Answers to Questions You May Have About Federal Aid

-- A User-Friendly SOP --

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What is Federal Aid?

Federal Aid represents money received by the NC Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) through various federal programs and agencies that enables us to manage fisheries and accomplish other DMF activities. Like so many things with the federal government, the process is not simple and straightforward.

The NC DMF Federal Aid Coordinator and Federal Grants Fiscal Manager work to help DMF researchers find funding opportunities, apply for aid, manage aid programs, and ensure that all grant conditions and requirements are met.

DMF researchers have responsibilities, too. They need to help identify funding opportunities, write grant narratives, prepare budgets, conduct the research, and write reports.

Federal Aid funds many DMF salaries. Without these grants, there would be far fewer people available to do the work and there would be less information available to manage fisheries. Federal Aid accounts for about one third of the operating expenses of DMF.

Who is eligible to receive Federal Aid?

While individual researchers apply for and carry out all the work, Federal Aid awards are made to the Department of Environmental Quality and are earmarked for DMF. The DMF Director is ultimately responsible for the Federal Aid received by DMF. The Director signs all Federal Aid packages as the authorized representative.

The Section Chiefs delegate responsibility to individual researchers to do the work. Teams of researchers, the Federal Aid Office, and other DMF support people work together to ensure the daily duties of grants are accomplished.

How does DMF decide which Federal Aid opportunities to pursue?

The NC DMF has guidelines that help determine which Federal Aid projects to pursue. These guidelines are developed as a result of knowing what is needed to help manage fisheries. New projects are identified primarily from completed Fishery Management Plans to help determine priorities for new research. Future management needs are also considered when deciding to seek funding for projects.

Additionally, individual researchers can suggest funding opportunities through their supervisors that can be pursued. On occasion, DMF researchers come across a source of funding that is applicable to their research. In almost every case, the researcher is given encouragement to apply for the grant. The Federal Aid Office provides support for all grant applications.
Most funding sources are limited in the amount of money that can be requested. Oftentimes there may be more than one project that wants to access to a single source of funds. After the internal review process and with the Director’s approval, proposals may be prioritized and only some will be submitted. The Director has final authority to determine which funding proposals will be advanced for funding consideration.

The Biological Review Team (BRT) and Management Review Team review proposed Federal Aid projects before they are submitted. A short deadline alone is not an acceptable excuse for not getting your project in with enough time for review. You need to allow sufficient time in your proposal preparation to allow for BRT review and to incorporate the comments. As soon as you decide to write a grant proposal you need to work out a timeline for writing, review, and submission. The Federal Aid Coordinator can help you determine a realistic timeline.

**What makes a good Federal Aid project?**

Federal Aid projects must have a sound justification for being done whether for research or for monitoring purposes. A project that sounds like a “neat idea”, but doesn’t have direct application to managing fisheries or does not support fisheries management in some way probably will not be recommended for funding. You must be able to state clearly why the research needs to be done.

If you cannot clearly state why a project needs to be done, you probably need to spend more time thinking it through. You must be able to clearly identify the problem or need and write in a compelling manner to explain why this project must be funded and funded at this time.

Use deductive thinking. Explain why this project is the next logical step in research that needs to be done. Be sure to acknowledge previous research whether it was completed by DMF researchers or researchers elsewhere. Demonstrating that you know past research convinces proposal reviewers that you are not repeating something that has already been done and are ready to advance the current level of understanding and science.

Funded research cannot be frivolous. It must be substantial in character and design. That means the research must be grounded in good science and use an acceptable study design. A research project should be carefully designed to provide the necessary data with which to answer all stated objectives. A research project that requires statistical analysis of the resulting data needs to have a study design that generates the data of the proper type you need to perform the analyses. Waiting until a study is completed to begin thinking about statistical analysis may result in you not being able to answer your study questions. If you don’t feel comfortable with statistical analysis, find someone in the Division who can help you. If you are not sure who to go to for help, contact the Federal Aid Coordinator who can direct you to someone who can help.
Lastly, make sure qualified people are available to do the research. The Principal Investigator (PI) is the lead researcher. Most often, this is the person who is in charge of working with the Federal Aid Coordinator to prepare the grant documents and who will be leading the research once it gets funded.

Often personnel in addition to the PI are needed to help conduct the research. Sometimes additional staff needs to be hired. If you think this may be the case, be sure to check with Human Resources about what that entails. Most often these hires come on as temporary employees or as time-limited employees.

Temporary employees are just that. They cannot work for more than 11 months at a time and do not receive employment benefits such as participation in the retirement plan or paid health insurance. Time-limited employees do receive the same benefits as regular, state appropriated employees; however, their continued employment is contingent upon the availability of funds. When their role on a grant is completed, or when the funding runs out, their employment ends unless another funding source can be found. Positions funded as temporary or time-limited cannot simply be made permanent even after a number of years.

**What are the sources of Federal Aid?**

**USFWS – Sport Fish Restoration (AKA Wallop-Breaux or Dingell-Johnson)**

Each year DMF receives money from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) under the Sport Fish Restoration Program (SFR). This program provides money to the states to manage and research fisheries that are important to recreational hook and line fishing. The amount changes from year to year. It can increase or decrease. The amount DMF receives is determined by the amount of taxes taken in for marine fuels, sporting good sales, etc. The total amount awarded to North Carolina is then divided between the Wildlife Resources Commission and DMF according to the number of recreational fishermen in the state.

In recent years there has been far more demand within DMF for Sport Fish Restoration money than was available. The state has considerable leeway in deciding how it wants to spend its SFR money as long as the supported projects fit within the program guidelines. SFR awards may be increased slightly from one year to the next due to operational costs (e.g., fuel price increases). However, the USFWS could reduce the amount of award from one year to the next, or DMF’s funding priorities could change causing a reduction in available funds. Even within a given funding cycle, money can be amended in or out depending on priorities and availability. The Federal Aid Office will make available, upon request, an accounting of grant funds to aid in the planning process.
Atlantic Coast Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP)

Each year the ACCSP solicits proposals to fund one-year grants that support the implementation of the ACCSP Program Design. These grants are designed to help fund demonstration projects, as well as to help ACCSP partners comply with ACCSP requirements. Specifically, these grants are not designed to be long-term sources of funds to continue ongoing projects. These grants are available to ACCSP partners and are competitive. Each year there are requests for more funding than is available.

NOAA Grants

NOAA Fisheries issues an annual request for proposals based on their needs for managing fisheries through the US Department of Commerce. These grants are highly competitive. Funding can be for multiple years, but the grants are limited to one-time projects, not ongoing research or monitoring.

DMF receives other NOAA grants as a result of partnerships, Congressional mandates, or agreements with specific agencies. Current examples include the Hurricane Grant, ACFCMA, Anadromous, and Cooperative Statistics. Sometimes specific research projects can be funded through one-time initiatives.

Grants.gov can be used to help identify new opportunities, such as Saltonstall-Kennedy and MARFIN grants or other one-time funding projects. While individual researchers may identify grants they wish to apply for, please remember that all DMF Federal grant applications must go through the Federal Aid Office.

Marine Resources Fund and Marine Resources Endowment Fund (AKA CRFL grants)

These grants are managed by the CRFL Coordinator for Marine Fisheries. Contact person for these grants is Jamie Botinovch, CRFL Project Coordinator.

What are the requirements to apply for Federal Aid?

First off, you must have the support of DMF to apply for funding for your project. Again, projects that meet the current and future stated needs of DMF will be given priority for seeking funding.

You must be able to show to the funding agency that you are qualified to do the research. Qualifications to do research are obtained through education, work experience and current employment. For example, you might have a master’s degree, but if all your work has been done on shellfish, it isn’t likely you would be funded to do research on black sea bass.
Proposals must meet all the requirements of the funding agency (e.g. SFR grants must be related to recreational fishing).
Before you seriously think about applying for a grant, consider whether or not the state is required to produce matching funds. Some programs such as SFR require a minimum of 25% of the cost of the research come from non-federal sources. Most frequently for DMF we provide match through state appropriated salaries. That is, people whose salaries are funded by the state will work on the grant. Some grants, especially competitive ones may require more or less match. In general, the more match you can provide for a competitive grant, the more likely you will be funded. The word of warning here is not to assume that salaries will be available for the match for your grant proposal. There are other ways to provide matching funds, besides salaries. Each case is different. The Federal Aid Coordinator can help you work through any issues related to match.

How do I apply?

Make sure your supervisor and the Federal Aid Coordinator knows that you want to apply for a specific grant before you start designing your study and doing the writing. Different grant programs have different application requirements. Be sure to write your proposal to match the program’s requirements.

A word of caution: Do not wait until just before the grant proposal is due to begin thinking about your project and working on the application. The application process will take longer than you think. Even if you are not sure you want to apply, talk to the Federal Aid Coordinator before you begin.

The following example is a generic version of what is required for a Sport Fish Restoration grant proposal. These grants are usually between 1 and 5 years in duration. The PI generally writes the project statement that includes the following sections: need, objective, expected results, approach, location of work, estimated costs, and key personnel.

Project Statement / Project Narrative / Statement of Work

Need

Why is this project being undertaken?
What was done in the past that relates to the proposed project?
How does the identified need relate to the grant program?
What evidence do you have that this need exists?

Objective

Describe how you will achieve measurable/tangible outcomes that will meet your stated need
Specify exactly what you hope to accomplish
Specify a period of time in which you expect to accomplish the project
Objectives must be realistic given time, $$, personnel & other resources

Expected Results and Benefits

What positive quantifiable results and benefits will the work accomplish?
For example,
Will you increase access?
Gain greater understanding of population dynamics?
How will this aid in the development of fishery management plans?
Will you be able to determine economic impact?

**Approach**
How will you achieve the objectives using the allotted time & resources?
Specific procedures
Schedule of activities
Key project staff and their functions
Use established methods
Provide citations for methods used

**Location of Work**
Where will the work take place?
As appropriate, list towns, counties, water bodies
What congressional districts will the work be accomplished in?

**Estimated Costs**
How much does each job cost in each year?
What will the money go for in each job or project?
What are the total costs, federal costs, and state costs (match)?
Many grants, including NOAA grants separate out the budget from narrative and also require a specific Budget Justification

**Key/Responsible Personnel**
Identify key project personnel
Identify the PI
Do not list PI by position only. The individual qualifications of the PI are important in awarding a grant in a competitive process.
Include a 2 page CV/resume for all key project personnel for competitive grants

Hints for writing Project Statements, Project Narratives, or Statements of Work:
Don’t be overly verbose. Some grant programs may have a maximum limit on the number of pages you can submit as part of your narrative.
Be compelling. Explain why this project is the next logical step in this line of research.
Use the DMF Editorial Guidelines
Number all the pages
Don’t be fancy with the presentation. Your must be able to email the entire narrative to the Federal Aid Coordinator.
Don’t use separate attachments unless absolutely necessary. Talk about any attachments first with the Federal Aid Coordinator.
How do I create a Budget?

This is the one area that proves more problematic than any other in grant writing for researchers. First off, I recommend writing the project statement. Put in it everything you would ideally like to do that will help you answer your research questions. Then determine what resources (people, supplies, travel, etc.) you will need to get the job done. The Federal Aid Coordinator can help you figure out personnel costs. If you are not sure about the other costs, talk to other researchers with more experience such as district managers, bio supervisors and your section chief. They might have more experience than you in these kinds of issues or at least ought to be able to direct you to someone who can help you figure out realistic amounts.

Additionally, a very useful tool to help you calculate the budget is the spreadsheet the Federal Aid Coordinator will send you. This spreadsheet can help you project out multiple years, etc. It also puts the data into a format that the Federal Aid Coordinator can use to help determine the adequacy of your budget and in the case of NOAA grants, fill out the required federal documents. The budget you submit will help to determine how your budget is set up in the state system. Please be as accurate as you possibly can. In some cases it is impossible to request more money once a grant award is made. If you make a mistake here and do not budget enough money, you will need to make do with the amount you receive, and you will still be expected by the Federal Funding Agency to accomplish the same amount of work.

Ok, I’ve got a Statement of Work and a Budget, now what?

The BRT will need to review your proposal. This review by BRT is to ensure that only proposals of the highest quality are allowed to go forward. BRT will check for methodological, need, and editorial issues. Allow enough time for the review and for you to incorporate comments BEFORE the submission deadline. Coordinate the timing for the internal review with the Federal Aid Coordinator and the BRT chairperson.

Once you have completed the BRT review and incorporated comments, the Federal Aid Office will be able to take over the rest of the submission. The Federal Aid Office will fill out all the federal forms – application, budget, assurances, endangered species, NEPA, state historic preservation office, etc. The Marine Fisheries Director or his designee with signature authority are the only ones authorized to sign and accept responsibility for federal grants. Once the signatures are obtained, the Federal Aid Coordinator will file your proposal package for you.

Some grants are now submitted online and not through the mail. Make sure you receive a complete copy of the submitted proposal from the Federal Aid Coordinator. If for some reason you don’t receive them after the proposal is submitted, ask the Federal Aid Coordinator to get copies for you.
What happens if I don’t get the grant?

Well, it happens. Sometimes through no fault of the researcher, a grant might not be selected for funding. It does not mean it wasn’t a good grant proposal. It could be that there were other priorities for funding that were higher than yours. Possibly, someone else’s proposal might have been as good as, or even better than your proposal. Don’t take it personally. Hold on to the proposal. Try to find out why it wasn’t funded. See if it is worth revising and resubmitting later.

Great, I’ve gotten a grant, now what?

Congratulations, but wait. You need to wait until there is official notification that the money has been awarded. The Federal Grants Fiscal Manager will need to set up the Center in the state accounting system. Once you know the money is available you can start gearing up to do the work.

In some cases, DMF is not capable of doing all the work necessary to complete the requirements of the grant. You might need to contract out some of the work. The contracting process can take time. If you need to seek bids, this process will take at least a month, sometimes longer. When a bid is accepted, you will need to prepare a contract to be submitted to Raleigh. Putting a contract together can take some time depending on whether you need to get documentation from the winning bidder. Be forewarned, that once a contract leaves DMF, it may take up to three months or longer before the contract is approved. No work by the contractor can be reimbursed until there is a signed contract in place.

How do I get started doing the actual work?

The first thing you need to do is to refresh your memory of what you have said you are going to do by referring to your Statement of Work. Make sure none of the conditions have changed since the time you proposed the work. If anything needs to be changed, contact the Federal Aid Coordinator right away. Be sure to review the budget. If your budget needs to be realigned, contact the Federal Grants Fiscal Manager. As a general rule, you will be given discretion by the Federal Government to move up to 10% of the entire grant award between categories. If you need to move more than 10%, DMF needs to formally ask the Funding Agency to approve the change. That will involve writing a justification for why the changes are needed. It can also mean a delay in getting the grant started.

If you need to hire personnel to help you do the work, contact the Human Resources Office and get their advice on how to proceed with creating, advertising, and hiring positions. Work with the Purchasing Services Agent if you need to buy equipment.
**I’ve got things up and running. What else do I need to know?**

The PI will be responsible for the day-to-day operation of the project and needs to monitor all the personnel and activities. The PI also needs to make sure that deadlines are being met. There are two kinds of reports that need to be filed periodically for every grant DMF receives. These are progress reports and financial reports. As a researcher, you only need to be concerned with the progress reports. The Federal Aid Office will take care of the financial reports for you.

When an award is made the funding agency will notify us of the specific reporting requirements. These requirements differ greatly by funding program. Generally, a report will be due at least annually, either 30 or 90 days from the end of each funding year. Some grants, most notably, NOAA monitored grants, require a separate progress report every 6 months.

At a minimum, progress reports require you to state the objectives for the grant period, proposed work for the period, what was actually accomplished, and what problems were encountered that kept you from meeting all your stated objectives for the reporting period. Reports must be written in a timely manner in order to allow for a BRT review and for the Federal Aid Coordinator to file the report. Always be sure to submit an electronic copy of all reports with the Federal Aid Coordinator. Be sure to keep copies of all your reports.

The Federal Grants Fiscal Manager will provide you with a monthly budget report showing your grant’s expenditures. Use these reports to monitor the flow of money. They can help you determine if you are not spending enough money, or if you are spending it too quickly.

**Oh, no! Things aren’t going as planned. What do I do?**

If you are having problems accomplishing the tasks in your proposal in the allotted amount of time, make sure your supervisor and the Federal Aid Coordinator both know. They will be able to help you figure out what to do. Most problems can be addressed in order to help get the project back on task. The Federal Aid Coordinator will get the Funding Agency involved if there needs to be any changes made to the approved budget and Statement of Work.

Changes to the originally approved budget and Statement of Work are called amendments. Once DMF has decided how we want to fix the problems, the Federal Aid Coordinator will contact the funding agency and request the amendment. However, there is no guarantee that an amendment will be approved.

Common reasons why an amendment will need to be filed include delays in hiring or getting contracts in place, or needing to modify proposed work jobs. You must keep in
mind at all times that you cannot deviate from the approved Statement of Work or budget without first contacting the Federal Aid Coordinator who will determine whether an amendment with the funding agency is required. BRT will need to review any changes to the Statement of Work before they can be submitted to the Funding Agency.

There are rare occasions when a progress report cannot be completed on time. Extensions to filing reports can be requested, but like amendments they must be for approved reasons.

As always, make sure the Federal Aid Coordinator has sent you copies of all amendments and award action requests. Be sure to keep your own copies.

**We completed the research we said we would do. Are we done?**

Once the grant or funding cycle has been completed, you have one final report that will need to be filed within 90 days. These reports are a compilation of all the work that was completed across all years. Be sure to allow enough time for the report to be written and reviewed by BRT. The Federal Aid Coordinator will let you know the date it is due in the Federal Aid Office to ensure that it is sent to the Funding Agency in time.

Electronic copies of all final reports will need to be submitted to the Library Committee for storage. Some grants have annual reports that need to be put on file with the Library Committee also. Either the Federal Aid Coordinator or your supervisor will let you know if this is the case with your grant.

Finally, there is one last thing. If you buy any equipment with Federal Aid money that has a Fixed Asset (FAS) number on it, we need to keep track of it, that is, where it is located and how it is being used at all times. Agencies differ slightly in their policies on how fixed assets are maintained. Once the grant is over, a Federal Funding Agency might request that the equipment be returned to them. They can allow DMF to keep the equipment, but limit its use only to other Federal Aid projects, etc. Best thing to do is to check with the Federal Aid Coordinator regarding any equipment you might have purchased as part of a now completed grant. The rule of thumb is that if it was bought with Federal Aid, check before you use it for ANYTHING else.

**What can the Federal Aid Office do for me?**

In summary, the Federal Aid Office is here to help DMF researchers by identifying grant opportunities and help you apply for them. The Federal Aid Office will remind you when reports and other documents are due. You should turn to the Federal Aid Office whenever you have questions about or problems with your grants.