**STATE OF MAINE**

**Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

*Agricultural Resource Development Division*

**RFA# 2024ARDRFSIEQUIP1**

**Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Equipment-Only Program**

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| **RFA Coordinator** | *All communication regarding the RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified below*.**Name:** Michelle Webb **Title:** Director, Agricultural Resource Development**Contact Information:** michelle.t.webb@maine.gov  |
| **Submitted Questions Due** | *All questions must be received by the RFA Coordinator identified above via the Submitted Questions Form provided in Appendix A by:***Date:** September 23, 2024no later than 11:59 p.m., local time |
| **ApplicationSubmission Deadline** | *Applications must be received by the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry by:***Submission Deadline:** October 28, 2024, no later than 11:59 p.m., local time.*Applications must be submitted electronically to:* RFSI.AGR@Maine.gov |
| **RFA Ammended on October 10, 2024** | On, October 10, 2024 the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry revised the *RFA Part V Key Process Events Section C Application Submission* (RFA pages 27-28) to allow up to two application submission emails to be sent per applicant entity. |

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**Part I SCORING RUBRIC**

This scoring rubric documents the criteria that the evaluation team will use to assign points to each applicant which will be used to determine final award recommendations.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Scoring Criteria** | **Files Used to Evaluate Criteria** | **Points Determination** | **Points Available** |
| 1. Completeness of Application.
2. All of the documents listed as required in Part II of this RFA were included in the application.
3. All of the documents listed as required in Part II of this RFA adhere to the formatting requirements.
 | All files submitted | Incomplete applications and/ or applications failing to adhere to the formatting requirements stated in Part II and Part VI of this RFA will not move forward.  | Pass/Fail |
| 1. Eligible Entity
2. The applicant is an eligible entity as described in Part III Section C of this RFA.
3. The applicant entity must be primarily responsible for the operation, maintenance, and reporting of the equipment and must be conducting middle of the supply chain activities that will occur in Maine.
4. The headquarters of the applicant entity must be in Maine.
 | All files submitted | Applicants not demonstrating qualification as an eligible entity will not move forward.  | Pass/Fail |
| 1. Middle of the Supply Chain Equipment Investment Proposed
2. The application describes a request for eligible special purpose equipment that is based on the allowable use of funds for middle-of-the-supply chain activities as described in Part IV Section D of this RFA.
3. The application requests funding for eligible special purpose equipment and the application requests funds within the allowable funding range of $10,000- $100,000.
 | All files submitted | Applicants not demonstrating qualification as requesting eligible special purpose equipment to only be utilized for eligible middle of the supply chain activities will not move forward.Note: the evaluation committee may move an application forward that has no more than one unallowable cost provided that the application demonstrates that it would be reasonable to complete the proposed outcomes if the unallowable cost were excluded from funding. | Pass/Fail |
| 1. Evidence of Critical Infrastructure
2. Has the applicant demonstrated experience with the proposed work, including past equipment investment and/or appropriate staff/business relationships?
3. Has the applicant provided evidence that the critical resources and infrastructure that are necessary for the proposed activities and outcomes to be successful are in place following the instructions described in Part IV Section F of this RFA?
4. Critical resources and infrastructure can include facilities, land, structures, the use of city streets and parks, a shared-used kitchen, and/or other essential resources for the proposed equipment investment activities. Land, structures, and other critical resources must be in place and in working condition at the time of application submission.
 | Evidence of Critical Infrastructure Letter(s) and all files submitted. | To receive full points:The applicant has submitted an error-free Evidence of Critical Infrastructure Letter that is complete and adheres to the format outlined in the RFA from the applicant entity to demonstrate that the applicant has demonstrated experience with the proposed work and that the critical resources and infrastructure necessary for the proposed activities and outcomes are in place at the time of application. **And,** if the equipment will be located, utilized by, stored, or operated by another entity (entities), an error-free and fully complete Evidence of Critical Infrastructure Letter has been submitted from the partnering entity (entities).The letter(s) must indicate the critical resources necessary for initiating and completing the installation and certify that they are in place and committed at the time of application submission. | Pass/Fail |
| 1. Applicant is a Historically Underserved Farmer or Disadvantaged Entity
2. Is the applicant a:
* Beginning Farmer;
* Socially Disadvantaged Farmer;
* An entity that meets the SBA determined criteria for one or more of the [SBA categories](https://www.sba.gov/federal-contracting/contracting-assistance-programs) of small disadvantaged business, women-owned small business, or veteran-owned small business;
* Veteran Producer or Processor;
* Limited Resource Farmer;
* LFPA Producer Partner
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 1: Applicant Information Andall files submitted | * Applicant is not a historically underserved farmer (0 points)
* Applicant partially demonstrates being a historically underserved farmer (3 points)
* Applicant fully demonstrates being a historically underserved farmer in one of the defined categories (5 points)
 | 5 |
| 1. Eligible Food and Beverage Product Type
2. The majority of ingredients (51 percent or more of all product ingredients by weight or volume, excluding water) are raw agricultural products that are grown, harvested, and produced in Maine with the exception of the specialty foods and beverage product category. (defined in the definitions section of this RFA).
3. The applicant has indicated that the food and beverage product(s) to be funded fall into one of the following categories:
4. Foods and beverages inclusive of 51% or more specialty crops (farm cultivated and processed for human food consumption), OR
5. Foods and beverages inclusive of 51% or more Maine dairy or eggs, OR
6. Foods and beverages inclusive of 51% or more Maine grains intended for human consumption, OR
7. Foods and beverages inclusive of 51% or more Maine farmed aquaculture, OR
8. Maine specialty food and beverage products inclusive of 51% or more Maine-grown and harvested ingredients **OR** specialty foods and beverage products that include one or more Maine-grown and harvested ingredients but are unable to be manufactured with 51% or more Maine ingredients.

The USDA defines grown and harvested to mean farm cultivated and harvested and not wild-caught. No meat, poultry, foraged, or wild-caught ingredients may be included in food products funded in any manner through the RFSI program. | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 3 Product Information | The applicant has indicated that the food and beverage product(s) to be funded will be inclusive of 51% or more Maine-grown and harvested ingredients in one of the following categories: 1) specialty crops, 2) dairy or eggs, 3) grains for human consumption, 4) farmed aquaculture.To receive full points, in these 4 categories, the applicant must list the Maine-grown and harvested primary ingredients.**OR**The applicant has indicated that the food and beverage product(s) to be funded will be a **specialty food or beverage product(s)** that will include one or more Maine-grown and harvested ingredients but is unable to be manufactured with 51% or more Maine-grown and harvested ingredients. To receive full points, in the specialty food and beverage category, the applicant must list the Maine-grown and harvested ingredients (by name and estimated % weight or volume) and list and describe the primary ingredients that are unable to be sourced in Maine (e.g., cocoa, avocado, almonds, sugar, year-round raw agricultural ingredients, etc.).  | 10 Points |
| 1. Impact on Maine’s Middle of the Supply Chain Capacity and Resilience
2. How well does the applicant define and describe the specific and existing problem, barrier, gap, and/or need in Maine’s middle of the supply chain that this equipment investment will address?
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 4 Purpose and Scope of Work andLetters of Support | * Defined but not described (1 point)
* Broadly or vaguely defines and partially describes (2 points)
* Partially defines and describes (3 pts)
* Defines but partially describes (4 pts)
* Provides a well-articulated problem, barrier, gap, or need statement and fully but concisely describes how the equipment will solve the defined challenge (5 points)
 | 5 |
| 1. Impact on Applicant’s Business Viability
2. How well does the applicant define and describe how this equipment investment will improve sales channels and increase access to more and better markets for the applicant’s business entity?
3. To what degree will the equipment investment improve the applicant’s business resiliency?
4. Will the equipment investment create opportunities to build upon these efforts after the initial first year of implementation?
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 4 Purpose and Scope of Work andEvidence of Critical Infrastructure Letter(s) | * Defines but does not describe (1 pt.)
* Broadly or vaguely defines and partially describes (2 pts.)
* Partially defines and describes (3 pts)
* Defines but partially describes (4 pts.)
* Provides a well-articulated and compelling description of how equipment will improve business sales, market, viability metrics (5 pts).
 | 5 |
| 1. Maine Priorities
2. Does the equipment investment address one or more of the Maine priorities identified in Part IV Section B of this RFA?
3. Equipment investments that will support processing and packaging improvements (including value-added processing, co-packing, canning, preserving, drying, hulling, shelling, milling, cooking, baking, juicing, distilling, and fermenting).
4. Equipment investments that will support storage and distribution improvements (including cold storage, refrigeration, delivery and distribution).
5. Equipment investments that will resolve middle-of-the-supply-chain challenges within Maine’s targeted agricultural products (specialty crops, dairy and eggs, grains for human consumption, aquaculture, value-added specialty foods).
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 4 Application Purpose and Scope of Work  | * The applicant checked the box to indicate a Maine priority area they feel is related to the application (1 point)
* The applicant’s Maine priority selection is not clearly aligned or fully described in the application materials (3 points)
* The application provides a well-articulated and compelling description of how the equipment investment will address a Maine RFSI priority (5 pts).
 | 5 |
| 1. USDA Priorities
2. Does the equipment investment address one or more of the USDA priorities identified in Part IV Section C of this RFA?
3. Expand value-added product capacity and resiliency
* Equipment investments that support the development of value-added products available to consumers.
* Focus on small and medium-sized enterprises that add options and choices for consumers and producers (emphasis on value-added);
1. Workforce/economic impact
* Equipment investments that support activities that provide fair prices, fair wages and new and safe job opportunities that keep profits in rural communities.
* Equipment investments that offer family-supporting job quality and treatment/safety of workers;
1. Diversity of processing infrastructure
* Equipment investments that increase diversity in processing options in terms of business model approaches, geography, and availability to underserved communities.
* Applications that are submitted by cooperatives, farmer- and worker-owned enterprises.
1. Equipment investments that offer more and better market opportunities and new streams of revenue to small and mid-sized agricultural producers, including those who may not have access to value-added opportunities or processing to meet market demand for premium or value-added products, such as underserved producers.
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 4 Purpose and Scope of Work  | * The applicant checks the box to indicate a USDA priority area they feel is related to the application (1 point)
* The applicant’s USDA priority selection is not clearly aligned or fully described in the application materials (3 points)
* The application provides a well-articulated and compelling description of how the equipment investment will address a USDA RFSI priority (5 points).
 | 5 |
| 1. Viability, Feasibility, and Readiness
2. Does the applicant describe a well-thought-out plan to purchase and implement equipment to achieve stated goals and outcomes?
3. Does the applicant demonstrate readiness to purchase equipment upon funding?
4. Does the applicant demonstrate readiness to implement equipment within six months, or according to an alternate proposed and justified timeline within the grant period ending May 24, 2026.
5. Does the applicant demonstrate that it will be feasible to measure, evaluate, and report on outcomes within one year of receipt of funding?
6. The Applicant has demonstrated reasonable assurances that the entity will be viable and economically sustainable after RFSI funding has ended.
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 4 Purpose and Scope of Work  | * Reviewers will provide up to 2 points in each criteria subcategory.
 | 10 |
| 1. Benefit to Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers (HUFR)
2. The applicant clearly lists and describes how the equipment investment will directly benefit historically underserved local farmers (other than the applicant entity).
* Beginning Farmer;
* Socially Disadvantaged Farmer;
* Veteran Producer or Processor;
* Limited Resource Farmer;
* LFPA Producer Partner
1. For applications intending to serve these entities, the applicant has demonstrated the involvement of the community beneficiaries when developing the proposed application.
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 6 Equipment Investment Benefit and Stakeholder Support  | * Equipment investment will not benefit historically underserved farmers (0)
* Applicant lists 1 or more historically underserved farmers (HUFR) but does not articulate the benefit or demonstrate the farmer’s involvement in the proposal (1)
* Lists 1 or more HUFR but does not fully articulate the benefit or demonstrate the farmer’s involvement in the proposal (2)
* Lists 2 or more HUFR and begins to fully articulate the benefit and/or demonstrate the farmer’s involvement in the proposal (3)
* Lists 1 HUFR and fully articulates the benefit and demonstrates the farmer’s involvement in the proposal (4)
* Lists 2 or more HUFR and fully articulates the benefit and demonstrates the farmer’s involvement in the proposal (5 points)
 |  |
| 1. Community Impact
2. The application lists and describes the specific farms, processors, food businesses and community stakeholders the equipment investment will benefit (other than the applicant entity).
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 6 Equipment Investment Benefit and Stakeholder Support and Letters of Support | * Applicant lists but does not describe 1 or more community beneficiaries (1 point)
* Applicant lists and describes 1 community beneficiary (3 points)
* Applicant lists and describes 3 or more community beneficiaries (5 pts)
 | 5 |
| 1. External Support
2. Does the applicant provide evidence of external support for this equipment investment?
3. Is there support from local farmers, producers, processors, ag service providers, municipalities, and/or commodity groups?
4. Does the applicant list and describe the external stakeholders that support the need for the equipment investment and why (other than the applicant)?
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 6 Equipment Investment Benefit and Stakeholder Support and Letters of Support | * Applicant lists 1 or more external supporters but does not describe (1)
* Applicant lists, describes 1 external supporter but does not provide a letter of support from each supporter (2)
* Applicant lists, describes, and provides a letter of support from 1 external supporter (3)
* Applicant lists, describes, and provides a letter of support from 2 or more external supporters (5 points)
 | 5 |
| 1. Expected Performance Measures
2. Does the applicant provide one or more of the predetermined indicators under Outcome 2 or Outcome 3?
3. Does the applicant provide quantifiable results for the indicator(s) selected?
4. Do the selected indicators align with the purpose and description of equipment activities and goals stated in all areas of the application?
 | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 6 Expected Performance Measures | * 1-3 Predetermined indicator(s) selected (1 point)
* 1-3 Predetermined indicator(s) selected and realistic anticipated quantifiable results are provided (3 points)
* 1-3 Predetermined indicator(s) selected and realistic anticipated quantifiable results are provided, and the expected performance measures are easily identifiable, aligned, justified, and well described within the application materials (5 points)
 | 5 |
| 1. Equipment Cost Documentation
2. Did the applicant provide a current vendor quote(s) to substantiate the cost of each piece of equipment?
3. Did the vendor quote(s) include all of the minimum necessary components: date of quote on/after August 1, vendor name, equipment name, itemized breakdown of all expenses included in the special purpose equipment (e.g. shipping, delivery, implements, attachments), and the total price of each special purpose equipment item.
 | Vendor Quote(s) and RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 7 Budget | * The quote(s) did not include all of the minimum components listed (0).
* The quote(s) included some but not every budget item/piece of equip. (1)
* The quote(s) include every equipment item but are difficult to understand and/or reconcile with the budget (2)
* The quote(s) is current, easily identifies every budget item/ piece of equipment, and is easy for reviewers to understand and reconcile with the proposed budget (5 points)
 | 5 |
| 1. Itemized Budget Accuracy
2. Are the budget items clearly itemized?
3. Is the itemized budget section thoroughly complete and mathematically, correct?
4. Does the budget align with the budget narrative and the proposed Equipment purchases?
 | Vendor Quote(s) and the RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 7 Budget Narrative | * There is more than one mathematical error (1 point)
* The budget is partially complete and is mathematically correct (2 points)
* The budget clearly demonstrates the total cost for the application and articulates how category costs listed in the budget are derived and clearly align with the overall application narrative and proposed activities, and the budget sections are free of mathematical and accounting errors, the budget sections reconcile (5 pts.)
 | 5 |
| 1. Allowable Costs
2. Does the budget only contain allowable costs as described in Part IV Section D of this RFA and is in compliance with the [USDA General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf), [RFSI Specific USDA Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_Specific_TermsandConditions_FY23.pdf), [RFSI Program Scope and Requirements](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf) and further guidance from the USDA to States Departments of Agriculture?
 | Vendor Quote(s) and RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 7 Budget and all files submitted | * The application contains multiple unallowable costs (0 points/FAIL)
* The application contains 1 unallowable cost but would be reasonable to complete without the unallowable cost (3 points)
* The application only contains allowable costs (5 points)
 | 5 |
| 1. Equipment Justification
2. Is the equipment justification complete and does it fully respond to the RFA instructions?
3. Does the applicant clearly explain and justify each piece of equipment and how each relates to the purpose and expected outcomes?
4. Is the budget justification detailed enough to give a picture of how funds will be used to accomplish expected outcomes?
 | Vendor Quote(s) and RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 7 Budget | * The equipment justification is not present (0 points)
* The justification is incomplete and/or does not fully follow the RFA instructions (2 points)
* The justification needs more detail to inform reviewers of how costs align with the proposed activities and outcomes (5 points)
* The justification is fully complete for each budget item/piece of equipment, clearly explains how costs align with proposed activities, and demonstrates how funds will be used to accomplish expected outcomes. (10 points)
 | 10 |
| 20. Application Completeness1. The application and all required documents are complete and adhere to the format outlined in the RFA.
 | All files submitted | * Applications will start with 10 points in this criterion.
* Reviewers will deduct one point for each error, unanswered or incomplete question, field, or check box, or deviation from the format outlined in the RFA, up to a total of 10 points may be deducted.
 | 10 |
| **Total Points Possible** | **100** |
| **3 Competitive Bonus Points**The Application demonstrates that the foods/beverages will contain 67% or more Maine-grown, harvested, and processed ingredients  | RFSI Equipment-only Narrative Section 3 Product Information | 3 priority points will be granted to RFSI Equipment-only applications where the funded foods contain 67% (by weight or volume) or more agricultural raw materials that are grown and harvested in Maine by weight or volume. Water is excluded from this requirement.*This criteria may be used as a tiebreaker if necessary.* | 3 |

**Part II FILES REQUIRED AND/OR RECOMMENDED**

This list provides the required and recommended files to be submitted in response to this RFA. Applicants must follow the instructions for file naming. Applicants must use the forms listed below to submit their applications. Applicants must not change the formatting of the provided application document templates.

* **File 1 [Applicant’s Name] – Application File One (required):**
* Applicants must download the required File 1 Word document template from this RFA by double-clicking on the document icon below.



* Application File One (includes Cover Page, Debarment Performance and Non-Collusion Certification, Litigation Form, RFSI Equipment-only Narrative, and the Maine RFSI Environmental Prescreening Worksheet)
* Applicants must not change the formatting of the provided template.
* File 1 must be submitted as one Word .Doc or .Docx document file.
* **File 2 [Applicant’s Name] – Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure (required):**
* Applicants must download the required Word document template from this RFA by double-clicking on the document icon below.



* Application File Two must include, at minimum, one Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure (EOCR) Letter.
* Applicants must follow the instructions in this RFA Part VI Section F Evidence of Critical Infrastructure to complete this file.
* Multiple letters must be combined into one file and submitted together as File 2.
* File 2 must be submitted as one Word .Doc or .Docx or Adobe .PDF document file.
* **File 3 [Applicant’s Name] – Vendor Quotes (required):**
* Applicants must follow the instructions in this RFA Part VI Section G Vendor Quotes to complete this file.
* Multiple files must be combined into one file and submitted together as File 3.
* Applicants must include a quote for each piece of equipment requested
* Also in this file, applicants intending to purchase equipment costing more than $100,000 must include a pre-qualification or pre-approval letter from a financial institution IF they intend to use loan funds to fund the difference between purchase cost and grant award.
* File 3 must be submitted as one Adobe .PDF document file
* **File 4 [Applicant’s Name] – Letters of Support (recommended):**
* Multiple files must be combined into one file and submitted together as File 4.
* File 4 must be submitted as one Adobe .PDF document file

**PART III OVERVIEW OF THE GRANT OPPORTUNITY**

## Purpose and Background

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (Department) is seeking applications for the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Equipment-only Program (RFSI) as defined in this Request for Applications (RFA) document. This document provides instructions for submitting applications, the procedure and criteria by which the awarded Applicant(s) will be selected, and the contractual terms which will govern the relationship between the State of Maine (State) and the awarded Applicant(s).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA AMS) is partnering with state Departments of Agriculture to invest in food supply chain resilience, market access, and value-added processing infrastructure through the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Equipment-only Program (RFSI).

The purpose of the Maine RFSI Equipment-only program is to build resilience across Maine’s middle of the food supply chain. Funds will support expanded capacity for the aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, and distribution of Maine-produced food and beverage products within 5 targeted agricultural product categories:

1. Foods and beverages inclusive of 51% or more [specialty crops](https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/specialty-crop) (farm cultivated and processed for human food consumption);
2. Foods and beverages inclusive of 51% or more Maine dairy or eggs;
3. Food and beverages inclusive of 51% or more Maine grains intended for human consumption;
4. Foods and beverages inclusive of 51% or more Maine farmed aquaculture;
5. Maine specialty food and beverages products produced with 51% or more Maine-grown and harvested ingredients **OR** specialty foods and beverages that include one or more Maine-grown and harvested ingredients but are unable to be manufactured with 51% or more Maine grown and harvested ingredients.

If funded, the special purpose equipment purchased must only be utilized for middle-of-the-supply chain activities that occur in Maine. All RFSI Infrastructure Equipment-Only Grant-funded foods and beverages must be for human consumption and be intended to contribute to more and better markets for local producers (no foods intentionally produced or processed for donation to a food bank or pantry network).

The USDA defines grown, harvested, and processed to mean farm cultivated and harvested and not wild-caught. No meat, poultry, foraged, or wild-caught ingredients may be included in food products funded in any manner through the RFSI program. Activities including meat, poultry, wild-caught and foraged ingredients, animal feed and forage, cannabis, fiber, landscaping products, tobacco, dietary supplements, seeds, or hemp-derived CBD, non-food and beverage products and other ineligible agricultural products are ineligible for funding through this program.

All categories of foods and beverages processed on RFSI-funded equipment must meet the following criteria:

* The majority of ingredients (51% or more of all product ingredients by weight or volume, excluding water) are raw agricultural products that are grown and harvested in Maine (with the exception of food and beverage products in the specialty food and beverage product category).
* Substantial transformation (processing) of the ingredients in the product occurred in Maine;
* The headquarters of the applicant that will be conducting the middle of the supply equipment activities leading to product manufacturing the product is in Maine.

Products that fall in the Maine specialty food and beverage productcategory, and not any other category, must meet the following criteria:

* The majority of ingredients (51% or more of all product ingredients by weight or volume, excluding water) are raw agricultural products that are grown and harvested in Maine **OR** a statement is provided indicating a smaller composition of (at least one) Maine-grown and harvested ingredients are included in the product and a list and description of which product ingredients are unable to be sourced in Maine (e.g. cocoa, sugar, avocado, banana).

Priority points will be granted to Applications for middle-of-the-supply chain activities in which the food and beverage products contain 67% or more agricultural raw materials grown and harvested in Maine by weight or volume. Water is excluded from this requirement.

## General Provisions

1. From the time this RFA is issued until award notification is made, all contact with the State regarding this RFA must be made through the RFA Coordinator identified on the cover page of this RFA. No other person/State employee is empowered to make binding statements regarding this RFA. Violation of this provision may lead to disqualification from the application process at the State’s discretion.
2. Issuance of the RFA does not commit the Department to issue an award or to pay expenses incurred by an Applicant in the preparation of a response to the RFA. This includes attendance at personal interviews or other meetings, where applicable.
3. All applications must adhere to the instructions and format requirements outlined in the RFA and all written supplements and amendments (such as the Summary of Questions and Answers) issued by the Department.
4. Applicants will take careful note that in evaluating an application submitted in response to this RFA, the Department will consider materials provided in the application, information obtained through interviews/presentations (if any), and internal Departmental information of previous contract history with the Applicant (if any). The Department also reserves the right to consider other reliable references and publicly available information in evaluating the Applicant’s experience and capabilities.
5. The application must be signed by a person authorized to legally bind the Applicant and must contain a statement that the proposal and the pricing contained therein will remain valid and binding for a period of 180 days from the date and time of the RFA deadline.
6. The RFA and the awarded Applicant’s application, including all appendices, attachments, or updated documents requested by the Department or the USDA will be the basis for the final contract, as determined by the Department.
7. Following the announcement of an award decision, all submissions in response to this RFA will be public records, available for public inspection pursuant to the State of Maine Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) ([1 M.R.S. § 401](http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/1/title1sec401.html) et seq.).
8. The Department, at its sole discretion, reserves the right to recognize and waive minor informalities and irregularities found in applications received in response to the RFA.
9. All applicable laws, whether or not herein contained, shall be included by this reference. It shall be the Applicant’s responsibility to determine the applicability and requirements of any such laws and to abide by them.

## Eligibility to Submit Application

All applicant businesses and organizations must be domestically owned, and applicants’ facilities must be physically located in Maine. Applicants doing business along the state’s border or have locations in multiple states should only apply in one state to avoid duplication of federal funds. Applicants who have received prior state or federal funding are eligible to apply for RFSI funding for specific equipment that will not be funded through other state or federal funds. The applicant must be the entity primarily responsible for operating, maintaining, and reporting on the proposed special purpose equipment.

Entities eligible for RFSI Equipment-only grants are:

* Agricultural producers or processors, or groups of agricultural producers and processors (applicants must indicate if they are for-profit or a nonprofit organization).
* Nonprofit organizations operating middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, and distribution of targeted agricultural products.
* For-profit entities operating middle of the supply chain activities such as processing, aggregation, or distribution of targeted agricultural products, whose activities are primarily focused on the benefit of local and regional producers and that meet the eligibility requirements of the SBA small business size standards.
	+ - For-profit entities must meet the eligibility requirements of the SBA small business size standards matched to industries described in the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). For more information on these size standards, please visit [SBA’s Size Standards webpage](https://www.sba.gov/federal-contracting/contracting-guide/size-standards). For a quick check on whether your business qualifies, please use the SBA [Size Standards Tool](https://www.sba.gov/size-standards/index.html)
* Local government entities operating middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, and distribution of targeted agricultural products.
* Tribal governments operating middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, and distribution of targeted agricultural products.
* Institutions such as schools, universities, or hospitals bringing producers together to establish cooperative or shared infrastructure or invest in equipment that will benefit multiple producers in middle-of-the-supply chain activities such as processing, aggregation, and distribution of targeted agricultural products.

## Ineligible Applicants

## Applicants ineligible for funding include:

* Applicants already receiving RFSI Infrastructure Project funding are ineligible for RFSI Equipment-only grant funding
* Entities who are not headquartered in Maine
* Entities that do not engage in middle-of-the-supply chain activities financial corporations, banks, and agricultural service providers
* Farmers markets, food pantries, and retail-only stores
* Entities that do not focus on increasing market opportunities for local and regional food products
* For-profit entities that are not primarily focused on benefiting local and regional food and beverage producers
* For-profit entities in which the business activities are not currently and primarily focused on operating middle of the supply chain activities
* Entities that are not will not be the primary business/organization responsible for the operations, maintenance, and reporting on the special purpose equipment

## Awards

The Department will work in partnership with the USDA to make competitive subaward investments in middle of the supply chain equipment to domestic food and beverage businesses, agricultural producers and processors, and other eligible entities.

The date that subrecipient contracts will begin will be determined by the Department after final review by the USDA. Contracts are estimated to start on or after March 1, 2025, and must be completed by May 24, 2026. The Department anticipates making multiple awards of no less than $10,000 and no more than $100,000 each as a result of this RFA process. There is no match requirement for this grant. Awards will be made through a competitive scoring process. The total number of awards will be determined by the total number of eligible applications recommended for award and the amount of each eligible applicant’s request. Awards will be selected in order by high to low application score.

1. **Appeal of Contract Awards**

An aggrieved applicant (Petitioner) may request an appeal hearing on a grant award decision by submitting a request for appeal to the Department Commissioner, in writing, no later than fifteen (15) calendar days from the date of the award decision (date of notification of conditional award letter). The written request for appeal must describe the specific nature of the grievance. The Commissioner shall grant an appeal hearing unless it is determined that:

* 1. The petitioner is not an aggrieved person; or
	2. The written request for appeal was submitted more than fifteen (15) calendar days after notification of award.

The burden of proof within the hearing of appeal lies with the petitioner. The evidence presented must specifically address and be limited to one or more of the following:

* 1. Violation of law;
	2. Irregularities creating fundamental unfairness; or
	3. Arbitrary or capricious award.

Notice of the appeal proceeding shall follow the requirements of 5 M.R.S. § 9051-A(2) and be provided to those entities as determined applicable by the Commissioner. The notification must include the date and location of the hearing and the name of the Hearing Officer. Appeal proceedings may be held in person, virtually, or in a hybrid format at the discretion of the Hearing Officer. Failure to appear for a scheduled hearing may be grounds for default.

**PART IV ACTIVITIES AND REQUIREMENTS**

#

1. **Funding Scope**

RFSI Equipment-only grants to middle-of-the-supply businesses must create more diverse local and regional market options and create more economic opportunities for communities, allowing them to retain more of the value chain dollar. States must ensure that RFSI Equipment-only funds are used for the purpose of expanding the middle of the supply chain capacity for locally and regionally produced foods and offer more and better market opportunities and new streams of revenue to small and mid-sized agricultural producers, including those who may not have access to value-added opportunities or processing to meet market demand for premium or value-added products, such as underserved producers.

Equipment-only applications must describe an equipment investment plan that is scaled appropriately to meet the applicant's long-term expansion needs. Applicants should explain how the equipment purchase and resulting increase within their production, throughput, or market access fits into their business plan. Applications should demonstrate how food and beverage ingredients will be sourced, how increased product quantities will be marketed, and the market demand for products.

Applicants can request multiple pieces of equipment; however, the proposed equipment investment responds to one overarching purpose. Applicants must define and describe the specific and existing problem, barrier, gap, and/or need in Maine’s middle of the supply chain that this equipment investment will address. For example, if an equipment investment is to expand from making local salsa to making local tomato sauce, the applicant could request funds for tomato processing equipment and then pasta sauce canning equipment, as both are required and connected in order to get the final product. If the equipment investment is to expand the quantity of products to a new market, the applicant could ask for a new delivery vehicle and an electric pallet jack to load into that new delivery vehicle, as both are connected and necessary. However, requesting a new cooler for storing raw produce and also a new milk bottling line would not be aligned with the same overarching challenge.

Competitive applications will demonstrate the following:

* How the equipment investment will increase production capacity, allow the business to reach new markets, or create new products;
* Why this impact creates greater resiliency in the middle of the supply chain;
* Why it is necessary for the organization to purchase this specific equipment at this particular time;
* Market demand for the product(s);
* A robust plan for moving raw and/or finished products through the supply chain;
* A clear plan for sourcing, aggregating, or utilizing local and regional raw products or ingredients; and
* Organizational capacity to successfully integrate more or diversified product(s) into their business model
1. **Maine RFSI Equipment-only Program Priorities**

The equipment to be purchased with grant funds must directly enable the applicant to meet one of the Maine RFSI Priorities. Applicants are required to demonstrate how this equipment investment will help the applicant to accomplish one or more of the Maine RFSI Priorities listed below:

* Equipment investments that will support processing and packaging improvements (including value-added processing, co-packing, canning, preserving, drying, hulling, shelling, milling, cooking, baking, juicing, distilling, and fermenting).
* Equipment investments that will support storage and distribution improvements (including cold storage, refrigeration, delivery, and distribution).
* Equipment investments that will resolve middle-of-the-supply-chain challenges within Maine’s targeted agricultural products (specialty crops, dairy, and eggs, grains for human consumption, aquaculture, and value-added specialty foods).
	+ Note: On-farm facilities to receive equipment funding must be facilities that conduct middle-of-the-food-supply chain activities and not production-related activities.
1. **USDA RFSI Equipment-only Program Priorities**

The equipment to be purchased with grant funds must directly enable the applicant to meet one of the USDA RFSI Priorities. Applicants are required to demonstrate how this equipment investment will help the applicant to accomplish one or more of the USDA RFSI Priorities listed below.

* Expand value-added product capacity and resiliency
	+ Equipment investments that support the development of value-added products available to consumers.
	+ Focus on small and medium-sized enterprises that add options and choices for consumers and producers (emphasis on value-added);
* Workforce/economic impact
	+ Equipment investments that support activities that provide fair prices, fair wages, and new and safe job opportunities that keep profits in rural communities.
	+ Equipment investments that offer family-supporting job quality and treatment/safety of workers;
* Diversity of processing infrastructure
	+ Equipment investments that increase diversity in processing options in terms of business model approaches, geography, and availability to underserved communities.
	+ Applications that are submitted by cooperatives, farmer- and worker-owned enterprises.
* Equipment investments that offer more and better market opportunities and new streams of revenue to small and mid-sized agricultural producers, including those who may not have access to value-added opportunities or processing to meet market demand for premium or value-added products, such as underserved producers.
1. **Allowable Use of Funds**

The only eligible expense for this grant round is specialized equipment (otherwise known as special purpose equipment) that directly aligns with the goals of the RFSI program. Special purpose equipment is tangible, nonexpendable, personal property having a useful life of more than one year and an acquisition cost that equals or exceeds $2,500 per unit, for the purpose of this Maine RFSI Equipment-only grant.

Eligible special purpose equipment must be used for a specific middle of the supply food and beverage activity and not be used for general business operating needs.

All equipment purchases must meet the following criteria:

* Equipment is necessary for the middle of the supply chain activities and is not otherwise reasonably available and accessible. Equipment is normally charged as a direct cost by the organization and is acquired in accordance with organizational practices.
* The equipment investment must create greater resiliency in Maine’s middle of the supply chain.
* There must be a specific need making it necessary for the applicant to purchase this specific equipment at this particular time.
* The equipment must improve the applicant’s organizational capacity to successfully integrate more or diversified product(s) into their business model
* Equipment must be used solely to meet the purpose of the program and objectives of the RFSI equipment-only program.
* Equipment is subject to the full range of acquisition, use, management, and distribution requirements under [2 CFR § 200.313](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200/subpart-D/subject-group-ECFR8feb98c2e3e5ad2/section-200.313) as applicable.
* The equipment investment must increase the applicant’s production capacity, allow the business to reach new markets, or create new products.
* The equipment investment must be a primary component of a robust plan for moving raw and/or finished product through the food and beverage supply chain.
* Items under $2,500 per unit are considered supplies and not eligible for this grant.

Some examples of special purpose equipment include:

* Upgrades or new equipment for specific agricultural products;
* Processing, preservation, and storage/cold storage;
* Post-harvest cleaning and grading;
* Purchase of freezing equipment, freezer, or cold storage;
* Processing, canning, preserving and pasteurization;
* Preparation and packing;
* Drying, hulling, shelling, and milling;
* Reverse osmosis systems;
* Egg packing machines;
* Flotation tanks;
* Roasters;
* Packing and labeling equipment;
* Cooking, baking, juicing, distilling, fermenting equipment;
* Special purpose vehicles relevant to the scope of work, such as delivery vehicles or refrigerated trucks. Vehicles must only be utilized for middle-of-the-supply chain activities (not for production, harvest, direct-to-consumer activities). Mixed-use vehicles are not eligible for funding. Food trucks are not eligible for funding.
* Please note that on-farm equipment must be for post-harvest activities, not for crop production activities, including harvest activities.

Additional eligible costs could include:

* Implements, attachments, and equipment components necessary and reasonable to make each special purpose equipment item operational for the activities described as long as they are included in the equipment quote;
* Shipping and handling or delivery charges for the equipment, as long as it is included in the equipment quote and reasonable compared to the price of the equipment;
* Sales tax for the equipment, as long as it is included in the equipment quote.

Expenses can be for equipment or upgrades to equipment within a leased

building/space, as long as the landlord has granted permission for improvements or modifications to be made to the space is documented in an Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure Letter.

Applicants may not submit a total equipment budget of less than $10,000 or more than $100,000. Please note that grant funds can go towards pieces of equipment that are more than

$100,000; however, the applicant must demonstrate the capacity to pay for the remainder of the

equipment cost. For example, if a piece of equipment is $140,000, the applicant can ask

for $100,000 in grant funds, but must include $40,000 as a matching contribution that is committed or secured at the time the application is submitted.

The recipient cannot encumber property improved as part of the cooperative agreement

award and must follow the requirements of 2 CFR §200.311 before disposing of the

property. The real property will be used for the originally authorized purpose as long as

needed for that purpose. If an applicant needs to get rid of equipment after the grant is

complete, the recipient must obtain disposition instructions from AMS, which may

include paying back some funds to the grant program.

Special purpose equipment must be in compliance with the [USDA General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf), [RFSI Specific USDA Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_Specific_TermsandConditions_FY23.pdf), [RFSI Program Scope and Requirements](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf), and further guidance from the USDA to States Departments of Agriculture. The Department and the USDA reserve the right to make changes to, and final determination of eligible expenses.

The USDA defines the middle of the food supply chain as the stage that occurs after agricultural production and before the product is sold to consumers. These activities include the processing, aggregation, and distribution of agricultural products between leaving the field and entering the marketplace. Therefore, grant funds cannot be used for the cultivation, harvest, or retail marketing of eligible food and beverage products.

Allowable activities or tasks examples include:

* + - The purchase of special purpose equipment for institutions or others that will benefit multiple producers through middle-of-the-supply-chain activities such as processing, aggregation, and distribution of targeted agricultural products.
		- Upgrades to equipment for processing specific agricultural products, such as:
			* On-farm post-harvest processing, preservation, and storage/cold storage;
			* Post-harvest cleaning and grading;
			* Aggregator warehouse and storage, including cooperatives;
			* Purchase of freezing equipment, freezer, or cold storage;
			* Processing, canning, preserving and pasteurization;
			* Preparation and packing;
			* Drying, hulling, shelling, and milling; and or cooking, baking, juicing, distilling, fermenting.

Applicants must ensure that all equipment installation and implementation activities comply with all applicable license and permit requirements by the state, county, or other local jurisdiction for their type of facility (for example, food processing, dairy, food storage, etc.) Applicants must also ensure there is no conflict of interest in contracting or purchasing of goods and services.

1. **Non-Allowable Use of Funds**

The RFSI Equipment-only Program will only fund eligible equipment, including related shipping, delivery, and/or freight charges.

* Equipment that has a minimal impact on the Maine and USDA RFSI Priorities. For example, a piece of equipment that has a very small increase in production or increases market access by a minimal amount;
* Acquiring real property (including land purchases), or any interest therein;
* Equipment investments supporting meat, poultry, wild-caught and foraged ingredients, animal feed and forage, cannabis, fiber, landscaping products, tobacco, dietary supplements, seeds, or hemp-derived CBD, nonfood and beverage products and other ineligible agricultural products;
* Pre-award costs;
* Business operating equipment and technology such as printers, copiers, IT systems, inventory tracking and/or accounting software, solar panels, generators, heat pumps, HVAC systems, and ventilation systems;
* Contractor, consultant, engineering, or installation costs not conducted by the equipment vendor and not included in the submitted quote;
* Personnel, training costs, supplies;
* Lease agreements;
* Retail market expenses (including coolers and displays that consumers will have direct access to);
* Marketing expenses;
* Agricultural production expenses (pre-harvest and harvesting equipment);
* Equipment and activities that have received a Federal award from another program;
* Expenses that have been or will be reimbursed under any funding source;
* Equipment investments which have already received funding from another federal grant or subaward programs may not receive funding for the same activities through an Infrastructure Grant. However, RFSI Equipment-only funds may build on the successes of prior funding, such as the USDA Regional Food Business Centers Business Builder subawards, to fund subsequent activities.
* Business operating and program costs, personal, contractual, construction and renovation, travel, and other expenses determined to be eligible by the USDA including those listed in the [RFSI Program Scope and Requirements](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf).
1. **Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure**

Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure is required to document that the critical resources and/or infrastructure that are necessary to complete the proposed equipment investment are in place at the time the application is submitted. Critical resources and infrastructure can be facilities, land, structure, use of city streets/parks, shared-used kitchens, and/or other essential resources for the proposed application. Land, structures, and other critical resources must be in place and in working condition at the time of application submission. The letter(s) must identify and describe the critical resources necessary for acquiring and implementing the equipment and certify that they are in place and committed at the time of application submission.

One Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure must be submitted by the applicant entity. More than one Evidence of Critical Infrastructure letter may be required to fully demonstrate that the infrastructure and resources are in place. As critical resources include things like a building lease or access to in-kind shared-use space, a letter may be necessary from a landlord or non-applicant entity owner of any space where the equipment will be operational. If equipment will be installed and/or operated at a location not owned by the applicant entity, a letter will be required from the organization/owner of the property/facility where the equipment will be utilized.

Evidence of Critical Infrastructure letters must show that the physical location (building, land, etc.) is in place and committed at the time of the application and will be available to receive the equipment when the funds are awarded.

Letters of Evidence of Critical Infrastructure must minimally include the following:

* Applicant Entity Name
* A statement about committing/approving/granting permission, etc., of the critical resource or infrastructure needed for the equipment
* A description of the approved use of the critical resource or infrastructure approved for the equipment, any costs associated with use, and any qualifying circumstances.
1. **Vendor Quote(s) Required**

Applicants must submit documentation to substantiate the current cost of each piece of equipment. Applicants are required to submit a current and valid quote (dated on or after August 1, 2024) for each equipment item that will be purchased with grant funds. Equipment price quotes may be in the form of a written sales estimate from a vendor/used equipment seller, a catalog or online vendor pricing sheet, or a binding quote provided by a commercial vendor. Used equipment is allowable.

Please note that a quote cannot come from a building contractor who will purchase the equipment and conduct additional activities to prepare the site for installation. Installation costs are ineligible. All costs necessary and reasonable for equipment delivery must be included in the vendor quote (e.g., packaged equipment components, implements, attachments, and shipping, handling, delivery, and freight charges).

Applicants intending to purchase equipment costing more than $100,000 must include a pre-qualification or pre-approval letter from a financial institution IF they intend to use loan funds to fund the difference between purchase cost and grant award. The bank letter must be dated on/after August 1, 2024.

Vendor Quote(s) must minimally include the following:

* Date of quote
* Vendor Name
* Equipment name
* Itemized breakdown of all expenses included in the special purpose equipment quote (e.g. shipping, handling, delivery, implements, attachments).
* Total price of each special purpose equipment item
1. **Indirect Costs**

Indirect costs are not allowed for RFSI Equipment-only grants.

1. **Disbursement of Funds**

Award subrecipients must sign an official State of Maine contract agreement with the Department indicating their commitment and responsibilities toward completing their RFSI equipment activities in a manner consistent with State of Maine policies and all applicable state and federal laws and regulations. Subecipients must be registered as a vendor with the Maine Division of Procurement Services before final approval can take place.

Awarded subrecipients will receive 70% of contracted funds following signing of the grant agreement and after the submission and approval of a request for an advance disbursement to place a down payment or order the eligible and approved equipment.

Up to an additional 20% (or up to 90% total) of the grant award will be paid on a reimbursement basis after the submission and approval of an interim outcomes report, demonstrating initial progress towards proposed activities and outcomes.

The final 10% (or the full remaining amount) will be paid on a reimbursement basis after the submission and approval of all required reports, including a final report demonstrating all completed activities and satisfactory achievement of expected measurable outcomes within one year of contract award.

The Department will provide a template which will be required to be fully completed prior to approval of funding disbursements. Subrecipients will receive payments and reimbursements for only approved costs listed in the contract that results from the RFA. Subrecipients must maintain documentation of equipment expenses for three years beyond the contract period. Accurate expense totals will be a required component of status reporting.

1. **Reporting Requirements**

Grant subrecipients will be required to submit annual performance reports as required by the Department and the USDA throughout the duration of the contract and a final performance report upon completion. Reports will include questions such as a narrative of the accomplishments to date, progress toward anticipated outcomes, financial reporting, and photos that demonstrate activities related to the equipment investment.

The Department or its designee(s) reserves the right to perform site monitoring visits to any and all awardees to ensure that work is progressing within the required time frame and that fiscal procedures are being followed accurately and appropriately. Monitoring includes both financial and program information as well as site visits.

1. **Other Requirements**
	1. **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)**

All activities funded under this RFA must comply with the [National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)](https://www.epa.gov/nepa/what-national-environmental-policy-act) and related applicable agency regulations and instructions, [Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act](https://www.gsa.gov/real-estate/historic-preservation/historic-preservation-policy-tools/legislation-policy-and-reports/section-106-of-the-national-historic-preservation-act) (NHPA), the  [Endangered Species Act](https://www.fws.gov/law/endangered-species-act) (ESA), other laws and regulations as outlined therein, and any applicable state, local, or tribal laws. A review for NEPA compliance is required prior to the award of grant funds. If selected for an award, applicants must provide all requested information to support compliance with NEPA, NHPA, ESA, and all other federal environmental laws and regulations this may include photos and site visits.

* 1. **UEI SAM.Gov**

All subrecipients of RFSI funds must have a Unique Entity Identifier number (UEI) in SAM.Gov prior to being issued a subrecipient contract. There is NO cost to register in SAM.gov.

* 1. **Acknowledgement of Support**

In compliance with the [USDA General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf) Section 11: Acknowledgement of Support and as required in [2 CFR § 415.2](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-B/chapter-IV/part-415/subpart-B), subrecipients must acknowledge USDA AMS support in all publications written or published with USDA AMS grant or cooperative agreement support. This includes reports, pamphlets, posters, brochures, and, if feasible, any publication reporting the results of or describing a grant-supported activity. Subrecipients must also acknowledge USDA AMS support on any audio or video product, including live or prerecorded radio or television programs, audio recordings, and multimedia presentations.

Subrecipients are responsible for ensuring that an acknowledgment of USDA is made during media interviews, including popular media such as radio, television, and news magazines, that discuss work funded by USDA AMS in a substantial way. Subrecipients are asked to coordinate all public announcements of awards and subawards, with the Department who will then, in turn, coordinate with the USDA AMS and its Public Affairs Office.

The following acknowledgment of USDA funding must appear in all published materials or products, in any format (websites, audiovisuals, etc.), that are substantially based upon or developed under an AMS award:

*Funding for this equipment investment was made possible by a grant/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the USDA. This USDA supported equipment investment was made possible with funding from the American Rescue Plan Act.*

Subrecipients are encouraged to use the USDA logo in their financial acknowledgment. Any other logo use requires approval in writing from the Department and AMS prior to finalizing documents for publication or printing. When using the USDA logo, please use the [logo acknowledgment images provided by USDA AMS](https://www.ams.usda.gov/about-ams/ams-logo).

In addition to the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf) section 11.0 Acknowledgement of Support, this program also requires that the recipient follow AMS requirements for signage and acknowledgment of funding from the American Rescue Plan Act.

**PART V KEY PROCESS EVENTS**

## Submission of Questions

* 1. **General Instructions:** It is the responsibility of all Applicants and other interested parties to examine the entire RFA and to seek clarification, in writing, if they do not understand any information or instructions.
		1. Applicants and other interested parties should use **Appendix A** (Submitted Questions Form) for submission of questions. The form is to be submitted as a WORD document.
		2. Questions must be submitted by e-mail and received by the RFA Coordinator identified on the cover page of the RFA as soon as possible but no later than the date and time specified on the RFA cover page.
		3. Submitted Questions must include the RFA Number and Title in the subject line of the e-mail. The Department assumes no liability for assuring accurate/complete/on-time e-mail transmission and receipt.
	2. **Question & Answer Summary:** Responses to all questions will be compiled in writing and posted on the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry’s [Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program webpage](https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/resilient-food-systems-infrastructure.shtml.). It is the responsibility of all interested parties to go to this website to obtain a copy of the Submitted Questions & Answers Summary. Only answers to the Submitted Questions issued in writing via the Submitted Questions & Answers Summary document posted to this website will be considered binding.

## Amendments

All amendments released in regard to this RFA will be posted on the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry’s [Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program webpage.](https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/resilient-food-systems-infrastructure.shtml.) It is the responsibility of all interested parties to go to this website to obtain amendments. Only those amendments posted on this website are considered binding.

## Application Submission

* 1. **Applications Due:** Applications must be received no later than 11:59 p.m. local time, on the date listed on the cover page of the RFA.
		1. ~~Only one application submission email may be sent per applicant entity (defined by the Unique Entity Identification UEI number listed on the application(s)). In the event that more than one application submission email is sent by an applicant entity, only the contents of the first email submission, according to the email posted sent date and time, will be considered to be officially submitted and eligible for review and funding consideration.~~(Retracted 10/10/2024).
		2. Only up to two application submission emails may be sent per applicant entity (defined by the Unique Entity Identification UEI number listed on the application(s)). In the event that more than two application submission emails are sent by an applicant entity, only the contents of the first and second email submissions, according to the email posted sent date and time, will be considered to be officially submitted and eligible for review and funding consideration.(Ammended 10/10/2024).
		3. It is the responsibility of the applicant to follow the application submission instructions provided in this RFA. Any emails received after the 11:59 p.m. deadline, submitted to the incorrect email address, submitted via an unapproved method (e.g., postal mail or in-person delivery), or submitted with incomplete application materials (e.g., missing files stated to be required in this RFA), will be rejected without exception.
1. **Delivery Instructions:** Applications must be submitted electronically to the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry at RFSI.AGR@Maine.gov
	1. Only applications received by e-mail will be considered. The Department assumes no liability for assuring accurate/complete e-mail transmission and receipt.

Application submission e-mails that are successfully received by the RFSI.AGR@Maine.gov inbox will receive an automatic reply stating as such.

* 1. E-mails containing links to file sharing sites or online file repositories will not be accepted as submissions. Only e-mail application submissions that have the requested files attached will be accepted.
	2. Encrypted e-mails received which require opening attachments and logging into a proprietary system will not be accepted as submissions. It is the Applicant’s responsibility to check with its organization’s information technology team to ensure that security settings will not encrypt its application submission.
	3. File size limits are 25MB per e-mail. All e-mails and files must be received by the due date and time as described above.
	4. Applicants are to insert the following into the subject line of their e-mail submission: “**RFA#2024ARDRFSIEQUIP1 Application Submission – [Applicant’s Name]**”.
1. **Submission Contents**
2. All application forms and documents must be submitted in the format provided or stated in the RFA.
3. Applicants are not to provide additional attachments beyond those specified in the RFA or Application Form for the purpose of extending their response. Materials not requested will not be considered part of the application and will not be evaluated.
4. All applications **MUST** include the following (found in Part II of the RFA) unless otherwise stated:
5. File One which includes: Cover Page, Debarment Performance and Non-Collusion Certification, Litigation Form, RFSI Equipment-only Narrative, and the Maine RFSI Environmental Prescreening Worksheet)
6. File 2 Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure Letter(s)
7. File 3 One current and valid vendor quote for each equipment item to be purchased.
8. Applicants **MAY optionally** include the following:
9. File 4 Letter(s) of Support (up to three)

**PART VI PROPOSAL SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS**

This section contains instructions for Applicants to use in preparing their applications. The Department seeks detailed yet succinct responses that demonstrate the Applicant’s qualifications, experience, and ability to perform the requirements specified throughout the RFA.

The Applicant’s proposal must follow the outline used below, including the numbering, section, and sub-section headings. Failure to use the instructions specified in this RFA, or failure to respond to all questions and instructions throughout the RFA, or failure to submit all required documents may result in the proposal being disqualified as non-responsive or receiving a reduced score. The Department and its evaluation team have sole discretion to determine whether a variance from the RFA specifications will result either in disqualification or a reduction in the scoring of an application. Rephrasing of the content provided in the RFA will, at best, be considered minimally responsive.

Applicants are not to provide additional attachments beyond those specified in the RFA for the purpose of extending their response. Additional materials not requested will not be considered part of the proposal and will not be evaluated. Include any forms provided in the submission package or reproduce those forms as closely as possible. All information must be presented in the same order and format as described in the RFA.

**Application Contents**

**Application File 1– Required**

* 1. **Application Cover Page**

Applicants must complete the Proposal Cover Page. It is critical that the cover page show the specific information requested, including the Applicant's address(es) and other details listed. This information will be used to inform you of the outcome of the RFA. The Application Cover Page must be dated and signed by a person authorized to enter into contracts on behalf of the Applicant. The authorized signature must be signed in black or blue pen ink or established through an e-signature software such as Adobe e-signature or DocuSign.

* 1. **Debarment, Performance and Non-Collusion Certification**

Applicants must complete the Debarment, Performance, and Non-Collusion Certification Form, which must be dated and signed by a person authorized to enter into contracts on behalf of the Applicant. Applicant must indicate if this is nonapplicable.

* 1. **Litigation**

Applicants must attach a list of all current litigation in which the Applicant is named and a list of all closed cases that have closed within the past five (5) years in which the Applicant paid the claimant either as part of a settlement or by decree.  For each, list the entity bringing suit, the complaint, the accusation, amount, and outcome. If there isn’t any, please indicate N/A.

* 1. **Maine RFSI Environmental Prescreening Worksheet**

Applicants must complete the Maine RFSI Environmental Prescreening Worksheet. A review for NEPA compliance is required prior to the award of grant funds.

* 1. **RFSI Equipment-Only Narrative**
	2. Applicants must submit a fully completed RFSI Equipment-Only Narrative (**provided in Part V)**
	3. The USDA AMS has the right to request edits and/or ask for clarification on any aspect of a submitted application prior to subrecipient contract execution as part of the review process. The USDA AMS will determine if the application is ultimately eligible for funding and will take steps to ensure that each application is in compliance with the [USDA General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf), [RFSI Specific USDA Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_Specific_TermsandConditions_FY23.pdf), [RFSI Program Scope and Requirements](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf), and subsequent guidance from the USDA, and may deem all, or a portion, of any application to be ineligible which may subsequently require an adjustment in a final subrecipient award amount which may result in no contract being awarded after USDA review.

**Application File 2 Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure Letter(s) – Required**

* + - 1. **Evidence of Critical Resources and Infrastructure Letter(s)**
		1. Applicants are required to document that the critical resources and/or infrastructure that are necessary to complete the proposed equipment investment are committed and in place at the time the application is submitted.

**Application File 3 Vendor Quote(s) – Required**

* + - 1. **Vendor Quote(s)**
				1. Applicants are required to submit a quote for each piece of equipment listed in the application.

**Application File 4 Letters of Support – Optional and Recommended**

* 1. **Letter(s) of Support**

a. Applicants are encouraged to submit a letter(s) of support. A maximum of three letters of support are accepted for review.

**PART VII APPLICATION EVALUATION AND SELECTION**

1. **Evaluation Process – General Information**
	1. An evaluation team, composed of qualified reviewers, will judge the merits of the applications received in accordance with the criteria defined in the RFA. Each application category (e.g. specialty crop, grains for human consumption, dairy and eggs, aquaculture, and specialty food and beverage products) may have a unique and qualified evaluation team.
	2. Officials responsible for making decisions on award selection will ensure that the selection process accords equal opportunity and appropriate consideration to all who are capable of meeting the specifications. The goals of the evaluation process are to ensure fairness and objectivity in reviewing the applications and to ensure that all contracts are awarded to Applicants who provide the best value to the State of Maine.
	3. The Department reserves the right to communicate and/or schedule interviews/presentations with Applicants, if needed, to obtain clarification of information contained in the applications received. The Department may revise the scores assigned in the initial evaluation to reflect those communications and/or interviews/presentations. Changes to applications, including updating or adding information, will not be permitted during any interview/presentation process, and therefore, Applicants must submit proposals that present their rates and other requested information as clearly and completely as possible.
	4. Failure to respond to all questions and instructions throughout the RFA may result in the application being disqualified as non-responsive or receiving a reduced score. The Department and its evaluation team have sole discretion to determine whether a variance from the RFA specifications will result either in disqualification or a reduction in the scoring of a proposal.
2. **Scoring Process:** The evaluation team will use a team approach to evaluate and score all sections listed in the Scoring Rubric posted in this RFA. Members of the evaluation team will score criteria sections individually, and the evaluation team will review both individual and average scores for each submitted application. The evaluation team will arrive at a consensus as to the assignment of points for each of those sections based on average individual scores and subsequent evaluation discussion and score determination. The evaluation team has the right to establish a minimum score required for award recommendation (e.g. only applications with a minimum score of 85 will be recommended for award). The minimum score only establishes an additional pass/fail threshold to inform the evaluation team’s final recommendations for award and does not provide a guarantee that applicants scoring equal to or greater than the minimum score required will be recommended for an award. The actual recommendations for award will be subject to the total amount of applications received and the total amount of funding available. Applicants will be recommended for award in the order of highest to lowest eligible score until available funds are exhausted, even if the lowest applicant score recommended is higher than the minimum qualifying score. Further, the Department withholds the right to retain all or a portion of available funds from this application period to be utilized for future use rather than be awarded through this process.
3. **Scoring Weights:** The score will be based on a 100-point scale and will measure the degree to which each application meets the criteria provided in this RFA’s Part I Scoring Rubric. A 3-point bonus criteria metric has been added, which may be used in the event of a tiebreaker for limited available funding.
4. **Selection and Award**
	1. Notification of conditional award selection or non-selection will be made in writing by the Department.
	2. Issuance of this RFA in no way constitutes a commitment by the State to award a contract, to pay costs incurred in the preparation of a response to the RFA, or to pay costs incurred in procuring or contracting for services, supplies, physical space, personnel, or any other costs incurred by the Applicant.
	3. The Department reserves the right to reject any and all applications or to make multiple awards.
	4. The consensus scoring review committee will make recommendations to the Department Commissioner for approval to be submitted to the USDA for further review and approval.
	5. The Department may coordinate with other agencies or entities that it deems necessary in awarding funds under this program.
	6. The Department reserves the right to determine the number of awards and modify, partially fund, or increase awards at the Department’s discretion.
	7. Applicants selected during the RFA process will be required to complete all USDA-requested changes to the Application and supporting documentation.
	8. The Department will complete a Maine RFSI Infrastructure Equipment-Only Grant proposal for the USDA, and final award is contingent upon the acceptance of the Maine proposal by the USDA.
	9. The USDA reserves the right to reject any and all Applications or to make adjustments to awards. The USDA AMS will determine if an Application is ultimately eligible for funding and will take steps to ensure that each equipment investment is in compliance with the [USDA General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf), [RFSI Specific USDA Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_Specific_TermsandConditions_FY23.pdf), [RFSI Program Scope and Requirements](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf), and further guidance from the USDA to States Departments of Agriculture and may deem all, or a portion, of any application to be ineligible which may subsequently require an adjustment in a final subrecipient award amount which may result in no contract being awarded after USDA review.
5. **Contract Administration and Conditions**
	1. The awarded Applicants will be required to execute a State of Maine Service Contract with the appropriate riders as determined by the issuing Department.
	2. Allocation of funds is final upon successful negotiation and execution of the contract, subject to the review and approval of the State Procurement Review Committee. Contracts are not considered fully executed and valid until approved by the State Procurement Review Committee, and funds are encumbered. No contract will be approved based on an RFA which has an effective date less than fourteen (14) calendar days after award notification to Applicants. (Referenced in the regulations of the Department of Administrative and Financial Services, [Chapter 110, § 3(B)(i)](https://www.maine.gov/dafs/bbm/procurementservices/policies-procedures/chapter-110)). This provision means that a contract cannot be effective until at least 14 calendar days after award notification.
	3. Following the award, a Contract Administrator from the Department will be appointed to assist with the development and administration of the contract and to act as administrator during the entire contract period. Department staff will be available after the award to consult with the awarded Applicants in the finalization of the contract.
		1. In providing services and performing under the contract, the awarded Applicant must act as an independent contractor and not as an agent of the State of Maine.
		2. The State anticipates paying the Contractor on the basis of net 30 payment terms upon the receipt of an accurate and acceptable invoice. An invoice will be considered accurate and acceptable if it complies with all specific and agreed-upon requirements listed within the contract that results from the RFA, which may include the submission on the Department provided template, the State of Maine contract number, the Awardee’s State of Maine Vendor number, documentation of proof of payment for approved expenses (e.g., itemized receipt).

**APPENDIX A RFA TERMS AND ACRONYMS WITH DEFINITIONS**

The following terms and acronyms, as referenced in this RFA, have the meanings indicated below:

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| --- | --- |
| **Term/Acronym** | **Definition** |
| **Acknowledgment of Support** | In addition to the [AMS General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf) section 11.0 Acknowledgement of Support, this program also requires that the subrecipient follow AMS requirements for signage and acknowledgment of funding from the American Rescue Plan Act.  |
| **AMS** | The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is a division of the USDA. The Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) administers programs that create domestic and international marketing opportunities for U.S. producers of food, fiber, and specialty crops. AMS also provides the agriculture industry with valuable services to ensure the quality and availability of wholesome food for consumers across the country. |
| **Application** | A completed package containing all elements detailed in the RFA. |
| **Beginning Farmer** | A “[beginning farmer or rancher](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-VII/subchapter-D/part-760/subpart-B/section-760.107)” means, for this section, a person or legal entity who, for a program year, both: (i) Has never previously operated a farm or ranch, or who has not operated a farm or ranch in the previous 10 years, applicable to all members (shareholders, partners, beneficiaries, etc., as fits the circumstances) of an entity, and (ii) Will have or has had for the relevant period materially and substantially participated in the operation of a farm or ranch. See also: [Beginning Farmer.](https://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/bfrp_definition.aspx) |
| **Department or DACF** | Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry |
| **Equipment** | Also known as special purpose equipment. Special purpose equipment' is tangible, nonexpendable, personal property having a useful life of more than one year and an acquisition cost that equals or exceeds, for the purpose of this Maine RFSI Equipment-only grant, $2,500 per unit. Special purpose equipment must be used for a specific middle of the supply chain food and beverage activity and not be used for general business operational needs. Items under $2,500 per unit are considered supplies and not eligible for this grant. |
| **Historically Underserved Farmers and Ranchers** | Some groups of people are identified in Farm Bill legislation and in USDA policy as being Historically Underserved (HU). Members of these groups have been historically underserved by, or subject to discrimination in, Federal policies and programs. [Four groups are defined by USDA as “Historically Underserved,”](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers) including farmers or ranchers who are: Beginning; Socially Disadvantaged; Veterans; and Limited Resource.  |
| **Letter of Support (LOS)** | A Letter of Support is an optional but recommended application component that facilitates the Applicant’s demonstration of stakeholder support.  |
| Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher | The term [Limited Resource Farmer or Rancher](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers) means a participant:* With direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than the current indexed value in each of the previous two years, and
* Who has a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four, or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous two years.

A Self-Determination Tool is available to the public and may be completed online or printed and completed hardcopy at: [https://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov](https://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/)/. |
| Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Producer Partners  | Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Producer Partners with a current LFPA contract with the Department are also determined by the RFSI Program to meet the criteria to be considered processors or other middle-of-the-supply chain businesses owned by socially disadvantaged individuals. |
| **Middle of the Supply Chain** | The middle of the supply chain is the stage that occurs after agricultural production and before the product is sold to consumers. The food supply chain involves the following stages: 1) Production, 2) Processing, 3) Aggregation/Distribution, and 4) Markets/Consumers. For the purposes of RFSI, “middle of the supply chain” refers to the middle stages: 2) Processing and 3) Aggregation/Distribution. RFSI funds cannot be used for 1) Production activities/costs, including pre-harvest and harvesting farm equipment, or 4) Market/Consumers activities. Please note that in accordance with the RFSI [Program Scope and Requirements section](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf)1.5.6, on-farm post-harvest processing, preservation, and storage/cold storage are allowable activities.See [Maine RFSI Middle of the Supply Chain graphic illustration](https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/images/rfsi-middle-supply-chain.png) |
| **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** | Requires federal agencies to assess the environmental effects of their proposed actions prior to making decisions. See: [National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)](https://www.epa.gov/nepa/what-national-environmental-policy-act) and related applicable agency regulations and instructions, [Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act](https://www.gsa.gov/real-estate/historic-preservation/historic-preservation-policy-tools/legislation-policy-and-reports/section-106-of-the-national-historic-preservation-act) (NHPA), and [the Endangered Species Act](https://www.fws.gov/law/endangered-species-act) (ESA). |
| **RFSI** | Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program |
| **Small Disadvantaged Business, Women-Owned Small Business, or Veteran-Owned Small Business** | A business entity applicant that meets the SBA-determined eligibility criteria for one or more of the [SBA categories](https://www.sba.gov/federal-contracting/contracting-assistance-programs) of small disadvantaged business, women-owned small business, or veteran-owned small business.  |
| **Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher** | A [socially disadvantaged](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers) is, for this program, a producer or processor who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities. Gender is not included as a covered group. RFSI socially disadvantaged groups include the following and no others: (i)American Indians or Alaskan Natives, (ii) Asians or Asian-Americans, (iii) Blacks or African Americans, (iv) Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, and (v) Hispanics.For an entity, at least 50 percent ownership in the farm business must be held by socially disadvantaged individuals to meet the criteria for socially disadvantaged. The term entities reflect a broad interpretation to include partnerships, couples, legal entities, etc. |
| **State** | State of Maine |
| **SBA** | Small Business Administration |
| **Subaward** | An award provided by the Department to a subrecipient to carry out part of a Federal award received by the Department. |
| **Subrecipient** | A recipient of a subaward from the Department to carry out a portion of the federal award. |
| **Unique Identifier Number (UEI)** | The 12-digit UEI number replaces the 9-digit DUNS number provided by Dun & Bradstreet which were previously used by the agency to uniquely identify organizations receiving federal funds. There is NO cost to register in SAM.gov. |
| **USDA** | United States Department of Agriculture |
| **USDA Specific Allowable Costs** | Grant expenditures that are specifically determined to be allowable as described within the corresponding [USDA AMS General Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FY2024_AMSGeneralTermsandConditions.pdf) Allowable and Unallowable Costs Table in common categories for AMS grant programs. This table is not intended to be all-inclusive. The Applicant should consult the Federal Cost Principles [(Subpart E Cost Principles of 2 CFR § 200)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200/subpart-E) for a complete explanation of the allowability of costs. See also [RFSI Specific USDA Terms and Conditions](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_Specific_TermsandConditions_FY23.pdf) and [RFSI Program Scope and Requirements](https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/RFSI_ProgramScopeandRequirements.pdf)  |
| **Veteran Producers or Processors** | A person who served in the United States Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard, including the reserve components thereof, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable and who also meets the definition of beginning farmer or rancher (BFR). The VFR must: a) not have operated a farm or ranch; or b) not have operated a farm or ranch for more than 10 consecutive years. For a legal entity or joint operation to be considered a VFR entity, all members must meet the definition of VFR. See [Veteran Farmer Program Definition](https://lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/VFR_Definition.aspx)  |

**APPENDIX B SUBMITTED QUESTIONS FORM**

**State of Maine**

**Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry**

**RFA#**

**Maine Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program**

This form should be used by Applicants when submitting written questions to the RFA Coordinator.

If a question is not related to any section of the RFA, enter “N/A” under the RFA Section & Page Number. Add additional rows as necessary. Submit this document in WORD format, not PDF.

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| **Applicant Entity Name:** |  |

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| **RFA Section & Page Number** | **Question** |
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