Australia-China Agricultural Cooperation Agreement 2020 grant funding round

General feedback for applicants

Summary

The grant round 2020 received 43 applications. After assessment, 5 were selected for funding, totalling $244,200.

It was excellent to see the interest shown by stakeholders in the program and successful applications were of a high standard.

The selected applicants provided strong, well-written responses to all the assessment criteria. The proposed activities were eligible, appropriate and effective to achieve the program outcomes and demonstrated their suitability for public funding and value for money.

The Feedback provides all organisations with easy access to information about the grant selection process and the main strength and areas for improving applications.

Program overview

The Australia-China Agricultural Cooperation Agreement (ACACA) 2020 is a treaty-level agreement between the Australian and Chinese governments. The agreement was signed in 1984 to enhance cooperation across agricultural industries, develop the trading relationship and provide a forum for the mutual exchange of scientific information between the two countries. This grant funding program (the program) operates under this agreement.

The program operates under this agreement, it is ongoing and advertises a grant opportunity (funding round) every calendar year, or twice in a calendar year where funding permits. There are two funding streams available; Stream 1 must be for an eligible project activity undertaken in Australia and/or China. Stream 2 must be for a trade mission to China only. The beneficiaries of the ACACA grant opportunity are Australian agriculture, fisheries, meat, forestry, regulatory, biosecurity and food safety industries, organisations, businesses and individuals, including their respective industry or sectors, who are seeking to enhance cooperation between Australia and China.

The program is administered by the Department of Social Services' Community Grants Hub (the Hub), on behalf of Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) under a Whole of Australian Government initiative to streamline grant processes across agencies.
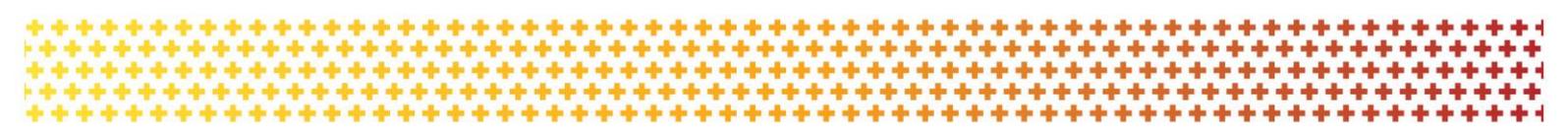
Selection process

An open competitive selection process was undertaken to select a range of quality projects from a variety of organisations.

Applications were screened for eligibility and compliance against the requirements outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines (GOG).

A DAWE appointed assessment panel comprising of five members undertook the assessment of all eligible and compliant applications, scoring each application in relation to three equally weighted assessment criteria and made funding recommendations to the decision maker.

To do this, the assessment panel considered:

- how well applications scored against the assessment criteria

- the relative merit of an application compared to other applications focussed on the program outcome(s), including overall value for money

- the overall objective/s to be achieved in providing the grant

- the relative value of the grant sought

- the extent to which the application matches identified priorities

- whether the mix of projects or trade missions achieve a balance for industries, regions and delivery mechanisms and support wider industry benefits

- how the grant activities will target groups or individuals

The outcome of the assessment was provided to the Delegate and final approval of projects was made by the First Assistant Secretary, Trade and Market Access Division.

General feedback for applicants

Successful applicants proposed activities that were eligible, appropriate and considered effective for achieving the program objectives. They demonstrated their suitability for public funding, value for money and met the requirements outlined in the GOG. Applications included strong responses to all of the assessment criteria.

The feedback is based on the information provided by the assessment team and Selection Advisory Panel during the funding round as well as experience from other funding rounds.

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:

- *need for the grant activity* – applications that provided limited or no details about the need of project activities generally did not score well. Assessors need to be able to determine from the application why the proposed activity is needed and how it will address the need. Higher scoring applications provided quantitative evidence to demonstrate need of the activity and explain how this would address the need.

- *project effectiveness* – applications that did not clearly determine the effectiveness of project to achieve the program outcomes did not score well. Applications that provided measured contribution to the achievements and showed how much the project will achieve the program outcomes were generally well rated by assessors. Higher scoring applications clearly articulated the project effectiveness and how this would contribute to program outcomes.

Contribution towards program outcomes

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

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

- checking the GOG to ensure that the proposed project is a good fit for the program
- ensuring that the application clearly demonstrates how the proposed project meets the program outcomes and links project activities to the project outcomes
- justifying the delivery approach.

Criteria specific feedback

Criterion 1 – Alignment with ACACA objectives, funding priorities and broader benefits

Strong applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly describe:
Clearly describe what the project will achieve (the outcome) and how it supports the objectives of the ACACA program.	- What the outcome will be - The activities that will be undertaken to achieve the outcome. - How the outcome connects to the ACACA program objectives and at least one of the identified funding priorities.
Support and clearly describe two-way benefits for Australia and China.	- How the outcome will benefit Australia's agricultural industry. - How the outcomes will be shared. - How outcomes and intended benefits will support market access for Australian agricultural products to the China market. - Benefits for China and its industry.

Areas for improvement
Generally, unsuccessful applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 1 by: - ensuring that planned outcomes were of benefit to both Australia and China.   - demonstrating how the outcome would benefit the broader industry in Australia and how that would happen.

Criterion 2 – Suitability of the applicant to achieve stated goals of the project or trade mission

Strong applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described:
Could demonstrate existing linkages with China and its industry	- engagement with relevant bodies such as producers, research institutions directly engaged with industry in china, importers of the focus commodity. - How that engagement would enable delivery of planned outcomes.
Showed how outcomes would benefit wider industry	how planned outcomes would benefit Australian industry more broadly. That is, how they would be communicated and applied beyond one agency, institution, company etc

Strong applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described:
Featured experience, skills and capacity to deliver the project	• their ability to manage Commonwealth government grant funding responsibly and effectively. • their capability to engage relevant expertise, including any technical expertise, required to achieve positive outcomes for all stakeholders. • the applicant's skills and the appropriate processes that would be put in place to ensure the project would be well managed, time lines met, staff in place, outcomes and finances monitored, and project activities reported.
Areas for improvement	

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

• ensuring that existing linkages with China were current and relevant to the proposal.
• clearly describing that the proposed activities were relevant to industry and to both Australia and China.
• demonstrating benefits to the relevant industry more broadly and to market access.

Criterion 3 – Robustness of the proposed project or trade mission

Strong applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described:
Clearly expressed grant activity measurement and evaluation	• how they will measure outcomes and progress towards achieving the objectives of the grant opportunity • how any lessons learned could be utilised as well as project successes.
Demonstrated need for grant activity	• that there is a need for the activity or an issue to be addressed in relation to the program objectives. • the evidence demonstrating the need such as findings from research already undertaken or consultation outcomes.
Well-planned activities	• how approved activities would be undertaken including a schedule and a clear allocation of funding to eligible activities • evidence of processes to be put in place to ensure identified risks would be appropriately managed and mitigated.

Areas for improvement

Generally, unsuccessful applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 3 by:

- clearly describing the proposed activities to be undertaken and providing evidence
- including a timeline of the activities to be completed under the project
- clearly articulating the project's potential risks and how they would be managed.