

NPRB PROPOSAL REVIEW PROCESS

Initial Screening of Proposals

Upon receipt, the NPRB staff will screen proposals for conformance with requirements set forth in this notice. This review will consider whether the proposal meets the format and structure requirements in this RFP, and assess whether it falls within the research priority selected from this RFP. Proposal identified by staff as having questionable responsiveness will be reviewed by an ad hoc committee of Science Panel members who will determine which of these proposals, if any, to carry forward. If the Ad hoc committee cannot agree on whether a proposal is responsive to the RFP priority selected, it will be fully reviewed. **Proposals that are found to not comply with the requirements of the RFP or that are determined to be unresponsive to the priority selected from the RFP will be returned without further processing. Notification of non-compliance will be sent to the proposal applicant.**

Independent Technical Evaluations

Proposals that pass the initial screening will undergo independent, anonymous, technical peer review, conducted by regional, national and international experts. Staff will assign peer reviewers to proposals following the [NPRB Technical Peer Review Conflict of Interest Policy](#). The goal of this step is to receive three independent technical reviews for each proposal. Reviewers will be asked to provide comments and qualitative assessments of the technical aspects for each proposal in each of the categories indicated below (percentages indicate the weight that the subsequent review by the NPRB Science Panel will give to the criteria), and an overall summation. Reviewers will be asked to score each section, as well as the overall summation into one of five categories: poor, fair, good, very good and excellent.

The technical review criteria are as follows:

- a. Soundness of Project Design/Conceptual Approach (60%): Is there a clear statement of project objectives, and explanation of what the project will accomplish and why it is important? Have the applicants demonstrated a clear understanding of the problem being addressed, the present state of knowledge in the field, the project's relation to other work, including their own, and the measurable benefits which will result from the proposed work? Is there sufficient information to evaluate the project technically? What are the strengths and/or weaknesses of the technical design relative to securing productive results? Is there a clear hypothesis to be tested and well-defined expected outcomes? Is there a clear description of a detailed experimental design with associated power analysis as appropriate, including assumptions required, sample size, and other relevant information needed to determine the utility and technical feasibility of accomplishing the research? Is there a list of data sources or requirements? Reviewers will give the following approximate weights to components within this criterion: 10% for background and need; 10% for statement of problem or question; 20% for study design; and 20% for analysis.
- b. Education and Outreach (5%): Is the education and outreach plan clearly defined? Are the planned education and outreach activities/materials aimed at audiences other than the scientific community? Are the costs itemized in the budget narrative and realistic for the proposed activities?
- c. Timeline and Milestones (10%): Is there a clear table detailing appropriate timelines and associated measurable milestones, objectives, accomplishments and deliverables that can be

used to track and evaluate project performance through the entire award period? Is there a description of the product or result that may be used to measure project success (e.g., report, published paper, management implementation) and how the research results will be disseminated?

- d. Project Management (15%): Evaluate the organization and management of the project, and the project's principal/co-investigator(s) and other personnel in terms of related experience, qualifications and prior performance. Applicants must demonstrate how they will coordinate and collaborate with other projects and leverage their proposal with support from other sources. Have investigators demonstrated adequate resources and partnerships to complete the proposed work? Applicants must seek to avoid duplication of other research efforts. If there is more than one investigator involved, has the applicant clearly identified the distribution of responsibility for the overall workload (i.e., the responsibilities of each PI or Co-PI involved in the project).
- e. Project Costs (10%): The justification and allocation of the budget in terms of the work to be performed will be evaluated. Is the project cost unreasonably high or low?

Science Panel Review

Following the [NPRB Science Panel Conflict of Interest](#) procedures, staff will assign two Science Panel members with the relevant expertise to each proposal (a Primary and a Secondary). Science Panel members generally conduct their own independent review following the same technical review guidelines above. These are completed and made available to all panel members in advance of the Science Panel meeting. Science Panel members will adhere to their [COI procedures](#) throughout the meeting. The Primary and Secondary summarize the proposal for the entire Panel, go over the evaluations by the outside technical reviewers, and, based upon that input and their own evaluation, give their overall assessment to the group. The entire Panel then discusses the proposal and its evaluations further and determines, by consensus, a tier ranking as follows:

Tier 1:

Proposals that are considered highly meritorious based on the combined peer and science panel reviews (based on the criteria outlined above) will be designated Tier 1 proposals. Highly meritorious will be defined as proposals that generally score an average of Very Good to Excellent and do not require any scientific alterations to the proposed work to go forward (although suggestions for improvements may be made). The Science Panel may decide to go back over the Tier 1 list to determine if there are any scientific nuances amongst them that may be relevant to the Board when making their final funding decisions. Such criteria will be only science-based (i.e., not as it relates to the RFP category caps) and may include relative comparisons between highly ranked proposals such as: more technically robust, more specifically on target with what the RFP was looking for, or more time sensitive in terms of increasing scientific knowledge base. Accordingly, proposals placed in this category may be separated into **Tier 1a** or **Tier 1b**.

Proposals that are highly meritorious as defined above but have minor non-science related issues (e.g. budget or permitting) that once fixed would place the proposal in the Tier 1a or Tier 1b category, will be categorized as **Tier 1a conditional** or **Tier 1b conditional** proposals respectively. In such instances, the Science Panel will clearly identify the conditions they believe need to be met before the proposal goes forward.

Tier 2:

A **Tier 2** ranking will be given to proposals that are good scientifically but not exceptional. Additionally, proposal that have minor science issues of a simple or straightforward nature, for example simple changes to sample size or study design, will be categorized as **Tier 2 conditional**. A Tier 2 proposal that has non-science issues will also be placed in the **Tier 2 conditional** category. For conditionally ranked proposals, the Science Panel will clearly identify the conditions they believe need to be met before the proposal goes forward.

Tier 3:

Proposals that are found to have fatal flaws or those that are simply not competitive scientifically even with minor changes and should not be funded, are designated **Tier 3** proposals. These will generally be proposals with some Poor and Fair ratings or those that are mixed, depending on the issues. Tier 3 proposals are those that require substantial revision to be competitive and thus they should not be funded.

The NPRB receives over 100 proposals in response to its annual RFPs. To allow the Science Panel sufficient time to discuss those they feel are most competitive, a triage system is often required. As a result, the Science Panel may opt to forgo detailed discussion of proposals, based on reviews and Science Panel assessment, which will not be competitive. Science Panel members retain the option of bringing any of these up for discussion at any time during the meeting before final recommendations are crafted for the Board.

Reconciling differences between Independent Technical and Science Panel reviews:

Ideally, each proposal will have been read by five technical reviewers (3 peer and 2 Science Panel reviews). With that number of reviews it is common that evaluations vary, sometimes greatly. Where there is disagreement between the Science Panel and the outside reviewers (in either direction), proposals and all reviews are discussed at length. The final scientific authority lies with the Science Panel who will document these discrepancies and their discussion in support of their final recommendation to the Board. It should be noted that the Board will also have access to all the technical reviews as well as the Science Panel Summary ahead of their meeting and thus will have all the information needed to also discuss any discrepancies in the rankings if they wish to do so.

Science Panel recommendations

Staff, Primary and Secondary panel members will take notes on the discussion of their assigned proposals. Following the meeting, the Primary, in consultation with the Secondary and any other panel member identified during the discussions, is responsible for drafting a summary paragraph for the specific proposals for the Board. This paragraph will follow a pre-determined template and be submitted to the NPRB staff within a few days of the meeting. Staff will compile all paragraphs and submit Tier 1 and Tier 2 summary paragraphs to the Advisory Panel (see below) and all summary paragraphs to the Board as soon as possible.

Advisory Panel input

The Advisory Panel Review of proposals is intended to highlight those proposals that have special stakeholder, community and other societal relevance and public interest value. The Advisory Panel will be provided with full proposal materials and the Science Panel summary paragraphs for all proposals that the Science Panel has determined to be responsive to the RFP

and to have scientific merit. The Advisory Panel will review Tier 1 and Tier 2 proposals and provide a short summary of the attributes of a subset of these proposals that they wish to highlight as having significant stakeholder, community or other societal relevance. These summaries will be brought to the attention of the Board for consideration. It is not the intent of the Advisory Panel to comment on all Tier 1 and Tier 2 proposals, but rather to highlight those they identify as having special value to stakeholders. The Advisory Panel contribution is also not intended to rank proposals, to provide comment on the scientific merit of proposals, nor the alignment of such proposals with category budgets. Standard [Advisory Panel Conflict of Interest procedures](#) will apply with respect to the AP review of proposals.

Board Review

The chair and/or vice-chair of the Science Panel will present the Science Panel summary paragraphs to the North Pacific Research Board (NPRB) and be present at the meeting to answer technical questions. The NPRB will consider technical evaluations, Science Panel recommendations and Advisory Panel input. The Board will use scientific merit as defined by the Science Panel rankings as their primary criterion, but there are likely to be many more highly ranked proposals than funds available. To allow for a balanced portfolio and the flexibility to respond to current issues, other factors may be considered at the time of final funding decisions. Such factors include, but are not limited to:

1. Pressing fisheries management needs;
2. Ecosystem information needs;
3. Other projects currently funded on a similar topic;
4. Overlap with other ongoing programs;
5. Competitiveness relative to other proposals of equal merit within a topical area;
6. Category target funding amounts published in the RFP; and
7. Previous performance of applicants (evaluation of previous NPRB funded projects will involve project management, adherence to project budgets, timelines, and reporting requirements, as well as achievement of previously funded project objectives).

While these factors will be considered, scientific merit remains the primary consideration for proposal funding. Thus, the Board will accept Science Panel recommendations for Tier 3 proposals and will not consider them for funding. Further, if the Board decides to fund a Tier 1 conditional or Tier 2 conditional proposal, the Board will carry forward all the Science Panel conditions. The Board reserves the right to put any additional conditions on any proposal recommended for funding. Proposals that receive conditional funding by the Board will be asked to resubmit a revised proposal which specifically addresses all concerns raised and specified during the review and decision-making process. Unless otherwise noted by the Board, staff will review the revised statements of work vis-à-vis the conditional requests and determine whether to go ahead with funding or not. Where staff does not feel comfortable making this final determination they may consult a subset of the Science Panel or the Executive Committee of the Board.

The Board will document their decision making process, in particular where it deviates from the Science Panel recommendations. This information, as well as all technical reviews and Science Panel Summary paragraphs will be provided as written feedback to the applicants.

Public comment will not be taken during the proposal review and decision making process. The exact award period will depend upon the requested duration of funding, the decision of the NPRB on funding amount, the results of post-selection negotiations between the applicant and NPRB staff, and review by NPRB and Department of Commerce officials.

Consultation with Interested Parties

Throughout the proposal review process, the NPRB and its staff may consult with NOAA and other Federal and State agencies, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and other entities, as appropriate, who may be affected by or have knowledge of a specific proposal or its subject matter.

Secretary of Commerce Review

By law, all recommendations of the Board are subject to final approval by the Secretary of Commerce, who must ensure that the project recommendations are consistent with the terms of the NPRB grant award, federal law and the enabling legislation. Projects recommended for funding by the Board may be denied approval upon the review of the Secretary of Commerce. As noted in general condition 4 (below) the applicants are responsible for obtaining all federal, state and local permits. Approval of the project by the Secretary of Commerce does not preclude the requirement to obtain such permits.