# SBIR Proposal Writing Basics: NSF Non-deadline Actually is a Deadline--Maybe

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Earlier this week, we wrote an article in which we said it was not necessary to submit your NSF Phase I proposal by the June 13, 2019 solicitation cycle end date. We’ve heard from a number of folks, both inside NSF and out, and have come to the conclusion that we were wrong: you do need to treat June 13 as a deadline for your NSF proposal. Let us explain, as best we can…

Our advice to not worry about submitting by the 13th was based on a webinar presented by NSF in which we were led to believe that you can submit after June 13th and it wouldn’t matter: your Phase I proposal would be reviewed on a rolling basis, so submitting by, say, June 30th would mean the proposal would be reviewed shortly thereafter and you would know soon thereafter if you won.

But what we have heard this week contradicts this. First, we were told that submitting “a week or so” after the 13th wouldn’t really matter, and the proposal would be reviewed along with those submitted by the 13th—with a decision coming at about the same time that NSF has historically made them, which would probably be in November. But if your proposal was submitted much beyond that general “week or so” it likely will be held to be reviewed after the next deadline in December.

Second, we were told that the rolling review process, in which proposals would be reviewed shortly after they are received regardless of when they cross NSF’s threshold, is a work in progress, and isn’t ready for implementation. This was accompanied by the comment that review of proposals should expected to be along the historical timeline, namely several months after the submission deadline.

Third, we were told that each NSF program manager is doing his/her own thing. This ranges from how much time and effort they put into responding to applicants’ project pitches, to how strict they are about the June 13th “deadline,” to whether and how they review proposals (rolling reviews, virtual panels, traditional once-per-solicitation-cycle review, etc).

The bottom line is that there is so much uncertainty and variability in the NSF’s “new” approach, that the smart and conservative approach is to treat June 13, 2019 as a real deadline, and get your Phase I proposal submitted by 5 pm local time that day. Otherwise, there is a risk that it will not be reviewed until all proposals submitted before the next deadline (December 12, 2019) are received, which will probably be in March or April 2020.

Finally, two words of advice:

1. Neither ourselves nor others we know have seen the NSF program managers reject any project pitches—meaning every one has led to an invitation to the applicant company to submit a full Phase I proposal. And the response from NSF to the project pitch has consisted largely of boilerplate text and canned advice. However, we have seen some kernels of wisdom and advice peppered into this canned text that are unique to the project pitch, and should be heeded when preparing the NSF Phase I proposal (remember, NSF program managers pick the winning proposals subject to their superior’s concurrence, so following the PM’s advice is a real good idea).
2. Because a lot of the project pitch feedback is boilerplate, you should not see this response as a substitute for getting advice and input from proposal reviewers, grant writers, and state SBIR outreach programs regarding your proposal’s content. You should still seek out critical input to your proposal that these resources can provide, who may spend more time on your proposal than an NSF program manager who has a very full plate and therefore can’t spend much time on the project pitches crossing their desk.