Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Supplement

United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service

Specialty Crop Block Grant Program Grants

Awarded by the Illinois Department of Agriculture

Funding Year: Fiscal Year 2027

Application Deadline: June 5, 2026, 12:00 PM (CDT)

Anticipated Funding Awarded to Illinois: $796,255.11

Federal Award Range: $75,000.00 max

Award Type: Reimbursement

Funding Opportunity Number: USDA-AMS-TM-SCBGP-G-26-0004

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number: 10.170

Funding Opportunity Title: Specialty Crop Block Grant Program – Farm Bill

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Executive Summary

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), requests applications for 2026 fiscal year (FY) Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP). The purpose of this program is to award grants to eligible State departments of agriculture to carry out projects that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops.

The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) solicits applications for projects that fall within the scope of the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. This notice identifies the SCBGP Funding Priorities for Illinois, funding information, application form locations, and associated instructions.

Purpose

The SCBGP assists State departments of agriculture in the 50 States, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the United States Virgin Islands to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops by:

(1) leveraging efforts to market and promote specialty crops;
(2) assisting producers with research and development relevant to specialty crops;
(3) expanding availability and access to specialty crops;
(4) addressing local, regional, and national challenges confronting specialty crop producers; and
(5) for such other purposes determined to be appropriate by the Secretary of Agriculture, in consultation with specialty crop stakeholders and relevant State departments of agriculture.

Specialty crops are fruits and vegetables, dried fruit, tree nuts, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture). Additional information on specialty crops, including a table of examples of the most common commodities, is available at: https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/specialty-crop.

Eligible Projects

Illinois currently devotes more than 83,000 acres of farmland to growing specialty crops, which produces over $600 million in sales for Illinois farmers.

To encourage further expansion of this industry, and to take full advantage of the allocated funds, IDOA invites the development of projects addressing the following issues affecting the specialty crop industry:

- Enhancing food safety;
- Improving the capacity of all entities in the specialty crop distribution chain to comply with the requirements of the Food Safety Modernization Act (21 U.S.C. Chapter 27), for example, developing “Good Agricultural Practices,” “Good Handling Practices,” “Good Manufacturing Practices,” and in costs-share arrangements for funding audits of such systems (including USDA GroupGAP) for small farmers, packers, and processors;
- Investing in specialty crop research, including research to focus on conservation and environmental outcomes;
- Developing new and improved seed varieties and specialty crops;
- Pest and disease control;
- Increasing child and adult nutrition knowledge and consumption of specialty crops;
- Improving efficiency and reducing costs of distribution systems; and
- Sustainability.

Applications for grant funds should describe how the project potentially affects and produces measurable outcomes for the specialty crop industry and/or the public rather than a single organization, institution, or individual. IDOA will not award grant funds for projects whose products or services promote or provide profit that solely benefits a single organization, institution, or individual.

To read more about eligible and ineligible expenses, please refer to USDA-AMS's General Terms and Conditions.

Examples of Eligible Projects

- A non-profit organization requests funds to demonstrate the viability of organic small fruit production and partners with Cooperative Extension to publicize the working model of diversification to other regional growers.
- A single farmer implements food safety practices or models on their property to meet food safety requirements and conducts a field day and training services to encourage other small family farmers to adopt the methods

Ineligible Projects

The following activities are not eligible for SCBGP funding:

- Projects whose products or services promote or provide profit that solely benefits a single organization, institution, or individual.
- Acquiring real property (including pre-existing buildings and land purchases), or any interest therein.
- Activities that have received a Federal award from another Federal award program.

Examples of Ineligible Projects

- A company requests grant funds to purchase starter plants or equipment used to plant, cultivate, and grow a specialty crop to make a profit or to expand production of a single business or organization.
- A single specialty crop organization requests grant funds to market its organization so that it can increase its membership.
- Funds for projects whose products or services promote or provide profit that solely benefits a single organization, institution, or individual. In addition, recipients and subrecipients cannot use grant funds to compete unfairly with companies that provide equivalent products or services. Single organizations, institutions, and individuals are encouraged to participate as project partners.

Illinois Funding Priorities

IDOA will prioritize SCBGP funding for the following projects:

- Projects that benefit beginning farmers or first-time specialty crop producers. A beginning farmer is an individual or entity that has not operated a farm or ranch for more than 10 years and substantially participates in the operation.
- Projects with educational programming to enhance knowledge and consumption of specialty crops.
- Projects connecting specialty crops with nutrition and health outcomes, including food safety.
- Projects that prioritize sustainability and conservation.

Reimbursement

This is a reimbursement grant. Grant funds will be paid to recipients for approved expenditures on a reimbursement basis after a contract is fully executed. Grant recipients must have the financial capability to pay project expenses up front and may request reimbursement monthly.

All costs must be associated with project activities that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops.

Matching Funds Requirement

There is no match requirement for the SCBGP. Match funds are not to be included in the application.

Application Information

Implementation Period

Specialty Crop Block Grant Application Period:
IDOA Funding Period Begins: January 1, 2027
IDOA Funding Period Closes: September 29, 2029

Eligibility

Entities eligible for grants under the SCBGP are:

- Nonprofit organizations.
- Local government entities.
- Tribal governments.
- Institutions such as schools, universities, or hospitals.
- For profit farmers or producers who are connecting the public and/or other farmers or producers to specialty crops with educational programs.

Required Application Format

Applications must be completed within Euna Grants Powered by AmpliFund (Euna Grants). The link can be found on the IDOA SCBGP webpage or on the Catalog of State Financial Assistance (CFSA).

Application includes the submission of these items within Euna Grants:

1. Registration within the Illinois GATA Portal
2. Uniform Grant Application
3. USDA Project Profile Application
4. Completion of Illinois Funding Priorities Section
5. Budget
6. Attachment of the following documents:
    a. IRS W-9
    b. Signed Conflict of Interest Form
    c. Signed Mandatory Disclosure
    d. Letters of Support

Project Evaluation

Grant projects will be scored by an independent external review panel comprised of agriculture, agribusiness development, and economic development experts. The review panel will use a scoring rubric to assign points to application content. Final decisions by IDOA may include other factors, such as how projects address Illinois funding priorities; total amount of funding each applicant, crop and/or industry is receiving; geographic location of project and project beneficiaries; rural and urban location of project and project beneficiaries; and past recipient performance on previous Specialty Crop Block Grants.

IDOA reserves the right to offer partial awards based on an assessment of the proposal, the pool of applicants, funding availability, and/or overall objectives of the grant program.

The competitive review process will:

- Follow all applicable State policies and procedures;
- Include the use of an independent review panel of experts or qualified individuals;
- Include the factors and reasons for selecting an applicant and any changes in project proposal ranks/scores that may occur during the review process; and
- Maintain guidelines and procedures to prevent any conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest as required by 2 CFR § 400.2.

Project funding is contingent on funding for the SCBGP being made available by USDA-AMS.

Project Evaluation Criteria

Each project that meets the minimum eligibility requirements will be reviewed and scored by an external review panel using the criteria listed below.

Criteria 1: Project Partner and Summary

a. The application provides a clear and concise description of the need for the proposed project.
b. The applicant identifies and engages the intended beneficiaries of the proposed project, including the number of beneficiaries and how they will benefit.
c. The proposed project will directly benefit specialty crops in the State.

Criteria 2: Project Purpose and Plan

a. Extent to which the application presents a clear, well-conceived plan of work that addresses at least one identified Illinois funding priority.
b. The project plan provides a clear, viable, and well-conceived overall methodology for fulfilling the goals and objectives of the proposed project.
c. Performance measures are appropriate for the scale and scope of the proposed project.

Criteria 3: Beneficiaries Include Specialty Crop Industry

a. The project is a research project that will benefit specialty crop farmers/producers.
b. The project aims to make specialty crop more competitive in the market.

Criteria 4: External Support

a. The application demonstrates local support for the proposed project.

b. The project demonstrates support from external stakeholders.
c. The project includes letters of support.

Criteria 5: Budget

a. The budget narrative and justification give a sufficient description of each category.
b. The overall budget is sufficiently detailed and consistent with the size and scope of the project.

Criteria 6: Overall Application

a. The application adhered to the application instructions.
b. The overall application presents a clear, focused, and viable plan to increase the competitiveness of Illinois specialty crops in a well written manner.
c. The project focuses on the Illinois specialty crop industry and how to better the industry. The Illinois specialty crop industry is not an accidental beneficiary of the project.

Submission Requirements

Applicants must:

1. Be registered and in good standing with SAM.gov.
2. Be registered and in good standing with GATA (grants.illinois.gov).
3. Be registered on Euna Grants.
4. Use the provided application templates located on Euna Grants or the IDOA SCBGP webpage.
5. Achieved qualified status in GATA no later than June 5, 2026 at 12:00 PM CDT.
6. Submit application and all required documents on Euna Grants by June 5, 2026 at 12:00 PM CDT.
    a. Please be sure that all documents are submitted together by the application deadline. Incomplete applications will be rejected and not evaluated.

Reporting Requirements

Projects that are funded are expected to align outcomes with the performance measures.

Performance and financial reports will be collected from awarded projects on regular quarterly intervals. Awarded projects will also be required to submit annual reports 30 days after the end of each budget period and a final report 30 days after the project end date. IDOA will solicit performance and financial reports from each awarded project via email, phone, teleconferencing, and/or site visits.

Award Notices

Upon completion of the competitive review process, selected applications will be sent to USDA AMS. Final determination of approved projects and award amounts will be facilitated by USDA AMS. Successful applicants will be notified after final approval of applications by IDOA. Successful applicants will be required to register as a vendor of the State of Illinois prior to the awarding of the grants. Each funded project will complete a Programmatic Risk Assessment as a risk assessment measure and will sign a subaward agreement acknowledging terms and conditions, statement of work, reporting deadlines, and invoicing guidelines.

Unsuccessful Applications

Unsuccessful applicants will be notified by IDOA via email as soon as possible after awards are approved by USDA AMS.

Risk Assessment

Each organization applying for the grant will undergo a risk assessment evaluation. In accordance with 2 CFR 200.332 and Illinois Administrative Rules for GATA Section 7000.340, IDOA must determine the ability of the subrecipient to comply with Federal statutes, regulations and the terms and conditions of the subaward agreement. All grantees will complete a Programmatic Risk Assessment as part of this risk assessment.

Organizations deemed at-risk by IDOA may still receive SCBGP subawards. However, IDOA is authorized to impose special conditions on high risk subrecipients as listed in 2 CFR 200.208. Examples of special conditions may include additional measures for project monitoring, and/or more detailed or frequent financial reporting.

Agency Contact Information

Applicants and other interested parties may direct inquiries to IDOA SCBGP personnel via email at agr.iscbg@illinois.gov. Additional information is available at https://agr.illinois.gov/assistance/illinoisfarmprograms/specialty-crop-grants.html.