THE USDA REVIEW PROCESS SHOULD INFLUENCE HOW YOU WRITE

Your proposal will first be examined by the National Program Leader and by the Panel Manager in order to assign reviewers. The Panel Manager is a respected scientist recruited from the research community to serve as a part-time employee of the USDA. Your proposal will be read by individuals who are assigned this task by panel's National Program Leader in collaboration with the Panel Manager. To assure some consistency in review, about 40% - 60% of the panel will be made up of individuals who served on the panel in the previous year. In most cases, three persons – a primary, secondary and tertiary reviewer – will be assigned to review your application. Their job will be to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your proposal. The primary reviewer will usually be the person on the panel who is judged by the National Program Leader and by the Panel Manager to be the most qualified to review your application. If the person is not an expert on the subject you are proposing, s/he will be close. The secondary reviewer will be the next most knowledgeable person, and so on. Most USDA applications are reviewed by 3-4 panel members, with additional ad hoc expertise as needed. Each panelist reviews from 12 to 20 applications for each panel meeting.

Become Aware of How Review Panels Operate. Understanding the USDA review process is very important to your success. Above we provided the links to an online video of a review group meeting at NIH. We strongly recommend that you view it, because it will give you a very good impression of what goes on during the meeting of any review group. Understanding the process and knowing what panel members have to contend with will help you to make your application more reviewer friendly.

Your application will be assigned a primary reviewer, a secondary reviewer (sometimes a tertiary reviewer) and a reader. Those individuals will receive your complete application. Everyone else on the panel will receive only your *Project Summary*, unless one or more become sufficiently interested in your application to request the complete version. That doesn't happen very often, however, because each of the panelists is *assigned up to 20 applications, usually 12 to 15,* as either primary reviewer, secondary (tertiary, for some panels) reviewer or reader. They have electronic access to the full complement of proposals under review by the entire panel, but rarely read more than the project summary for proposals not assigned to them. It is too much to expect that they would be looking for more applications to read. Thus, as you write your application it is important to realize that probably *only three persons at the meeting will have read your complete application*; the remainder – the majority of the panel – will be re-reading your *Project Summary* while your application is being reviewed, trying to corroborate what they are hearing from the three reviewers who were assigned your proposal. Your entire application will also have been read by 4-to-6 *ad hoc* reviewers. They will not be present at the meeting, but will have sent written reviews of your proposal to the Panel Manager.

The primary and secondary (tertiary) reviewers will have independently written reviews of your application; the reader will not have, but will be prepared to comment on the proposal. At the review panel meeting, the panelists are seated around a single table to facilitate discussion. The National Program Leader and the Panel Manager serve as chairs of the meeting, and can answer technical questions, but do not comment on merit. Each proposal is first presented by the primary and secondary reviewers. The Panel Manager and the National Program Leader will ensure that all cogent points contained in the *ad hoc* reviews are presented, should the primary reviewer overlook something. The reader is then asked to make any additional points that s/he believes are