# Southern SARE Grant Review Criteria and Tips
# For Administrative Council and Subcommittees


Research and Education Grants
- Pre-proposal (Full Administrative Council, Project Review Committee).....**Page 2**
- Full proposal (Project Review Committee).....**Page 4**
- Additional Review Tips.....**Page 6**

Education Grants (Project Review Committee).....**Page 7**

Professional Development Program Grants (PDP Committee)....**Page 9**

Graduate Student Grants (Project Review Committee)....**Page 14**

On-Farm Research Grants (Producer Grant Committee)....**Page 16**
Additional Review Tips.....**Page 19**

Producer Grants (Producer Grant Committee)....**Page 20**
Additional Review Tips.....**Page 22**

# Research and Education Grants Review Criteria

Research and Education Grants focus on multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary Systems Research projects that address issues of sustainable agriculture of current and potential importance to the region and the nation.

Research and Education Grants are a two-stage pre-proposal and full proposal process.

## Pre-proposal Review Process

The **Administrative Council** (the governing body of Southern SARE) is involved in screening pre-proposals at the close of the pre-proposal grant deadline. All pre-proposals are reviewed by four Administrative Council members who vote on whether or not a pre-proposal should move forward to the full proposal stage.

Full proposal invite is based on the following review criteria:

- **A Systems Approach to Sustainable Agriculture:** The pre-proposal demonstrates a whole systems approach to sustainable agriculture, focusing on more than one component system and including SARE's three pillars of sustainability.

- **Multi-institutional, Multi-disciplinary Collaborations:** The pre-proposal includes meaningful multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary collaborations with their roles in the project relevant to the three pillars of sustainability.

- **Project Relevance to Sustainable Agriculture**: The pre-proposal focuses on sustainable agricultural systems and makes a clear, well-thought case of either making existing systems more sustainable, or creates a new and innovative method for sustainability. The project meets SARE goals of sustainable agriculture.

- **Educational/Outreach Component:** An educational component is included with usable findings by farmers/ranchers and other intended audiences.

Each criteria is scored on a scale of **One to Four (1-4)** with the scores averaged for a final score. Each pre-proposal is scored as described:

**Four (4):** High Priority. Invite for Full Proposal: Pre-Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, addresses SARE's three pillars of sustainability, and fulfills the review criteria. Pre-Proposal requirements are met and addresses a topic of need with a unique, innovative, sustainable ag solutions.

**Three (3):** May Be Invited for Full Proposal But Not as Strong as High Priority Pre-Proposals: Pre-Proposals are not as strong as high priority pre-proposals, but there are elements that might make them worth seeing again. Pre-Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, pertains to sustainable agriculture, and fulfills the review criteria. Improvements are evident before they go through a technical review.

**Two (2):** Revise and Resubmit: Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program and pertains to sustainable agriculture, but there are sections of the proposal that don't fulfill review criteria or not all requirements of Call for Proposals have been met. Applicant is encouraged to Revise and Resubmit for the next grant cycle per the Administrative Council reviewer's comments to strengthen the proposal.

**One (1):** Do Not Invite for Full Proposal: Proposal does not fit into the grant program applied for; proposal does not meet the mission/vision of the SARE program; does not pertain to sustainable agriculture; and/or does not meet the requirements of the Call for Proposals.

A brief written explanation is also included in the review process. Based on this final score and the comments, the Administrative Council makes a recommendation to invite pre-proposal applicants to submit a full proposal.

After the Administrative Council makes its recommendation on the pre-proposals, the **Project Review Committee**, a subcommittee of the full Administrative Council, meets to discuss which pre-proposals to invite for full proposals based on the scores, comments, and recommendations put forth by the Administrative Council. The purpose of this review step is to ensure that pre-proposals recommended to submit a full proposal meet the conceptual requirements of the program and are technically feasible. It is at this time that final selections are made and are presented for a vote at the summer Administrative Council meeting.

# Full Proposal Review Process

Comprehensive reviews of Research and Education Grants are undertaken at the full proposal stage. Funding is awarded competitively and more proposals may be submitted than receive funding. Proposals will be less competitive, or may not be funded at all, if they don't conform to the requirements in the Call for Proposal.

Upon closure of the grant deadline, proposals receive a technical review by **three outside technical reviewers** across the Southern region with expertise in a wide range of sustainable agriculture research areas. Technical reviewers are assigned to proposals based on their expertise area.

Technical reviewers score and comment on proposals based on the following review criteria:

- **Reviewing the Ability of Project Investigators and Major Participants to Achieve Stated Goals** to determine if the investigators are qualified to conduct the proposed project. Are the roles of all investigators and participants adequately defined and appropriate? **(5 points)**

- **Determining if the project demonstrates a whole systems approach to sustainable agriculture**, and incorporates the three pillars of sustainability: profit, people, places. **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the Statement of Problem, Rationale and Significance** to determine if project goals can be attained and how the project outcomes contribute to sustainable agriculture and the priorities of Southern SARE. **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the Objectives** to ensure that they can realistically be completed within the proposed time frame, and project goals are feasible to obtain by the methods stated. **(20 points)**

- **Reviewing the Approaches and Methods** to determine if the project experiment is clear, well designed and thought out so that useful and applicable results can be obtained. Are the proposed methods and experimental design adequate to meet project objectives? Are they technically sound? **(20 points)**

- **Determining the effectiveness of the outreach plan.** Project results should have specific applicability for farmers and be presented in a way that could be adopted or implemented. Is the outreach plan well thought out and a benefit to its intended audience? Are the methods for implementing the outreach plan the most effective way of reaching farmers and ranchers? **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the assessment plan of Evaluation and Impact** to determine if it's an integral part of the development of each objective and is evident in conducting the project. How will the benefits be measured? How do farmers benefit from the project? What is the environmental benefit of the project? What are the potential economic and social benefits of the project? **(15 points)**

- **Evaluating the project's budget** to determine if the requested amount is reasonable and realistic, and is clear on what the funds will be spent on. Are the requested funds

allowable? Are budget items itemized with clear descriptions on how they will be used in the project? **(10 points)**

Each proposal is scored as described:

**100-75 = High priority:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, addresses SARE's pillars of sustainability, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met and addresses a topic of need with a unique, innovative, sustainable ag solution. Depending on funding levels, not all high priority proposals may be funded.

**74-50 = Fundable:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, pertains to sustainable agriculture, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met, but could be improved. While fundable, the proposal may not receive funding due to competition from other proposals.

**49-25 = Revise and resubmit**: Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program and pertains to sustainable agriculture, but there are sections of the proposal that don't fulfill review criteria or not all requirements of Call for Proposals have been met. Author is encouraged to revise and resubmit for the next year's competition per the reviewer's comments to strengthen the proposal.

**24-0 = Not fundable:** Proposal does not fit into the grant program applied for; proposal does not meet the mission/vision of the SARE program, does not pertain to sustainable agriculture, and/or does not meet the requirements of the Call for Proposals. The applicant has applied to the wrong grant program.

Once the technical reviewers complete their reviews, the **Project Review Committee** of Southern SARE's Administrative Council (Southern SARE's governing body) reviews the high scoring proposals and meets virtually to discuss fundable proposals. The Project Review Committee convenes at the winter Administrative Council (AC) meeting to finalize selections. Those are then recommended to the full Administrative Council and voted on for funding.

## Additional Review Tips

- Look are current market/sustainable ag farming trends. How would the grant results support those trends?

- Read the Call for Proposals before reviewing. It helps to answer the following questions: Is this really a sustainable ag project? Is every section included? Are budget items allowable? Is the timetable realistic? Are the objectives clear?

- Do applicants have the skills to conduct the project? If not, are they working/consulting with someone who does?

- Can you understand what the applicant is proposing? If the proposal is difficult to understand, the applicant may not be able to present results in a logical way.

- Is the proposal a band-aid to conventional agriculture that incrementally sustains the unsustainable, or is it an innovative idea that seeks transformative change toward agro-ecological, holistic systems?

- Is the systems approach clear in the proposal? Does the proposal incorporate the three pillars of sustainability? Are research experts emphasizing the three pillars involved in the project?

- Think about how your comments would help applicants strengthen their proposal or improve their grant writing skills. Your comments should be useful to the applicant in addressing a gap in their proposal that may not align with the evaluation criteria. Think about what would make the proposal fundable.

The Project Review Committee is responsible for ensuring that the selected projects reflect not only scientific merit, but include projects from as many priority areas as possible, from across states, institutions, stakeholder groups and NGOs. The comments given to PIs should be constructive and explicit. It is important that the review comments be of adequate substance to assist an author in meaningful revision. Short, one-sentence comments that provide little value for improvement are unhelpful for applicants. Be sure to focus on providing suggestions or recommendations that allow applicants to strengthen their grant-writing skills or improve upon their grant proposal for future resubmission and consideration.

# Education Grants Review Criteria

Education Grants provide opportunities for academic institutions and organizations, such as nonprofits and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to conduct education-based activities within their communities. The goal is to further sustainable agriculture efforts to farmers/ranchers, community groups, and ag professionals.

Upon closure of the grant deadline, proposals receive a technical review by the **Project Review Committee** of Southern SARE's Administrative Council, the program's governing body.

The Project Review Committee evaluates the proposal using the following criteria:

- **Reviewing the qualifications of the applicant.** Is the applicant eligible and have the experience, skills, knowledge and resources to complete the project? **(5 points)**

- **Reviewing the Need, Rationale and Significance** of the project based on skills and knowledge gaps that can be fulfilled through a "teachable" project whose success can be effectively measured through evaluation. **(10 points)**

- **Determining how the Project is Relevant to Sustainable Agriculture.** How does the project and its expected results contribute to sustainable agriculture? Is the project and its expected results a new and creative innovation? Does the project contribute to the growth of sustainable agriculture by building on and/or adding to existing knowledge? Is it a band-aid to conventional agriculture or does it move the needle in more sustainable farming practices? **(15 points)**

- **Reviewing the Objectives** to ensure that they can realistically be completed within the proposed time frame, and project goals are feasible to obtain by the methods stated. **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the Approaches and Methods** to determine if the proposed educational approach is clear, well designed and thought out so that it solves a problem or encourages farmer adoption of recommended practices or strategies. **(25 points)**

- **Evaluating the project's Budget** to determine if the requested amount is reasonable and realistic, and is clear on what the funds will be spent on. Are the requested funds allowable? Are budget items itemized with clear descriptions on how they will be used in the project? **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the Outreach Plan** for applicability for farmers/ranchers and their ability to adopt or implement project results. **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the Evaluation** to ensure methods demonstrate project process, outcome, and success of implementation or adoption of skills, knowledge, strategies or other educational resources. **(15 points)**

Each proposal is scored as described:

**100-75 = High priority:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, addresses SARE's pillars of sustainability, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met and addresses a topic of need with a unique, innovative, sustainable ag solution. Depending on funding levels, not all high priority proposals may be funded.

**74-50 = Fundable:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, pertains to sustainable agriculture, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met, but could be improved. While fundable, the proposal may not receive funding due to competition from other proposals.

**49-25 = Revise and resubmit**: Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program and pertains to sustainable agriculture, but there are sections of the proposal that don't fulfill review criteria or not all requirements of Call for Proposals have been met. Author is encouraged to revise and resubmit for the next year's competition per the reviewer's comments to strengthen the proposal.

**24-0 = Not fundable:** Proposal does not fit into the grant program applied for; proposal does not meet the mission/vision of the SARE program, does not pertain to sustainable agriculture, and/or does not meet the requirements of the Call for Proposals. The applicant has applied to the wrong grant program.

Once the Project Review Committee completes its technical review, it meets by Zoom call to discuss fundable proposals, and then again at the February Administrative Council (AC) meeting to select fundable projects. Those are then presented to the full Administrative Council for funding.

Provide comments for each review questions in the SARE Grant Management System, particularly in areas that need improvement. Short, one-sentence comments that provide little value for improvement are unhelpful for applicants. Be sure to focus on providing suggestions or recommendations that allow applicants to strengthen their grant-writing skills or improve upon their grant proposal for future resubmission and consideration. Be thoughtful in your responses in how the proposed project advances sustainable agriculture and provide input in what would make the proposal stronger in its sustainable ag efforts.

# Professional Development Program Grants Review Criteria

Professional Development Program Grants reviews are a two-stage pre-proposal and full proposal process.

## Pre-proposal Review Process

The Administrative Council (Southern SARE PDP Committee) is involved in screening pre-proposals at the close of the pre-proposal grant deadline. All pre-proposals are reviewed by three PDP Committee members who vote on whether or not a pre-proposal should move forward to the full proposal stage. The Executive Committee makes the final selections on which pre-proposals are invited to submit full proposals.

Full proposal invite is based on the following review criteria:

- **Collaboration:** The pre-proposal should demonstrate interdisciplinary efforts and multi-institutional partnerships that can endure beyond the life of the project. Collaboration may include: non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, land grant universities, non-land grant universities, colleges, USDA agencies, and mentor farmers. There is meaningful farmer / producer participation in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the training. Farmers and ranchers are not the primary audience of the training, but they are the ultimate beneficiaries of information, so they can provide a valuable perspective and should be included in the planning and implementation of training.

- **Project Summary:** A project's central purpose must be to provide or enable training to one or more of the following: Cooperative Extension Service agents; USDA field personnel from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency, and other USDA agencies, and; Other agricultural professionals and educators, including farmers who will serve as trainers. Research projects and farmer-outreach or education projects do not qualify for this funding.

- **Project Objective:** Project outcomes must focus on developing sustainable agriculture systems or moving existing systems toward sustainability, as defined in the 1990 Farm Bill. The1990 Farm Bill defines sustainable agriculture as: An integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term; Enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends; Make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources, and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; Sustain the economic viability of farm operations; enhance the quality of life of farmers and ranchers, and of society as

a whole.

- **Project Activities:** The proposed training projects must be relevant to sustainable agriculture in the Southern SARE service region.

- **Project Evaluation:** A coherent evaluation plan should demonstrate a feedback loop, which is essential to assess the effectiveness of the training model and include a plan to measure realistic outcomes that assess the change in attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions of the trainees.

- **Project Timeline:** Timeline of project activities reasonable for to achieve objectives in a one or two year time frame.

- **Estimated Budget**

Each criteria is scored on a scale of **One to Four (1-4)** with the scores averaged for a final score.

Each pre-proposal is scored as described:

- **Four (4): High Priority.** Invite for Full Proposal: Pre-Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, addresses SARE's three pillars of sustainability, and fulfills the review criteria. Pre-Proposal requirements are met and addresses a topic of need with a unique, innovative, sustainable ag solution. The Technical Reviewers should provide information on the Objectives and Methods.

- **Three (3):** May Be Invited for Full Proposal But Not as Strong as High Priority Pre-Proposals: Pre-Proposals are not as strong as high priority pre-proposals, but there are elements that might make them worth seeing again. Pre-Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, pertains to sustainable agriculture, and fulfills the review criteria. Improvements are evident before they go through a technical review.

- **Two (2) Revise and Resubmit:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program and pertains to sustainable agriculture, but there are sections of the proposal that don't fulfill review criteria or not all requirements of Call for Proposals have been met. Applicant is encouraged to Revise and Resubmit for the next grant cycle per the Administrative Council reviewer's comments to strengthen the proposal.

- **One (1) Do Not Invite for Full Proposal:** Proposal does not fit into the grant program applied for; proposal does not meet the mission/vision of the SARE program; does not pertain to sustainable agriculture; and/or does not meet the requirements of the Call for Proposals.

A brief written explanation is also included in the review process. Based on this final score and the comments, the Executive Committee makes a recommendation to invite pre-proposal applicants to submit a full proposal.

# Full Proposal Review Process

The full proposal process incorporates three entities within SSARE: the Administrative Council (AC), the PDP Committee of the AC, and a technical Review Team.

The full proposals are reviewed by the outside review team made up individuals who are trained and experienced in developing educational programs for agricultural professionals.

The role of the Outside Review Team is to focus on the theoretical approach of the program design, review the objectives, methods, approaches, design, timeline, and evaluation plan.

The Outside Review Team provides a written review that concentrates on:

- Methods and appropriateness of project design (including objectives and timeline)
- Evaluation and impact design
- Ability of project director and major participants

The AC/PDP Review Team reviews the full proposals based on the following criteria:

- Farmer/Producer Participation
- Collaboration of Diverse Groups
- Behavior-based Objectives
- Project Activities- Makes a case for relevancy to sustainable agriculture in the Southern SARE service region.
- A coherent evaluation plan
- Leverage other inputs and sustain outcomes in the future
- Appropriate educational methodology
- Realistic timelines and cost-effective budget
- Develop linkages to other SARE proposals

Proposals are rated High Priority( 4), Fundable (3), Revisions Required (2) or Non-Fundable (1). The strength and weakness of each proposal is clearly stated.

Feedback is restricted to written comments from the Outside Review Team and the AC-PDP Committee. Review feedback is provided to proposal authors only. The AC makes the final decision on funding.

Proposal #

**SCORING RUBRIC SSARE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM PROPOSAL**

| | EXEMPLARY (8 -10 PTS) | ADEQUATE (5 - 7 PTS) | MARGINAL (2 - 4 PTS) | MISSING (0 - 1 PTS) | SCORE | COMMENTS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Participation-** is there **meaningful producer participation** in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the training | Provides a clear and thorough explanation of producer participation. | Provides an adequate explanation of producer participation | Provides an unorganized explanation of producer participation. | Explanation of producer participation missing. | | |
| **Collaboration-diverse groups** will partner to plan, deliver, and evaluate training. May be NGO, CBO, Land Grants, colleges, Gov. agencies. | Provides clear explanation of collaboration with other relevant organizations in planning, delivery and / or evaluation of grant projects | Provides adequate explanation of collaboration with other relevant organizations in planning, delivery and / or evaluation of grant projects | Provides an unorganized / inadequate explanation of collaboration with other relevant organizations in planning, delivery and / or evaluation of grant projects | Explanation of collaboration missing. | | |
| **Objectives-** objectives and outcomes of the proposed training and education project must be clearly defined. | Provides a clear and thorough explanation of objectives and outcomes, including groups to be trained and expected behavioral changes | Provides adequate explanation of objectives and expected outcomes. Does not identify target audience or expected behavioral changes. | Provides an unorganized explanation of objectives and expected outcomes. Does not identify target audience or expected behavioral changes. | Objectives and outcomes missing. | | |
| **Evaluation-** feedback loop to assess the effectiveness of the training model | Presents a clear plan to measure realistic outcomes that assess changes in attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions of the trainees | Provides an adequate explanation training evaluations and of how outcomes will be assessed. | Provides an unorganized plan for evaluation of training effectiveness. | Evaluation plan is missing. | | |
| **Sustainable Ag Training-** Relevance may imply the training contributes to the diversity of agricultural enterprises, diversity of approaches for problem solving, or improving the profitability or economic importance of an enterprise. | Provides a clear explanation for project relevancy to sustainable ag in the south through environmental, societal and/or economic impacts. | Provides an adequate explanation of project relevancy to sustainable ag in the south through environmental , societal and/or economic impacts. | Provides an inadequate explanation of project relevancy to sustainable ag in the south through environmental, societal and/or economic impacts. | Explanation of sustainable ag relevancy or impact missing. | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Project Resources-** a plan to leverage other inputs, multiply outputs, and sustain outcomes | Presents clear explanation of how SARE resources will be used, how the scope of the project may be expanded, and, possibly institutionalized | Presents an adequate explanation of how SARE resources will be used, how the scope of the project may be expanded, and, possibly institutionalized | Presents an unorganized explanation of how SARE resources will be used. No explanation of how the scope of the project may be expanded. | No explanation of project resources. | | |
| **Methodology-** description of the methods that will be used to accomplish the project objectives. May include use of SARE Outreach materials, on-farm experiential learning, distance learning, etc. | Presents a clear and appropriate plan to achieve the stated training objectives and includes a description of participatory training methods and materials | Provides adequate explanation of training methods and how training objectives will be achieved. | Provides an unorganized explanation of the major activities to be used to accomplish training objectives. | Training methodologies missing. | | |
| **Budget and Timeline-** | Provides a clear explanation of the major budget items and a realistic timeline of how they would be used. | Provides an adequate explanation of the major budget items and a realistic timeline of how they would be used | Provides an unorganized explanation of the major budget items and timeline of how they would be used. | Budget and/or timeline is missing. | | |
| **Linkages to other SARE projects-** Go to the Project Report tab and search the database for similar projects. | Provides a clear explanation of how this project builds upon or develops linkages to other SARE projects. Proposal specifically cites other SARE projects. | Provides adequate explanation of how this project builds upon or develops linkages to other SARE projects. No citations provided for other SARE projects. | Provides unorganized explanation of how this project builds upon or develops linkages to other SARE projects. | Linkages missing and no explanation given. | | |
| **Funding Recommendation-** On a scale of 1 to 4, please rate your opinion of this proposal's value to be funded | 4 = High Priority | 3 = Fundable | 2 = Marginal; needs revisions | 1 = Not fundable | | |

# Graduate Student Grants Review Criteria

Graduate Student Grants is the only SARE grant program that provides opportunities for Master's and PhD students enrolled full time at U.S. universities to conduct sustainable agriculture research, whether in the lab or in the field. Two years of research can be funded at a project maximum of $22,000. Graduate Student Grants have been a vehicle for students to apply for other SARE grants as they further their academic and research careers.

Upon closure of the grant deadline, proposals receive a technical review by **outside technical reviewers** across the Southern region with expertise in a wide range of sustainable agriculture research areas. Technical reviewers are assigned to proposals based on their expertise area.

Technical reviewers score and comment on proposals for technical merit and relevancy of the project to sustainable agriculture based on the following review criteria:

- **Reviewing the Qualifications of the Graduate Student** to determine that the student (with the major professor's support) has the experience and qualifications to conduct the proposed work and can complete the work within proposed timetable. **(5 points)**

- **Reviewing the Statement of the Problem** to ensure that the applicant clearly describes the problem and why the problem needs to be addressed. **(15 points)**

- **Reviewing the Objectives** to ensure that they can realistically be completed within the proposed time frame, and project goals are feasible to obtain by the methods stated. **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the Approaches and Methods** to determine if the project experiment is clear, well designed and thought out so that useful and applicable results can be obtained. **(25 points)**

- **Determining how the Project is Relevant to Sustainable Agriculture.** How does the project and its expected results contribute to sustainable agriculture? Is the project and its expected results a new and creative innovation? Does the project contribute to the growth of sustainable agriculture by building on and/or adding to existing knowledge? Is it a band-aid to conventional agriculture or does it move the needle in more sustainable farming practices? **(20 points)**

- **Reviewing the Timeline** to determine if the project can be effectively completed in the time provided based on the research proposed. Does the graduate student demonstrate the ability to complete the proposed project? **(10 points)**

- **Evaluating the project's Budget** to determine if the requested amount is reasonable and realistic, and is clear on what the funds will be spent on. Are the requested funds allowable? Are budget items itemized with clear descriptions on how they will be used in the project? **(15 points)**

Each proposal is scored as described:

**100-75 = High priority:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, addresses SARE's pillars of sustainability, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met and addresses a topic of need with a unique, innovative, sustainable ag solution. Depending on funding levels, not all high priority proposals may be funded.

**74-50 = Fundable:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, pertains to sustainable agriculture, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met, but could be improved. While fundable, the proposal may not receive funding due to competition from other proposals.

**49-25 = Revise and resubmit:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program and pertains to sustainable agriculture, but there are sections of the proposal that don't fulfill review criteria or not all requirements of Call for Proposals have been met. Author is encouraged to revise and resubmit for the next year's competition per the reviewer's comments to strengthen the proposal.

**24-0 = Not fundable:** Proposal does not fit into the grant program applied for; proposal does not meet the mission/vision of the SARE program, does not pertain to sustainable agriculture, and/or does not meet the requirements of the Call for Proposals. The applicant has applied to the wrong grant program.

Once the technical reviewers complete their reviews, the **Project Review Committee** of Southern SARE's Administrative Council (Southern SARE's governing body) reads the high scoring proposals and meets virtually to discuss fundable proposals. This process roughly takes two weeks. The Project Review Committee convenes at the summer Administrative Council (AC) meeting (late July/early August) to finalize selections. Those are then recommended to the full Administrative Council and voted on for funding.

Though not required, you may provide general comments for each proposal in the SARE Grant Management System, particularly in areas that need improvement. Short, one-sentence comments that provide little value for improvement are unhelpful for applicants. Be sure to focus on providing suggestions or recommendations that allow applicants to strengthen their grant-writing skills or improve upon their grant proposal for future resubmission and consideration. Applicants look to peer reviews to improve upon and strengthen their own research experiences.

# On-Farm Research Grants Review Criteria

On-Farm Research Grants are one of Southern SARE's smaller grant programs ($30,000 for a two-year research project). Targeted to Cooperative Extension, USDA agencies like NRCS, university researchers, and NGOs, On-Farm Research Grants allow ag professionals who work directly with farmers and ranchers to conduct on-farm research with at least one farmer/rancher cooperator.

On-Farm Research Grants emphasize relationship building between the ag professional and the farmer through two main components of the grant: research focusing on an on-farm sustainable ag practice or technique, and an outreach component to share the results of the grant with the farming community.

Upon closure of the grant deadline, proposals receive a technical review by **outside technical reviewers** across the Southern region with expertise in a wide range of sustainable agriculture research areas. Technical reviewers are assigned to proposals based on their expertise area. The technical review process generally takes 7 weeks.

Technical reviewers score and comment on proposals based on the following review criteria:

- **Reviewing the Statement of the Problem** to ensure that the applicant clearly describes the problem and why the problem needs to be addressed. **(15 points)**

- **Reviewing the Statement of the Proposed Solution and Relevance to Sustainable Agriculture** to demonstrate an improvement over the current problem and how the project and its expected results contribute to sustainable agriculture. Is the solution a new and creative innovation? Does the solution contribute to the growth of sustainable agriculture by building on and/or adding to existing knowledge? Is it a band-aid to conventional agriculture or does it move the needle in more sustainable farming practices? **(15 points)**

- **Reviewing the Approaches and Methods** to determine if the project experiment is clear, well designed and thought out so that useful and applicable results can be obtained. Approaches and Methods align with the budget request. **(25 points)**

- **Reviewing the timeline** to determine if the project can be effectively completed in the time provided based on the research proposed. **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the literature cited** to demonstrate how well the applicant prepared their proposal based on published literature of the research topic. **(5 points)**

- **Determining the effectiveness of the outreach plan.** Is the outreach plan well thought out and a benefit to its intended audience? Are the methods for implementing the outreach plan the most effective way of reaching farmers and ranchers? **(20 points)**

- **Evaluating the project's budget** to determine if the requested amount is reasonable and realistic, and is clear on what the funds will be spent on. Are the requested funds allowable? Are budget items itemized with clear justifications on how they will be used in the project? **(10 points)**

Each proposal is scored as described:

**100-75 = High priority:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, addresses SARE's pillars of sustainability, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met and addresses a topic of need with a unique, innovative, sustainable ag solution. Depending on funding levels, not all high priority proposals may be funded.

**74-50 = Fundable:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, pertains to sustainable agriculture, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met, but could be improved. While fundable, the proposal may not receive funding due to competition from other proposals.

**49-25 = Revise and resubmit:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program and pertains to sustainable agriculture, but there are sections of the proposal that don't fulfill review criteria or not all requirements of Call for Proposals have been met. Author is encouraged to revise and resubmit for the next year's competition per the reviewer's comments to strengthen the proposal.

**24-0 = Not fundable:** Proposal does not fit into the grant program applied for; proposal does not meet the mission/vision of the SARE program, does not pertain to sustainable agriculture, and/or does not meet the requirements of the Call for Proposals. The applicant has applied to the wrong grant program.

The **Producer Grant Committee** of the Southern SARE Administrative Council reviews On-Farm Research Grant proposals once the Technical Review Committee has scored and commented on them. The comments and scores of potentially fundable projects from the Technical Review Committee are used by the Producer Grant Committee to drive discussions, and ultimately select proposals for funding.

Based on the scores and comments of the Technical Review Committee, the Producer Grant Committee should focus its efforts on the following aspects of the proposal:

- Project need and importance to sustainable agriculture in the Southern region. Does the proposed project fill a research need, address something new, or expand on existing research through a different lens? Use your own expertise or farming experiences to determine the potential contributions the research project would bring to sustainable agriculture.

- Project outreach plan. The On-Farm Research Grant requires an outreach component to its research to share results with the greater farming community. Evaluate if the outreach plan is clearly defined and would benefit its intended audience. Is the outreach plan proposed the most effective way of reaching the project's intended audience? Does the outreach plan provide value for its users? Is the PI thinking outside the box? Think about whether the outcomes of the outreach plan would have life beyond the project and how the use of the outreach plan to communicate project results would lead to greater exploration or application on the farm.

- Project budget. Scan the budget and determine if the budget is realistic for the project. Examples to consider: Reasonable budget for labor, or reasonable request for materials or supplies relative to size of treatment plots. Don't let a questionable budget item (if allowable) deter you from potentially funding the project. The budgets of most funded grant projects are revised prior to subaward contracts being finalized.

# Additional Review Tips

- On-Farm Research Grants require at least one farmer cooperator. How are farmers integrated into the project? Do they have cookie cutter job descriptions or is their involvement meaningful and impactful to the project and sustainable ag?

- Look at current market/sustainable ag farming trends. How would the grant results support those trends?

- Can you understand what the applicant is proposing? If the proposals are difficult to understand, the applicants may not be able to present results in a logical way.

- Is the proposal a band-aid to conventional ag or an innovation that seeks transformative change?

- Think about how your comments would help applicants strengthen their proposal or improve their grant writing skills. Your comments should be useful to the applicant in addressing a gap in their proposal that may not align with the evaluation criteria. Think about what would make the proposal fundable.

- Do applicants have the skills to conduct what they are proposing? If not, are they working/consulting with someone who does?

Though not required, you may provide general comments for each proposal in the SARE Grant Management System, particularly in areas that need improvement. Short, one-sentence comments that provide little value for improvement are unhelpful for applicants. Be sure to focus on providing suggestions or recommendations that allow applicants to strengthen their grant-writing skills or improve upon their grant proposal for future resubmission and consideration. Applicants look to peer reviews to improve upon and strengthen their own research experiences.

# Producer Grants Review Criteria

Southern SARE's Producer Grant program gives farmers the opportunity to conduct their own research projects. The program is intended to help farmers and ranchers develop sustainable production and marketing practices that benefit their own farming operations, as well as those of their fellow farmers for the purpose of being more profitable, protecting the environment and preserving community quality of life.

The goal of the Producer Grant Program is simple: Allow farmers to test on a small scale an idea, practice or technology to a production or marketing problem (either as an individual or as a group), evaluate whether the results sustainably address the problem, and share how those efforts can benefit other farmers.

The Producer Grant has two main components: Research focusing on a production or marketing sustainable ag practice or technique, and an outreach component to share the results of the grant with fellow farmers.

Upon closure of the grant deadline, proposals receive a technical review by the **Producer Grant Committee** of Southern SARE's Administrative Council, the program's governing body.

The Producer Grant Committee evaluates the proposal using the following criteria:

- **Reviewing the qualifications of the applicant.** Is the applicant eligible and have the experience, skills, knowledge and resources to complete the project? Does the applicant describe the farm operation and the role on the farm? **(5 points**)

- **Reviewing the Statement of the Problem** to ensure that the applicant clearly describes the problem and why the problem needs to be addressed. **(10 points)**

- **Reviewing the Statement of the Proposed Solution** for relevance to sustainable agriculture and how it's an improvement over the current problem. Does the solution contribute to the growth of sustainable agriculture by building on and/or adding to existing knowledge? Is it a band-aid to conventional agriculture or does it move the needle in more sustainable farming practices? **(15 points)**

- **Reviewing the Approaches and Methods** to determine if the project experiment is clear, well designed and thought out so that useful and applicable results can be obtained. **(20 points)**

- **Reviewing Farmer Impacts** as proposed project and anticipated project results apply to one or more of the following categories: Adoptability, Economic Benefits, Longevity, Quality of Life, and Impact on Other Farmers. **(15 points)**

- **Reviewing the timeline** to determine if the project can be effectively completed in the time provided based on the research proposed. **(10 points)**

- **Determining the effectiveness of the outreach plan.** Is the outreach plan well thought out and a benefit to its intended audience? Are the methods for implementing the outreach plan the most effective way of reaching farmers and ranchers? **(10 points)**

- **Evaluating the project's budget** to determine if the requested amount is reasonable and realistic, and is clear on what the funds will be spent on. Are the requested funds allowable? Are budget items itemized with clear descriptions on how they will be used in the project? **(15 points)**

Each proposal is scored as described:

**100-75 = High priority:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, addresses SARE's pillars of sustainability, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met and addresses a topic of need with a unique, innovative, sustainable ag solution. Depending on funding levels, not all high priority proposals may be funded.

**74-50 = Fundable:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program, pertains to sustainable agriculture, and fulfills the review criteria. Proposal requirements are met, but could be improved. While fundable, the proposal may not receive funding due to competition from other proposals.

**49-25 = Revise and resubmit:** Proposal meets the mission/vision of the SARE program and pertains to sustainable agriculture, but there are sections of the proposal that don't fulfill review criteria or not all requirements of Call for Proposals have been met. Author is encouraged to revise and resubmit for the next year's competition per the reviewer's comments to strengthen the proposal.

**24-0 = Not fundable:** Proposal does not fit into the grant program applied for; proposal does not meet the mission/vision of the SARE program, does not pertain to sustainable agriculture, and/or does not meet the requirements of the Call for Proposals. The applicant has applied to the wrong grant program.

Once the Producer Grant Committee completes its technical review, it meets by conference call to discuss fundable proposals, and then again at the February Administrative Council (AC) meeting to select fundable projects. Those are then presented to the full Administrative Council for funding.

Provide comments for each statement provided in the reviewer section of the SARE Grant Management System, particularly in areas that need improvement. Short, one-sentence comments that provide little value for improvement are unhelpful for applicants. Be sure to focus on providing suggestions or recommendations that allow applicants to strengthen their grant-writing skills or improve upon their grant proposal for future resubmission and consideration. Be thoughtful in your responses in how the proposed project advances

sustainable agriculture and provide input in what would make the proposal stronger in its sustainable ag efforts.

## Additional Review Tips

- Think like the person writing the grant to learn the purpose of the grant and the intended outcome.
- Evaluate and support the proposal from the PIs viewpoint. Do the results help producers to be more successful? Would the results be affordable for producers in the field?
- Pay attention to proposals where the applicant is only wanting to pay themselves to farm or seeking to purchase equipment through the grant. Is the funding request going toward "financing the farms", or is it responding to a need?
- Check the credentials of the applicant. Are producers really producers, or a legitimate producer organization? A Google search would aid in this.
- Is it possible for the applicant to conduct their project based on their farm operation?
- Is the proposal a band-aid to conventional ag or an innovation that seeks transformative change?
- Think about how your comments would help applicants strengthen their proposal or improve their grant writing skills. Your comments should be useful to the applicant in addressing a gap in their proposal that may not align with the evaluation criteria. Think about what would make the proposal fundable.
- Do applicants have the skills to conduct what they are proposing? If not, are they working/consulting with someone who does?

Finally as you review proposals, feel free to provide your own farming experiences in the area being proposed for study. Does the proposed project address something new that needs further research, or does it expand on existing research through a different lens? If you feel the proposed project is not fundable, what changes can be made that would increase the likelihood of its fundability? Applicants look to peer reviews to improve upon and strengthen their own farming experiences and successes.

Proposal reviews take place in the SARE Grant Management System at https://projects.sare.org.

To begin the review process:

1. Log on to the SARE Grant Management System at https://projects.sare.org using your username and password. If you need assistance in creating or resetting your

password, follow the instructions here: https://projects.sare.org/creating-or-resetting-your-password-instructions/

2. Once logged in, under the header **Proposal Reviewer Links** find a link called "Manage my proposal reviews." Click on this link.
3. The link will take you to a page labeled **Manage Reviews**. This page will show the 2025 Southern Producer Grant header and a list of proposals associated with this grant that have been assigned to you for review. Take note of the deadline to complete the reviews.
4. A red "X" next to an assigned proposal indicates the review is not yet complete.
5. Click on a proposal link. It will take you to a page that asks you if you have a conflict of interest. Mark "yes" or "no". If "yes" you will be removed from the proposal and it will be reassigned to another reviewer. If "no", the page will expand to General Instructions and each review criteria question.
6. To answer each question, click on "Edit Answer". Any red "X" next to a review question indicates that the answer has not been completed. Each completed review question will default to a green checkmark, indicating as complete. Once you have answered all review questions, the greyed out "Mark Complete" button will turn green. Make sure to click on this button to complete your review.
7. Follow these instructions for each proposal assigned to you to review until you have completed the review process for each proposal.