

NERRS Science Collaborative

Feedback Report from the 2020 Request for Proposals

As part of ongoing adaptive management efforts, the Science Collaborative works to refine and adjust our approach to meet our goal of delivering highly relevant, usable science that addresses coastal management problems important to the reserves. Our approach is driven by feedback from program participants and the NERRS, and direction provided by NOAA.

This document summarizes the feedback we received from the feedback survey deployed following the close of the three 2020 Science Collaborative Requests for Proposals (RFPs). This year, the Science Collaborative released Collaborative Research, Catalyst, and Science Transfer RFPs during the 2020 funding cycle. We received 33 Catalyst, 32 Collaborative Research, and 13 Science Transfer proposals, and ultimately funded 20 projects. See our [recent funding announcement](#) for more details on the new projects.

2020 RFP Feedback Process

This year, we asked reserve staff and all 2020 RFP applicants for feedback on the three 2020 RFPs via an anonymous, web-based feedback form. The invitation to reserve staff encouraged them to provide feedback, even if they did not ultimately submit an application. We received 61 responses, 48% of which came from non-reserve staff representing academic institutions, non-profit organizations, and state or local agencies. Of the total responses, 89% of respondents were part of a team that submitted a proposal in response to at least one 2020 RFP.

RFP Guidance and Proposal Submission

Feedback: The Request for Proposals and the grant application process were fairly similar to prior years, and the majority of applicants reported that the purpose of each RFP, the proposal requirements, and the submission process were clear (Figure 1). Comments reflected positive sentiment toward the availability and clarity of guidance documents throughout the proposal development process.

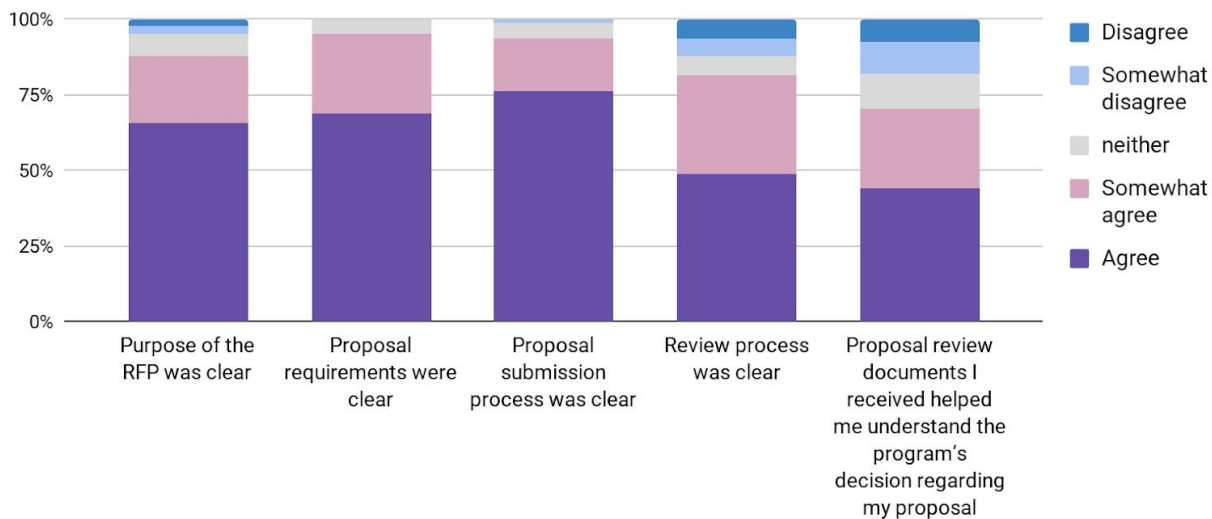
In their responses to open-ended survey questions, a number of people reported that the collaboration required to develop a strong proposal was time consuming and involved, and particularly challenging due to the pandemic this year. Some respondents requested more guidance on requirements for end user engagement, as well as more clarity in distinguishing the roles of collaborators, partners, and end users. We also heard that multi-reserve projects amplify the challenge of meeting the RFP requirements, particularly meeting deadlines for submissions and gathering letters of support.

RFP Adjustments: In 2021, we've added some additional guidance on what applicants should include in their proposal narrative, how to define different roles within a project, and what should



be included in letters of support. We realize planning collaborative science projects is complex, and we will continue to consider additional tools and references to support the proposal development process as well as project implementation.

Figure 1. Respondents' perceptions of the 2020 RFP application processes



Clarity of Review Process

Feedback: Survey responses revealed questions about the proposal review and selection process. Although over 75% of respondents indicated they found the review process to be clear, and 70% found the review documents helpful (Figure 1), comments revealed that applicants had questions about:

- How reserve manager assessments of proposals were incorporated into the review process;
- How the applicant's response to their proposal's technical reviews was used in the review process; and
- How to make sense of their reviews when scores and comments differed among reviewers of their proposal.

RFP Adjustments: To help address these questions, we revised the way the review process is explained in the 2021 RFPs. The review process is particularly complex for the collaborative research RFP, which involves a pre- and full proposal stage and many reviewers, so it's helpful to get feedback on areas of confusion. Each of the questions listed above is addressed below.



Ensuring Alignment with NERRS

Feedback: Some applicants raised questions about how the reserve manager assessments of proposals were incorporated into the review process. We also heard that the requirement to meet a predefined management need, as listed in the Annual Summary of Reserve Management Needs, can impede some potentially important ideas.

RFP Adjustments: To address questions raised by applicants and reserve managers, as well as some confusion we've noted among proposal reviewers, we modified our process for soliciting and incorporating manager input for the 2021 RFPs. Managers have been consulted and given detailed guidance on the modified process. A brief summary of the revised process follows.

- Applicants will need to work closely with reserve collaborators to develop their proposal, including sections explaining the project's relevance to the NERRS.
- If managers feel strongly about the value of a proposal, particularly if the proposal addresses a topic not clearly described in the annual reserve management need summary, they have the option to provide a letter of support for the proposal package.
- All relevant managers will have an opportunity to submit concerns about a proposal directly to the Science Collaborative, and the program will either reach out to clarify the concerns, raise the identified issue with panelists, address concerns with applicants ahead of contracting, or use the feedback as part of the secondary selection process.

Applicant Response to Reviews

Feedback: For the 2020 RFPs, we implemented a new step in the review process for collaborative research full proposals. Applicants were given a chance to review their proposal's written technical reviews and provide a short response as input to the panel discussion of proposals. Survey responses indicated that applicants appreciated this opportunity; however, there were a couple questions about how the responses were used in the final ranking of proposals.

RFP Adjustments: Our review panel really appreciated the additional information provided by applicants in their responses to their proposal reviews, and this seemed to deepen the panel discussion of each proposal's merits. We plan to use a similar process for the 2021 RFPs. To address the feedback, we will include some additional guidance to applicants as they are developing their response, and we will instruct panelists to refer to applicant responses appropriately as they develop their final summary of the review panel's deliberations.

Secondary Selection Factors for Proposal

Feedback: For the 2018 catalyst and 2020 catalyst and collaborative research RFPs, we incorporated a new policy providing secondary selection criteria for proposals that states that no reserve would serve as lead reserve on more than one grant award under that RFP. Applicants



had a number of questions about the policy and raised concerns that it was impeding collaboration and creativity, and discouraging reserves from leading multi-reserve projects.

RFP Adjustments: For the 2021 RFPs we have revised the secondary selection criteria to match what was used in the 2020 science transfer RFP. The revision states that no reserve will serve as the lead reserve on more than one new project under that RFP, except in cases where a reserve is leading a project that involves three or more reserves. We hope this revised policy will remove a barrier for multi-reserve proposals, while also providing a mechanism for ensuring single-reserve projects are distributed across the reserve system.

Reviewer Feedback on Proposals

Feedback: Comments submitted as part of the RFP feedback survey revealed frustration about diverging proposal reviews and the desire for more clarity about how funding decisions were made.

RFP Adjustments: One of the most challenging parts of a formal review process is providing applicants with feedback materials that clearly convey the rationale behind a funding decision, which is especially important after undergoing the demanding process of proposal development. When recruiting reviewers, we deliberately look for people with diverse backgrounds, who look at different aspects of a proposal and which, therefore, can produce different views of a proposal's merit. The resulting feedback can be frustrating for applicants to interpret. We learn from the review process every year and will continue to adjust our guidance to reviewers so that feedback is as clear, concise, and constructive as possible.

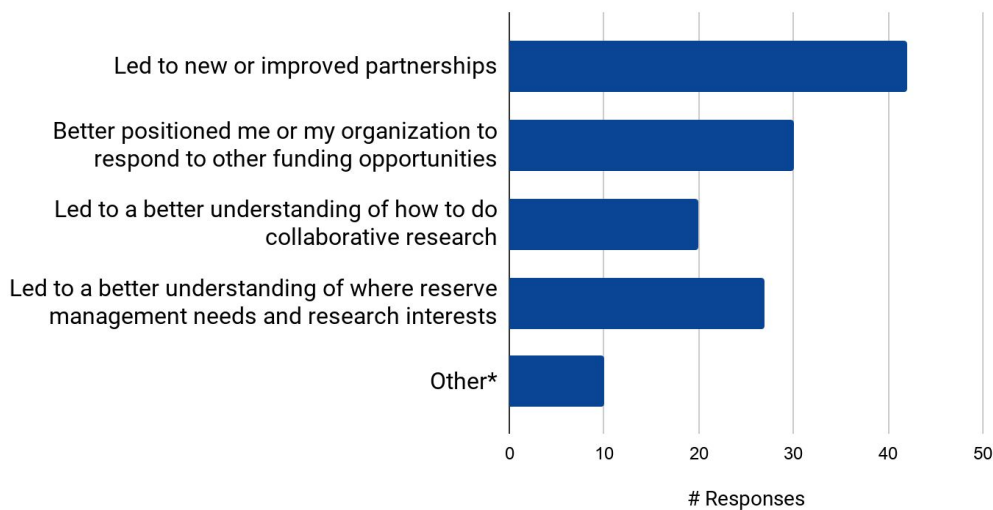
Benefits of Proposal Development

Survey respondents shared some of the benefits they experienced from participation in the preparation of a proposal under the 2020 RFPs (Figure 2). A majority of respondents (69%) indicated that participating in a 2020 RFP competition led to new or improved partnerships, and half indicated that participating in the 2020 process better positioned them to respond to other funding opportunities. "Other" responses included comments such as:

- Refined ideas and better identified project goals;
- Helped us write better reserve management needs to be referenced in future RFPs;
- Rekindled past partnerships;
- Improved understanding of reserve needs more at the national level;
- Improved ability to develop a proposal that fits NERR management needs; and
- Greater understanding of local concerns and stakeholder needs for research.



Figure 2. Respondents' perceptions of additional benefits attained through participation in a 2020 competition:



Lessons Learned and Tips

In addition to feedback on the RFPs, we also asked respondents to share lessons they learned through developing a proposal for a 2020 RFP. Some key lessons included:

- Developing a good proposal requires aligning many elements - end user needs, reserve needs, research interests and capabilities, and engagement components.
- Establish authentic relationships with end users well in advance of an RFP being released, and continue to engage with them often.
- Development of a competitive proposal can be part of a process that extends for years. Consider accessing other funding sources to initiate collaboration ahead of the RFP.
- Collaborating across reserves can help pool resources, spread out the workload, and enable partners to divide and conquer.
- Be specific in the proposal, spell out connections to prior work and management needs, and include examples of what the project could generate.

Thank you!

We thank everyone who participated in the 2020 RFPs and provided feedback on the process. Understanding what works well and where to make improvements is critical to ensuring the best program is delivered to the NERR System, and your input informs future program planning and funding opportunities. We take your feedback seriously and look forward to continuing to evolve and improve the program.

Please do not hesitate to provide additional input by email (nerrs-info@umich.edu) or phone (Lynn Vaccaro: 734-763-0056; Nick Soberal: 734-763-0034).

