# SBIR Proposal Writing Basics: Unsettled Times at USDA SBIR

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You may have seen that US Dept of Agriculture (USDA) released its SBIR solicitation within the past week. This solicitation is unusual in that it has two due dates: one is October 23, 2019, and the other is October 1, 2020. We’ve been in the SBIR program since its inception in 1982, and have never before seen one solicitation issued for the next two fiscal years. Before you conclude that this is just USDA being innovative in how it administers its Small Business Innovation Research Program, consider the following explanation instead.

The Trump Administration announced some time back that it was going to relocate some USDA personnel and departments out of the Washington DC area, both to cut costs and to get staffers closer to their rural constituents. One of those departments is the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), under which the USDA SBIR program resides. According to some mainstream media reports, NIFA is going to relocate to the Kansas City area by the end of calendar year 2019.

Those media reports, as well as first- and second-hand comments that we’ve received, suggests this USDA relocation is very controversial. Reasons that are both professional (e.g., loss of proximity to agencies with which USDA works closely) and personal (e.g., two income families where one breadwinner is to be relocated by USDA while the other is employed by another DC area employer) have been presented as explanations of why this relocation should not occur. There also are political reasons that range from feeling that Trump is trying to gut USDA, to DC area politicians not wanting to lose these jobs from their jurisdictions. Taken together, these reasons add up to attempts to nullify the USDA relocation plan, USDA employees considering unionization, and senior USDA staffers taking early retirement or jobs at other Federal agencies.

What does this mean for the USDA SBIR program? The crystal ball isn’t entirely clear, but it does suggest that the USDA SBIR program could be disrupted over the next few years. We know first-hand that some key, long-time members of the USDA SBIR office are not going to relocate, and that means the office will not only be going through the inevitable inefficiencies associated with a long-range move to KC, but it also will be forced to either fill gaps with inexperienced or junior personnel or cope with staff shortages. We are guessing that this is why USDA issued an SBIR solicitation that has two due dates for the next two fiscal years—they are anticipating glitches and gaps associated with the move to KC, and are trying to eliminate the burden of publishing another SBIR solicitation next summer.

But what is really important about possible relocation of the USDA SBIR program offices is that this may lead to problems in doing timely reviews of incoming proposals, and getting the highest quality proposals converted into Phase I and II grants. Some have told us that Phase I proposals being submitted for the October 2019 deadline should not be affected too much, but all bets are off on the next round or two of Phase Is and IIs. But, if reports that the relocation will occur by the end of 2019 are accurate, then we feel the October 2019 Phase I proposals also may be delayed in their review and award.

Therefore, if you decide to submit a Phase I proposal to USDA for its October 2019 deadline, you need to go into it with an understanding that USDA action on that proposal may not be forthcoming any time soon (even by Federal government standards), that Phase I awards will be made slowly and perhaps “awkwardly” administered, and that subsequent Phase II proposal consideration and award may be similarly delayed. That might be okay if you aren’t counting on the USDA SBIR support to advance your innovation and develop a commercializable product/service, but it could be deadly for a small firm dependent on that USDA funding.

If you are in the latter situation, you may want to consider other agencies for your SBIR proposal over the next several years. For example, if there is a human health angle, then consider NIH and NSF. And if it is energy related, then either DOE, NSF or DoD are candidates. During this unsettled period at USDA SBIR, other agencies might give additional consideration to ag-specific projects. Our advice is to consider alternative agencies to USDA for your rural, farming, ranching, or forestry proposal, and then contact that agency’s SBIR office in advance to determine if they would entertain such a proposal. Also, consider putting a non-ag spin on your innovation to make it attractive to another agency; plan to get that agency to fund the basic innovation development, and then you could do the additional ag-related R&D and commercialization at a later time when USDA SBIR returns to “normal” or using your internal independent R&D funding.