

## ***Understand the Scoring and Ranking Systems Used to Determine Your Proposal's Likelihood of Funding***

1. USDA Scoring. After preparing their written reviews, reviewers on most USDA panels will score applications as follows: Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, or Poor. Following panel discussion of the proposal, the entire panel reaches consensus and collectively assigns a ranking category of:

- Outstanding
- High Priority
- Medium Priority
- Low Priority
- Do Not Fund

As a final step, the panel revisits the rankings of all proposals to ensure that they have been placed in the correct funding category, and then re-ranks proposals within a given category, as needed. Re-ranking primarily occurs in cases of proposals deemed “Outstanding” and “High Priority,” as well as those below the funding line that are nonetheless eligible for funding (e.g., Strengthening and New Investigator proposals). The first four of these categories above have decreasing likelihood of funding associated with them. Applications ranked in the last two categories are ones that will not be funded by the review panel under any circumstances. (Applications designated as “Low Priority” are thought to be ones that could be improved enough to merit funding at a later time, while those in the “Do Not Fund” category are thought by the panel members to be unfundable, even at a future time.)

In some cases, specific review criteria are assigned numerical values, although several of the Programs that used to use this formula in the past have changed to the five categories listed above. Be sure to read the RFA to determine how your application will be reviewed.

If a point system is used, it is important to note the relative weight of each of the sections. For example, the assignment of 25 points to Stakeholder Involvement out of the total of 50 points for Proposal Relevance would be a strong indication of the USDA's expectation for clear documentation of a strong role for stakeholders in both planning and execution stages of the project. Closely attend to the evaluation criteria given in the RFA to which you will be responding.

2. Additional, Unscored Criteria and Considerations. When applicable, the following will be considered, in the evaluation of scientific and technical merit, but will not be scored: Protections for Human Subjects; Vertebrate Animals; and Biohazards (see Chapter 15). When applicable, the following additional considerations will also influence the evaluation of your proposal, but not in terms of assigning the overall score: applications from foreign organizations, select agents, and budget / requested period of support.

Program Staff at the awarding unit apply additional criteria to break such ties and make their funding decisions – for example, mission relevance. One of the most important of these additional criteria is “portfolio balance” – how already-funded grants in their portfolio are distributed across the range of their priorities. This fact reflects why it is so important to determine, up front, how your idea relates to the priorities outlined the RFA to which you are responding.