

IRA RA RFA Frequently Asked Questions

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Topic: Application

Q1: What is the current timeline for release of the Request for Applications (RFA) and proposal due date?

A: The RFA was released on September 29, 2023. The deadline for proposals is March 5, 2024. This deadline is necessary to honor our external timelines to provide funding decisions to Grants Management Division (GMD) by GMD's deadline. The IOOS Office will need sufficient time to review the proposals and process the awards, while considering other funding opportunities happening in parallel.

Q2: Should the NEPA plan be one large one per proposal or broken into regional NEPA plans?

A: The environmental compliance (NEPA and Other Applicable Laws) process should be the same across the board, with one Environmental Compliance submission per proposal.

Q3: Who is eligible to apply to this RFA?

A: Only the 11 IOOS RAs are eligible to apply.

Q4: Can the proposals have appendices that provide detail on individual projects?

A: The project does need to be fully described within the page limit. This supports the need to communicate with the IOOS project experts or the IOOS regional team to ensure the proposal includes the necessary information.

Q5: Due to the 15-page project description page limit, can we provide additional project details under subaward scopes of work?

A: No. The RFA does not offer this option. Work described under subawards must correspond to work already described in the proposal body. If the appropriate level of project description cannot be met within the page limit, it is a good indicator that the scope of work is too large for one project and should be submitted in separate proposals.

Q6: Similar to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law proposals, can we assume that you don't need all the background information in the proposals, so we can focus on the project detail?

A: Yes, that is correct.

Topic: Budget

Q1: Can we include cost-sharing arrangements that aren't committed to yet? (i.e., partner engagement to come during a planning phase)

A: Yes, uncommitted cost-sharing arrangements can be included if described as such and the plan for providing final details is included.

Q2: What is the level of budget detail needed, particularly in light of TBDs?

A: The same level of budget detail is needed as for any IOOS funding application.

Topic: Funding Allocation

Q1: How will the \$100M be divided between regionally-specific and cross-regional projects?

A: Of the \$100M, \$55M will be distributed equally across the 11 IOOS Regional Associations (RAs) for regionally-specific projects under Topic Area 1. The remaining \$45M will be for cross-regional projects under Topic Area 2, where we intend for RAs to work together to submit proposals.

Q2: Will the IOOS Office receive any portion of the \$100M?

A: No, none of the \$100M is intended for the IOOS Office. The IOOS Office anticipates distributing all \$100M to the RAs.

Q3: Will this RFA be 'one' multi-year proposal, or will the time-period of the IRA opportunity be divided with follow-up proposals due later like Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding?

A: Through this Request for Applications, the IOOS Office anticipates funding up to 5-year cooperative agreements. Applicants may submit proposals for work over a shorter duration. We do not expect to be releasing any additional Inflation Reduction Act-related RFAs as follow ups to this funding opportunity.

Q4: For multi-year proposals, will all the funding be available in Year 1 or will it be disbursed annually?

A: We anticipate all project funding will be distributed at the start of the award in Year 1. We do not expect additional releases of funds after the establishment of the cooperative agreements.

Q5: Will the cross-regional funding be funneled through a single region or will the budgets be distributed directly to each RA?

A: For the Topic Area 2 cross-regional projects, a single RA should be listed as the PI institution where all funding will be provided. If additional RAs are intended to be funded collaborators on the project, they should be listed as sub-awards.

Topic: Subawards

Q1: Is contracting or subawarding to grantwriters an acceptable activity if it provides technical assistance to underserved groups in applying for grants?

A: Yes, provided the technical assistance is relevant to the goals of the IRA RFA and IOOS.

Q2: Can RAs fund a state agency or local government office using IOOS/IRA funds? E.g., if they will be installing and maintaining inundation sensors

A: Yes, an RA can include a subaward to a state agency or local government office.

Q3: For Topic 2 proposals, can there be multiple levels of subawardees?

A: Yes, there can be multiple levels of subawards. All immediate subawards and the second-tier subawards (i.e., the subawardees of the immediate subawards) must have all the accompanying budget documentation and other required forms.

Topic: Topic Area 1

Q1: How much of Topic Area 1 is focused on recapitalization, modernization, infrastructure? Are there targets?

A: Proposals that include the key tenets of the RFA will be the most successful. 1) Frontline, underserved, 2) Equitable service delivery, 3) Coastal resilience. Proposals should also present finite projects that have lasting impacts and enhance partnerships that deliver services and products to a wide range of users. There are no specific targets for recapitalization, modernization, and infrastructure.

Topic: Topic Area 2

Q1: What types of projects is the Office interested in for Topic Area 2?

A: Proposals that include the key tenets of the RFA will be the most successful. 1) Frontline, underserved, 2) Equitable service delivery, 3) Coastal resilience. Proposals should also present finite projects that have lasting impacts and enhance partnerships that deliver services and products to a wide range of users. The IOOS Office has identified three priority areas: water levels; ecosystem monitoring and services; and equitable service delivery and stakeholder engagement. The RAs are encouraged to work together around national or pan-regional scales. For more details on these priority areas and additional project ideas, please see the project descriptions located at <https://ioos.noaa.gov/ira-resources-for-ras/>. In addition, NOAA invites novel concepts for projects that meet the intent of the RFA and address pan-regional or national-scale coastal resilience issues.

Q2: What are the themes of the cross-regional RFA?

A: The RAs are encouraged to work together to identify shared priority areas that serve the intent of the Inflation Reduction Act at national or pan-regional scales. The IOOS Office has identified three priority areas: water levels; ecosystem monitoring and services; and equitable service delivery and stakeholder engagement. For information on these and additional project ideas, please see the project descriptions located at <https://ioos.noaa.gov/ira-resources-for-ras/>. In addition, NOAA invites novel concepts for projects that meet the intent of the RFA and address pan-regional or national-scale coastal climate issues.

Q3: How will you evaluate the Topic Area 2 proposals? Will it depend on how many RAs are working together?

A: All proposals for Topic Areas 1 and 2 will be evaluated through merit review using the evaluation criteria provided in the RFA. The total possible budget for potential projects could potentially far exceed the funding available in Topic Area 2. Therefore, the Office expects to work with you in developing realistic proposals that address IOOS priorities. However, the merit review and available budget will determine which proposals are put forward for selection. The number of RAs working together for Topic Area 2 will not be a factor in the evaluation.

Q4: Would the program office entertain one proposal for Topic 2?

A: Each proposal must have sufficient detail to hold up in merit review and to communicate the activities of the project clearly and fully. The level of detail needed to effectively evaluate the proposals is likely impossible in a single umbrella proposal covering many topics/projects for the \$45M in Topic Area 2. Proposals that are too vague or omit sufficient detail to understand the work are unlikely to be funded. A single \$45M proposal for Topic Area 2 is only acceptable if there is a singular topic with a narrow project scope. A single \$45M proposal for Topic Area 2 covering too broad of scope and activities will not be successful.

Topic: Community Engagement

Q1: Is this funding opportunity a Justice40 Initiative program?

A: This funding opportunity is not listed as a Justice40 covered program. As an Inflation Reduction Act investment, however, this funding opportunity honors the spirit of the Justice40 Initiative. Under the Justice40 Initiative, “the Federal Government has made it a goal that 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain Federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.” Projects should endeavor to honor the spirit of the Justice40 Initiative, advance environmental justice, and address decades of underinvestment in underserved, overburdened, and frontline communities by marshaling critical resources to these communities. Funded projects will be expected to conduct meaningful stakeholder engagement with, and report on the benefits directed to, these communities.

Q2: Where can I find information to help me identify frontline, underserved, or overburdened communities?

A: The federal government has developed some resources to identify frontline, underserved, overburdened, and environmental justice communities. Some of those resources are listed at <https://ioos.noaa.gov/ira-resources-for-ras/>. Additional tools may be available through other sources like state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, etc.

Q3: What happens when we don’t know underserved or frontline communities? How can we engage with them if we don’t know who they are?

A: Think about what resources you'll need to make those connections and conduct meaningful stakeholder engagement. You can propose the engagement with your community or civic members and what that would look like. Provide details about the process and how you anticipate identifying and working with underserved or frontline communities. In many cases, it may mean enlisting outside help, such as hiring new subject matter experts in community engagement or a social scientist. We anticipate this could expand the breadth of your RA membership and the IOOS Enterprise to meet more of the nation's coastal customers.

Q4: Does the IOOS Program Office expect the RAs to name specific underserved communities or stakeholders in their proposals? Or is it enough to describe how the project outcome will inevitably benefit those communities, for example through compliance with data management requirements that make any data collected discoverable, accessible (public and free), and usable? Or as another example, through improvements to models that lead to better forecasts?

A: Providing data or products on an openly accessible website doesn't meet our tenet of equitable service delivery. Many communities in need of tools and info may not know about IOOS portals, find them suitable to their needs, and even be able to access them due to tech limitations. We're aiming for RAs to work directly with communities using established models for meaningful engagement and service delivery that involve community input throughout the process of deciding what is needed, how to address those needs, and what products should look like.

Q5: What is an example of an overburdened community that would be served in an exclusive manner?

A: The RAs are encouraged to review the definitions in the RFA. The IOOS Office is not looking for projects that will exclusively serve overburdened or underserved communities, but those communities should be the drivers. Specific examples of overburdened communities can be discussed with the national office.

Q6: We were operating under the assumption that RA data and product service delivery is equitable if it is public, free, uses FAIR and CARE. It seems like a lot of our services will and do hit that mark but may not be tailored to overburdened communities until we can identify specific groups of people in those categories and work on additional co-design.

A: While the IOOS Office encourages the RAs to consider how their products are available and who can access them, it is important to provide a plan for how you will identify people in frontline and overburdened communities and begin a dialogue around what is needed to help improve their community resilience to climate change.

Topic: Proposal Projects

Q1: Are there any categories of activities typically undertaken by RAs, for example, modeling, that will be excluded by this opportunity?

A: As long as the activities are in areas that serve the intent of the Inflation Reduction Act at national, pan-regional, or regional scales, there is no category of activity that is particularly excluded.

Q2: Are To Be Determined (TBD) projects permitted, so as to allow for engagement to inform and fully define a project?

A: No, the Office and reviewers need to see a sufficient amount of detail to evaluate the proposals against the evaluation criteria. Proposals that are too vague or omit sufficient detail to understand the work are unlikely to be funded. The proposed work should be appropriate for the stage of the relationships, where the process of relationship development and engagement may be more emphasized for early-stage relationships and more product-based for more mature relationships. The Office intends to work with you as you develop your proposals. This collaboration should help avoid the concern of a TBD project.

Q3: How should we address sustainability plan post-award funding?

A: Projects under this funding should be finite projects with lasting impacts. This is one-time funding and we need to be able to communicate success from the funding without needing continuing funding. If you intend to purchase hardware which will have an O&M tail, you need to include the plan to cover it afterward. This could include a proposal that, at the end of the project, develops a strong case for new sustained funding.

Q4: What is a finite project? One with no ongoing component or operation and maintenance (O&M) tail? Like a process study?

A: We seek finite projects with lasting impacts. No additional funds will be made available after project completion to sustain work. Proposals can be for projects that have zero O&M tail, but zero O&M tail is not a requirement. If an RA would like to propose a project that will have an O&M tail, the proposal needs to include how that will be funded once the project is complete. An example of a project with no O&M is a pilot project at demonstration level. The proposal could state that the demonstration version of the project will be complete by a certain date within project period, even if no O&M available to sustain projects. This can be used as a way to showcase what the IOOS Enterprise can achieve and could be leveraged for external funding. An example of a project that minimizes O&M and delivers on being finite with lasting impact is the development of a product or tool, where the majority of the cost is upfront in development and requires relatively little to be maintained.

Q5: If projects are determined to need or benefit from centralized data management, should that be addressed in the RFA proposals? Or would it be supported separately by IOOS National as with other centralized DMACs?

A: Proposals should include data management needs as part of the proposed project work.

Q6: If projects are determined to need or benefit from centralized products, should that be addressed in the RFA proposals? Or would it be handled by IOOS National as with other national products?

A: Proposals should include centralized product needs as part of the proposed project work.

Topic: NOAA Coordination

Q1: Are we correct in assuming that SME participation from other NOAA offices would be financially supported by those offices?

A: This assumption is not necessarily correct. You should consult the NOAA SMEs to determine any financial need. If the applicant chooses to include NOAA SME participation at a cost, those funds can be distributed to the SME's NOAA Office through the holdback mechanism.

Q2: How involved can the Office be involved in board and RA discussions about RFA projects?

A: IOOS Program Office staff can and should be directly involved with the RAs in the development of these proposals. We encourage the RAs to reach out to SMEs in the IOOS and CO-OPS offices regarding projects of interest, and to inform the IOOS Regional Team (ioos.regions@noaa.gov) of these interactions.

Topic: Other

Q1: How is the IRA RFA different from the BIL?

A: Please refer to the IRA RFA overview slides from the Oct. 17, 2023 webinar (see slides #8-9) for guidance on how IRA, BIL, and Core funding complement each other.

Q2: What do we mean by coastal? How far out does that go?

A: "Coastal" includes all areas covered under the IOOS purview: from head of tide to the continental shelf.

Q3: I have a question that isn't addressed in these FAQs. Where do I send my question?

A: Please send any question about this RFA to ioos.regions@noaa.gov. Please do not send questions directly to IOOS Leadership. Questions about specific Topic Area 2 themes 1.a-f can be directed to the program manager listed in the theme's description (see Topic Area 2 Question #1).