,000 in cash.

Objective 2 from page 1, priced for a cost-share program paying 75 percent of the total, as Texas’s Landowner Incentive Program can.⁴ Numbers for illustration.

☐ before the deadline ☐ after it



Idea to final report.^{7,14} Every program runs its own calendar; the two fixed points for federal money are in steps 3 and 8.

Before you submit

- ☐ The objectives are ranked; each names what, where, how much, by when, and how it will be measured, and says why it is there.
- ☐ The program's own priorities describe the objectives.
- ☐ You, and every partner named, are eligible.
- ☐ You have talked with the program officer, or tried to.
- ☐ Registrations are current: SAM.gov for federal money, farm records for USDA cost-share.
- ☐ You have walked through the portal: its accounts, forms, and uploads.
- ☐ Every required section, form, and letter is in, in the order asked.
- ☐ Page limits, fonts, and file formats are met.
- ☐ Each review criterion is answered in its own words.
- ☐ Every budget line ties to a task and has a quote, rate, or record.
- ☐ The match is documented: who gives what, and what it is worth.
- ☐ Letters of support are specific, dated, and signed.
- ☐ Someone who has not seen the proposal has read it cold.
- ☐ Report dates are on the calendar.
- ☐ It goes in at least a day early, and you keep the confirmation.

Sources

Each source is shortened to its authors and year, where it was published, and its subject; the journal, volume, and pages, or the publisher or web address, find it.

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| <p>1 Aldridge and Colvin 2024. <i>Ecological Solutions and Evidence</i> 5:e12313. Writing SMART objectives.</p> <p>2 USDA NRCS. Advance payments, Environmental Quality Incentives Program. nrsc.usda.gov</p> <p>3 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Partners for Fish and Wildlife. fws.gov</p> <p>4 Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Landowner Incentive Program. tpwd.texas.gov</p> | <p>5 U.S. Department of the Treasury. Federal awards, searchable. usaspending.gov</p> <p>6 ProPublica. Nonprofit Explorer. projects.propublica.org/nonprofits</p> <p>7 Grants.gov. Applicant registration. grants.gov</p> <p>8 SAM.gov. Entity registration. sam.gov</p> <p>9 USDA NRCS. Applying to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. nrsc.usda.gov</p> <p>10 Happ 2026. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. NRCS funding rates. iatp.org</p> | <p>11 W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2004. <i>Logic Model Development Guide</i>. Battle Creek, Michigan.</p> <p>12 2 CFR 200.306. Cost sharing. ecfr.gov</p> <p>13 U.S. EPA. The 2024 revision to 2 CFR part 200. epa.gov/grants</p> <p>14 2 CFR 200.344. Closeout. ecfr.gov</p> <p>15 Grisham 2026. <i>Clouds: A Family, a Farm, and a Cotton Farmer's Poetic License</i>. Grisham Field Press.</p> <p>16 Blockstein 2002. <i>BioScience</i> 52:91–96. Political virginity and scientific credibility.</p> |
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Words worth knowing

Budget justification. The narrative behind each budget line: what it buys, why, and how the number was set.

Closeout. The end of an award: final reports filed, receipts reconciled, unspent money returned.

Cost-share, or match. The part of the project's cost you contribute, in cash or in kind.

In-kind. Labor, equipment, materials, or space you contribute, valued at a fair rate and documented.

Indirect costs. Shared costs of running an organization, such as rent, accounting, and insurance, that no one project can itemize.

Notice of funding opportunity. The announcement that sets a program's rules, deadline, and scoring.

Period of performance. The dates between which the award's money may be spent.

Program officer. The funder's staff member who runs the program and answers applicants' questions.

SAM.gov and the Unique Entity ID. The federal registration, and the number it issues, that an organization needs to apply for federal money.

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