National Landcare Program
Smart Farms Small Grants - Round 2
(Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 and Tier 4)

General feedback for applicants

1. Summary

The second call funding round under the National Landcare Program's; Smart Farms Small Grants received 645 applications, of which 638 were eligible. After assessment, 110 were selected for funding, totalling just over $9.2 million. A list of successful projects can be found here[1].

For the second round, similar interest was shown by stakeholders when compared to the first round of the program. This made the second round highly competitive and successful applications were of a very high standard.

The selected applicants provided strong, well-written responses to all of the assessment criteria. The proposed activities were eligible, appropriate and considered to be effective for achieving the program outcomes. They demonstrated their suitability for public funding and value for money and meeting all eligibility requirements as outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. Additionally, successful Tier 3 and 4 applicants demonstrated their suitability to deliver the project and capability to implement, monitor, report, engage with stakeholders and promote outcomes to the broader community.

There are four more annual rounds planned under the program. Here we provide detailed feedback on how future applicants can strengthen their proposals. Unsuccessful applicants in round 2 are encouraged to consider how this feedback applies to their application. If they wish to reapply in a subsequent round with a similar proposal, they should review their unsuccessful proposal before resubmitting. Applicants preparing a new submission are also encouraged to use this information to maximise their chances of gaining future funding.

All applicants in future rounds need to ensure they use the application form for that round, as there may be changes from one round to another.

2. Program overview

National Landcare Program

The National Landcare Program is the Australian Government's natural resources management program. It aims to protect, conserve and provide for the productive use of Australia's water, soil, plants and animals and the ecosystems in which they live and interact, in partnership with governments, industry and communities. This program will assist Australia's primary industries to

become more competitive in world trade, have greater resilience and be able to more effectively respond to changing climate, weather and market conditions.

Smart Farms Small Grants

Smart Farms Small Grants is a sustainable agriculture element of the National Landcare Program. It is an open, competitive grants opportunity offering up to $43.5 million over six years (2017-18 to 2022-23) to fund short-term (up to two years) projects that build the ability and willingness of Australia's farmers, fishers and foresters to adopt best practice natural resource management methods. This will deliver more sustainable, productive and profitable agriculture, fishing, aquaculture and forestry industries. Industry implementation of best practice also assists Australia to meet its obligations under international treaties including climate change, desertification, biological diversity and fish stocks.

It is expected that this second 2018-19 round will be followed by four subsequent annual calls for applicants through to 2022-23.

The Smart Farms Small Grants initiative is administered by the Department of Social Services' Community Grants Hub (the Hub), on behalf of Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (DAWR), under a Whole of Australian Government initiative to streamline grant processes across agencies.

3. Selection process for round 2

Projects were selected through an open competitive process.

All applications that passed the initial compliance and eligibility checks were assessed and moderated against the assessment criteria by the Hub to form a shortlist. A Selection Advisory Panel (SAP) was convened to provide additional geographical insight plus technical and industry expertise. The SAP was comprised of a Chair and two members determined by DAWR. They reviewed the shortlisted applications, making final selections based on the strength of the applicants' responses to the assessment criteria and their demonstrated ability to meet the requirements of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines; the Panel also ensured a balance of projects across industry sectors and location. Final approval of projects was made by the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources, the Hon. David Littleproud MP.

4. Considerations for future funding rounds

This feedback aims to enable previous and new applicants to strengthen any future submissions. It is based on feedback provided by the Hub assessment team and the Selection Advisory Panel during the second round, as well as experience from the first round and previous small grant programs funding rounds. Unsuccessful applicants are encouraged to consider how this applies to their own application before applying for round 3.

Writing and providing details

Applications should clearly and concisely address the selection criteria. It is difficult to assess poorly written and verbose applications, so careful editing is advised. The use of sub-headings and dot points can also assist to improve the readability of applications.

A number of applicants did not effectively utilise the word limits in their applications, providing too much background information but not enough detail on the proposed project. Low scoring applications often lacked sufficient detail to describe the:

- *project activities* – applications that provided limited or no details about the project activities and their appropriateness generally did not score well. From what is written, assessors need to be able to determine what the project will do, how this will directly contribute towards the program outcomes and deliver public benefits. Higher scoring applications clearly articulated the importance of the project and the activities, how they would be performed and how this would contribute to program outcomes.

- *project effectiveness*– applications that did not clearly outline the effectiveness of the project to achieve the program outcomes did not score well. Applications that provided the measured contribution to the achievements and showed how much and when the project would achieve the program outcomes were generally well rated by assessors.

Contribution towards program outcomes

To be awarded funding, applications needed to clearly demonstrate that the project would deliver the program objectives.

Smart Farms Small Grants are to support land manager practice change and to deliver more productive and profitable agriculture, fishing, aquaculture and forestry industries; protect Australia's biodiversity; protect and improve the condition of natural resources (in particular on-farm soils, water and vegetation); and assist Australia meet its international obligations. The purpose will be achieved through local, on-ground, projects funded by grants that contribute to achieving at least one of the two outcomes:

- Outcome 1 – Doing and fostering sustainable natural resource management best practice.
- Outcome 2 – Capacity building for sustainable natural resource management.

In general, many unsuccessful applications did not sufficiently demonstrate how their project would contribute to program outcomes, with some applications seeming to have limited relevance to the program. In particular, in order to improve a project's appropriateness with the program, applicants should consider:

- checking the Grant Opportunity Guidelines to ensure that the proposed project and activities are a good fit for the program
- ensuring that the application clearly demonstrates how the proposed project meets one or more of the program's outcomes and links project activities to the project outcomes
- demonstrating the need for the project to the target industry and/or geographic area
- justifying the delivery approach
- describing the mechanisms to extend information to famers and stakeholders and contribute to the uptake of new practices.

Capacity to deliver

Unsuccessful Tier 3 and Tier 4 applicants commonly did not strongly demonstrate that they have the capacity to deliver the project. To rank highly applicants should:

- demonstrate their ability to deliver projects of comparable outcomes, scope, budget and complexity
- include a strong focus on the implementing, monitoring and reporting of a project
- clearly articulate how the project would be delivered, including that appropriate governance structures are in place
- clearly describe the roles and responsibilities of different organisations involved in the project (including project partners or co-contributors)
- clearly describe how the project outcomes will be promoted to the broader community and maintained into the future.

Demonstration of public benefit

These Australian Government grants are funded by public money and suitable projects are selected on the basis that they will deliver a public benefit that is in the national interest. However, as projects are commonly undertaken on farm land, some degree of private gain can also be derived.

The two most common situations where project proposals would be expected to result in a material private gain is when the project is carried out on private land (e.g. a demonstration of a new practice) and/or when it involves the use of a specific commercial product or machine. In this case, or any other situation where it is anticipated that there will be a private benefit, the provision of funds for a project is guided by a set of principles for public and private benefit, this includes the need for applications to:

- clearly demonstrate the expected public benefits of project activities, if possible including quantitative measurements of:
  - expected community involvement, such as number of farmers, groups etc.
  - anticipated changes to natural resources (e.g. benefits to soil health, or area of land rehabilitated)
  - the value of the private benefit
- provide details about how private benefits resulting from the project would be counter balanced with suitably sized cash or in-kind co-contributions
- include a clear extension pathway to promote the project outcomes to other landholders and the broader community (this could involve a local Landcare or farming systems group or similar)
- include a robust monitoring and evaluation component.

Many unsuccessful applications did not demonstrate this information clearly enough.

Including ineligible and /or business as usual activities and budget items

A number of applications included ineligible activities or budget items or activities that are business as usual. A full list of ineligible items and activities can be found at Section 4.2 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. In particular there were unsuccessful applications that included:

- capital items – such as large investments for fencing and machinery (e.g. excavators, spraying, irrigating, seeding and mulching equipment etc.)
- subsidies for commercial operations, business start-ups or where primary activity is for commercial gain (e.g. commercialising a new piece of machinery)
- activities that are considered to be the landholder's normal responsibility as part of running a business (e.g. including the cost of lime and application on private land)
- extension programs for well-established management methods. This is considered as business as usual activity for the applicant (e.g. extension covering common district crop and grazing management practices)
- activities that are regarded as new research with limited practical application in the foreseeable future
- 'trials' for practices and /or technologies that are already well-established as best practice.

To score well, items and activities that are ineligible or 'business as usual' should not be included under the grant funding component of a project. This does not mean that private funding (as a project co-contribution) cannot be used for these items or activities as part of the project if the applicant considers that this will augment the project, but clear explanations of this are required in the budget justification.

5. Specific feedback – Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 and Tier 4

Please note that the selection criteria for round 3 may be slightly different from these round 2 selection criteria.

Applicants should ensure that they apply for the correct funding Tier based on project budget and the Smart Farms Small Grants outcome(s) being addressed

Criterion 1 - Appropriateness of project objective and project activities

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described:
• described what the proposed project wants to achieve and what is the project's objective.	• how the activity protects or improves the condition of eligible natural resources and improves food and fibre business productively and profitability • how the activity increases awareness, knowledge and capacity of land managers to sustainably manage eligible natural resources or improve the capacity of groups to in-turn help land managers.
• explained the importance of the project, why the project is needed and the impact of not having the project.	• the importance and need for the activity with enough information and clear justification • how the activity will deliver benefits to the broader community • the impact if the project did not go ahead.
• described the project activities—what activities will be performed, when and who will deliver.	• how each of the activities is appropriate to achieving the project objective • that the activity aligns fully with best available knowledge, science, established research results or best practice • the timing for delivery of each of the activities and who will deliver them.
Areas for improvement	
Generally, unsuccessful applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 1 by: • providing further detail about how the proposed activity achieves the program outcomes • providing clearer justifications with evidence of the importance and need for the activity • providing enough information about the sound methodology of the activity • providing more detailed information about how the activity delivers benefits to the broader farming community.	

Criterion 2 - Effectiveness of project to achieve Small Grants program outcomes

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described
• clearly described the effectiveness of the project to achieve the program outcomes.	• that the project would deliver positive benefits and that there will be mechanisms in place to measure these benefits.
Outcome 1: • clearly described how, how much, and when each activity will protect or improve the condition of eligible natural resources and improve food and fibre business productivity and profitability.	• the area that would be improved or protected by the activity • the number of factors that would be influenced in the area • the amount of improved food and fibre business productivity and profitability • the number or size of the communities that would receive a benefit • the extent of the intervention to deliver benefit • when the benefit would be realised.
Outcome 2: • described how, how much, and when, the activity will increase land managers' awareness, knowledge and skill to sustainably manage eligible natural resources or improve the capacity of groups to in-turn help land managers.	• the number of land managers that would be contacted • the number of farmers whose awareness, knowledge and skills would be increased • the number of groups of farmers whose capacity would be improved • the number or size of the communities that would be involved.
Areas for improvement	

Generally, unsuccessful applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 2 by:

- Outcome 1—more clearly outlining how and when the proposed project provides measured contribution to effectively and sustainably protect Australia's natural resources and improve food and fibre business productivity and profitability.
- Outcome 2—more clearly outlining how and when the proposed project provides measured contribution to increasing the knowledge and capacity of farmers and fishers; and /or facilitates the adoption of tools, technologies and improved land management practices.

Criterion 3 - Project suitability for public funding and value for money

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described
• clearly explained the grant amount requested for the project is appropriate.	• how the requested grant amount is appropriate considering the scale of the activity and the project outcomes • who would contribute to the cost of the project and what is the extent of their contribution (cash and in-kind co-contributions) • who would benefit from the project and by how much.
• described the public benefits of the project.	• the public benefits of the project • how the public benefits of the project are additional to those that would otherwise be achieved.
• outlined any private benefits of the project.	• that there would be a private benefit resulting from the project • the private benefits, how they have been valued and who the beneficiaries would be.
Areas for improvement	
Generally, unsuccessful applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 3 by: • providing detailed information how the requested amount is appropriate to conduct the proposed activities and to achieve the project objectives • explaining how the project will deliver public benefits and how these will be measured • outlining any private benefits from the project and details of the beneficiaries.	

Criterion 4 – Applicant suitability (This criterion does not apply to applications for projects in Tiers 1 and 2).

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described
• clearly described the applicant's previous management experience in delivering projects of a similar outcomes, scope and budget.	• how the applicant demonstrated that they are capable of implementing the project and that they have appropriate governance structures in place • that the applicant has the skills and appropriate processes in place to ensure that the project will be well managed; timelines are met; staff are in place, outcomes and finances monitored and project reported on • how the applicant's previous experience demonstrated their ability to deliver a project of similar outcomes, scope and budget • that the applicant identified and understood the project risks and that processes are in place to ensure that the identified risks will be appropriately managed and mitigated.
• described the capability to engage with relevant stakeholders and communities in project activity.	• that the applicant has demonstrated that they have appropriate skills to engage with relevant stakeholders and communities to implement the project activities • that the applicant is able to manage a number of different parties into a well-coordinated activity • that the applicant knows who needs to do what and when to ensure the project is successful.
• described the ways to promote the project's outcome to the broader communities and to maintain into the future.	• that the applicant has a clear plan of what will be done and how they would successfully promote the project outcomes • that the applicant has processes in place to maintain the project outcomes into the future to create a legacy.

Areas for improvement

Generally, unsuccessful applicants (Tiers 3 and 4) could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 4 by:

- demonstrating previous experience that they are well equipped to deliver the project
- providing evidence they have the relevant skills and expertise to ensure that the project will be successfully delivered
- explaining that they understood and identified risks and that processes are in place to manage and mitigate the risks
- outlining how the relevant stakeholders will be engaged and how roles and responsibilities will be distributed among the parties involved to make the project successful
- outlining how the project outcomes will be promoted to the broader community and how those outcomes will be maintained into the future.

6. Individual feedback

Individual feedback is available to applicants by contacting the Community Grants Hub (phone-1800 020 283 or email - support@communitygrants.gov.au) within 40 business days of having received the outcome notification letter. Please include in the request your legal entity name, application ID and the project activity title. The Hub will endeavour to respond to your request within 30 business days from the date of the request for feedback.