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SOAR Shellfish Growers Resiliency Fund

Request for Proposals | August 2023

SOAR Shellfish Growers Resiliency Fund

2023 RFP Guidelines

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I. Award Program Summary

The SOAR Shellfish Growers Resiliency Fund (Fund) aims to pave the way for a more resilient and sustainable U.S. shellfish industry that benefits the ocean and the communities that rely upon it. The Fund will extend funding to shellfish growers and other aligned organizations to further collaborative marine conservation efforts and increase economic opportunities for shellfish farming in the U.S.

The program is directed mainly toward growers and closely allied organizations.

Key Parameters of the Award Program

Eligibility: Shellfish growers, and closely aligned organizations with an industry partner that support shellfish aquaculture in the U.S., are eligible to apply (see section IV).

Type of Award and Maximum Size: Depending on the activities proposed in each project, and the legal nature of the Applicant, the selected projects will be awarded either via a contract for services or a grant agreement. TNC reserves the right to select the adequate type of agreement, however Applicants should assess these different alternatives in their proposed budgets.

The maximum award size will be \$20,000 USD, all applicable taxes included.

Priorities: The award program seeks projects that advance the following priorities. See additional details in section IV:

- Farmer engagement in shellfish restoration, marine conservation, or broader environmental outcomes
- Efficient farming operations
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion in the shellfish aquaculture industry

Award Period: All project activities must be completed within 2 years of award issuance.

Application Process: Applicants will be required to fill out an application form ([available here](#)).

Deadlines: The award program will begin accepting applications following the announcement of the RFP. Applications will be accepted until the deadline of 11:59 pm Pacific Time on **Friday, October 6, 2023**.

A session for questions regarding the RFP will be hosted online on August 21, 2023 at 3:00 pm Pacific Time.

Review Process: Pre-established evaluation criteria will be utilized in the review of applications (see section IV).

Reporting Requirements: An interim report/check-in will be due every 6 months. Upon completion of the project, the awardee shall provide TNC a final report, including a financial report. See section V for additional details.

II. Program Overview

In October of 2020, The Nature Conservancy and The Pew Charitable Trusts, in coordination with the shellfish industry, federal, and state partners, launched the Supporting Oyster Aquaculture and Restoration (SOAR) program with the goal of supporting oyster farmers affected by economic slowdowns associated with COVID-19 and rebuilding wild oyster reefs.

The Fund was established as part of the SOAR program a year later in 2021 and built upon the principle that a resilient aquaculture industry can advance conservation goals. Responsibly managed shellfish farms can provide vital [ecosystem services](#) that benefit ocean health, and, as such, shellfish growers are [critical partners in conservation](#). Recognizing this, the Fund extends grants to shellfish growers and aligned organizations to further collaborative marine conservation efforts and increase economic opportunities for shellfish farming in the U.S. In its first phase, the Fund issued [a total of \\$1 million for 36 innovation awards across 16 states](#).

This document outlines the application, eligibility requirements and timelines for the second phase of the Fund, which expects to fund a similar number of projects that support a focused portfolio of scalable innovation projects.

To learn more about SOAR, please visit our website: <https://www.nature.org/SOAR>.

III. Funding, Timeline, and Process

Funding Availability

Applicants applying for the award will be eligible to receive up to \$20,000 USD, all applicable taxes included.

Project Timeline

All projects must be completed within a 24-month period, i.e., by December 2025. Please see section V below for reporting requirements.

Application Requirements

Applicants will be required to fill out an [application form](#) that includes a proposed budget.

The application will be available to download on the [SOAR website](#). The application must be completed as a PDF document. All applications, including supporting materials, must be submitted in one email to soar@tnc.org. In the subject line, please include the name of the project and “SOAR 2023 RFP”.

Mail or paper applications will be accepted. Please contact us at soar@tnc.org or +1 406-384-6580 for more information.

Deadline

All applications, including supporting materials, should be sent to soar@tnc.org, or postmarked by the deadline below. To access the application templates and resources, visit the [SOAR website](#).

Complete applications must be received by no later than **11:59 pm Pacific Time on Friday, October 6, 2023**.

Application Review Process

All applications will be reviewed and graded against the Evaluation Criteria detailed in Section IV.

TNC will host a 60-minute online session to submit questions and receive answers from applicants on August 21, 2023 at 3pm Pacific Time. It is the Applicant's duty to inquire about and clarify any RFP related questions that the Applicant does not fully understand or believes may be interpreted in more than one way. TNC, however, is not required to answer all questions that are not pertinent to the RFP or are considered to be TNC's proprietary information.

Applications will be reviewed by The Nature Conservancy and The Pew Charitable Trusts, with advice of external experts as needed. The applications must be submitted by 11:59 pm Pacific Time on **Friday, October 6, 2023**. If there are remaining funds, a second RFP will be considered in early 2024.

Procurement and awarding activities, such as the review process, will be conducted in a nondiscriminatory manner with fair treatment given to all applicants. TNC reserves the right to reject any and all applications for any reason, to waive technicalities, and to pursue the development of proposals in a manner that is in the best interest of the organization mission.

Award and Notification

All applicants will be notified via email about their application status. Applications will be declined or fully awarded. The awards will be announced no later than February 2024.

IV. Resiliency Fund Eligibility

The Fund is open to applicants in the United States as well as US Territories and Tribal Nations. This program seeks to provide funding equitably among following geographies: West Coast (including Hawaii and Alaska, Guam, American Samoa, Northern Mariana Islands and US minor outlying islands), East Coast, and the Gulf of Mexico (including Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands).

Eligible Applicants

Shellfish growers and organizations that directly support the U.S. shellfish industry are encouraged to apply. Eligible organizations include, but are not limited to:

- **U.S. Shellfish growers**
- **U.S. Shellfish aquaculture industry associations**
- **Supply chain companies supporting shellfish aquaculture**
- **Other entities with a clearly defined industry partner that is one of the above groups**

Eligible Project Types

Proposed projects must identify and advance at least one of the priorities listed below. All applicants must determine which priority(ies) best represent their project and describe that connection clearly in the application. If the project addresses more than one priority, please indicate this in the application.

All applicants must show how their projects can result in a more resilient shellfish industry. Please refer to the evaluation criteria below.

Funding Priorities

- **Farmer engagement in shellfish restoration, marine conservation, or environmental outcomes:** Projects that increase farmer engagement in shellfish restoration, marine conservation, or enhance environmental outcomes of farming. Examples include:
 - Projects that advance efforts that enable linkage of shellfish growers to restoration to promote a new and stable “restoration market” for farmed shellfish and/or shell that represents an added market opportunity (excluding direct oyster purchases for restoration sites covered under the SOAR Purchase Program).
 - Projects that are intended to increase the environmental benefits of shellfish farms (ecosystem service provision) or reduce environmental impacts of farms.
 - Projects that engage shellfish farmers in efforts to conserve, manage, and protect marine resources.

- **Efficient farming operations:** Projects intended to improve efficiency and cost savings in farming operations and/or provide increased or enhanced industry support services or reduced carbon footprint. Examples include:
 - Projects that support shared farming resources or equipment for multiple farmers such as cold storage, transport, and marketing. (Proposals requesting funding for equipment upgrades for a single farm (e.g., icemakers) will not be considered).
 - Projects by one or more farms that support testing of new/innovative farm designs, gear, or other farming technology, which enhance productivity, and/or reduce costs. Applicants must include how the technology can be applied to other farms.
 - Projects that create industry supply chain improvements benefiting multiple farmers.
 - Projects that increase quality, consistency, or access to farming inputs for multiple farmers, such as hatchery production of shellfish seed.

- **Diversity, equity, and inclusion in the shellfish aquaculture industry.**
Examples include:
 - Projects, such as training, mentorship, or extension programs, that support a diverse workforce and create opportunities for people of diverse and/or underrepresented backgrounds (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, disability).

Evaluation Criteria

Please see the Resiliency Fund Evaluation Criteria below for a detailed breakdown of the scoring. The following criteria will be used to evaluate applications. All applications will be assigned scores ranging from 0 to 100 points. The projects selected for funding will be based on the highest-ranking scores and a balance across geographies and funding priorities.

- **Alignment with priorities (45 points):** This criterion assesses how closely the proposed project aligns with the given priorities listed above. The project should fall clearly under one or more priorities and be able to demonstrate impact.

- Farmer engagement in shellfish restoration, marine conservation, or environmental outcomes
- Efficient farming operations
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion in the shellfish aquaculture industry.
- **Outcomes are attainable within time period (15 points):** This criterion assesses whether the outcomes and deliverables in the application are realistic and can be accomplished within the 2-year time period.
- **Cost effectiveness of budget (15 points):** This criterion assesses the breakdown of the proposed budget and if the funds have been carefully allocated.
- **Clear plan for sharing outcomes with industry, collaboration with others, and potential for scale (10 points):** This criterion assesses how the project may have a larger impact on the aquaculture industry during and beyond the award period, and how lessons learned will be shared with farmers and/or the industry more broadly upon completion of the project.
- **Innovative ideas/concepts (10 points):** This criterion assesses if the proposed project provides a unique and innovative solution to a problem or challenge.
- **Climate considerations (5 points):** This criterion assesses that the applicant has considered the project’s impact and potential to mitigate or reduce climate impacts. (e.g. – reduced carbon emissions on farm or in transportation to market; mitigating shoreline effects from increased wave action with farm design modification).

Additional Funding Resources

Applicants dedicating additional funding resources¹ to their project should describe those resources in their application. All applications with other sources of support should indicate if the funds are applied for, pledged or in-hand. Additional funding is not a requirement.

SOAR funds are private philanthropic funds and therefore eligible to be used as leverage. Use of SOAR funds as leverage for other funding is encouraged.

Lobbying

SOAR funds may not be used for lobbying activities.

Permitting and Regulation

All permits, if required, must be disclosed and in good standing at the time of application submission. If permits are not currently in hand, provide evidence that this will be secured by January 2024.

V. Reporting and Payment Information

Applicants that are selected to participate in the Shellfish Growers Resiliency Fund program must abide

¹ Additional funding sources: Resources contributed to the project but are not included in the budget request. This may include “cash matching” funds. It may also include estimate “in-kind” funds, such as the cost of uncompensated employee time dedicated to the project, or an appropriate share of uncompensated equipment and/or supplies utilized in the project.

by the information provided below.

Award Information

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) serves as the management entity for the SOAR Shellfish Growers Resiliency Fund. Successful applicants will sign an agreement with TNC.

Depending on the activities proposed in each project, and the legal nature of the Applicant, the selected projects will be awarded either via a contract for services or a grant agreement. TNC reserves the right to select the adequate type of agreement, however Applicants should assess these different alternatives in their proposed budgets.

As part of the process, TNC may request copies of documents to ensure that Awardee meets the required eligibility criteria. These documents include but are not limited to the following: certificate of insurance, conflict of interest form², permit information (if applicable), and W-9. The agreement may contain the elements listed below regarding reporting requirements and payment. Award recipients will be expected to complete a survey to assess the effectiveness of the resiliency program.

Interim and Final Reporting

Every 6 months, a check-in via video meeting and/or submitted written report will be required to make sure the project and expenses are on track. A brief narrative on each deliverable is expected (300 words or less), and a summary of spending to date.

Upon completion of the project, the awardee shall provide TNC a final report that:

- Summarizes the project and how the project was completed.
- Breaks down the deliverables that were completed from the description of services.
- Explains and provides supporting data to demonstrate how the project has benefitted/will benefit the shellfish industry/conservation.
- Describes how the results have been/will be shared with the industry.
- Describes any obstacles encountered, and how these obstacles were overcome.
- Contains a financial report including receipts and detailing how the funds were spent and that all additional funding commitments have been fulfilled.
- Includes photographs, videos, and other supporting materials.

Additional reporting may be required based on the nature of the project.

Payment & Other Considerations

TNC will provide the awardee an advance payment of 20% upon the signing of the contract. Requests for additional upfront funding will be handled on a case-by-case basis, up to a maximum of 80%. Final payment will be issued upon satisfactory completion of the Final Report.

Costs incurred prior to the effective date of a written agreement are not reimbursable.

Applicants shall not use TNC's name, logos, images or any data or results arising from the anticipated agreement without TNC's prior written consent.

TNC incurs no obligation or liability whatsoever by reason of issuance of this RFP or action by anyone relative thereto.

VI. Contact Information

For questions about the SOAR Shellfish Growers Resiliency Fund and the request for proposals, please contact Rebekah Borgert at soar@tnc.org

² It is the policy of TNC to identify actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest in any situation in which TNC has a significant business interest. To assist TNC in complying with this policy, we request that all applicants complete our Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form. This relates to people who will be working, directly or indirectly, to respond to this RFP, as well as may be doing the resultant work if the Applicant receives the award.