National Landcare Program
Smart Farms Small Grants - Round 3

General feedback for applicants

1. Summary

The third funding round under the National Landcare Program's Smart Farms Small Grants received 659 applications, of which 618 were eligible. After assessment, 113 were selected for funding, totalling $5.03 million. A list of successful projects can be found here[1].

For the third round, similar interest was shown by stakeholders in comparison to the first two rounds of the program. This made the third 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 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 currently three more annual rounds anticipated under the program. Here we provide feedback on how future applicants can strengthen their proposals. Unsuccessful applicants in round 3 are encouraged to consider how this feedback may apply 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 and other relevant templates specific 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 major 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, farmers, land managers and communities. This program will also 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 and practices. This will deliver more sustainable, productive and profitable agriculture, fishing, aquaculture and forestry industries. Industry and farmer 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 anticipated that this completed third round in 2019-20 will be followed by three subsequent annual calls for applications 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, Water and the Environment (DAWE), under a Whole of Australian Government initiative to streamline grant processes across agencies.

3. Selection process for round 3

Projects were selected through an open competitive process.

All applications passing the initial compliance and eligibility checks by the Hub were then assessed against the four assessment criteria and moderated by DAWE to compile a shortlist. This list was then assessed by a Selection Advisory Panel (SAP) comprised of an independent Chair and two members to provide additional technical and industry expertise and insight, plus look at the geographical spread of projects across the country. The SAP's final selections were based on the strength of the applicants' responses to all of the assessment criteria and their demonstrated ability to meet the requirements of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines; the SAP also ensured a balance of projects across industry sectors and the country. Final approval of projects was made by the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management, the Hon. David Littleproud MP.

4. Summary of the qualities of good and poor applications

Good applications	Poor applications
Effectively used available space in the application form to demonstrate a good understanding of the background and purposes of the activities to achieve project outcomes.	Often provided very short responses that did not provide enough detail about how the proposed activities would achieve the program outcomes.
The application clearly and succinctly described the need for the project, what the proposed project aims to achieve, defined the project's objectives, explained the importance of the project and why the project is needed and the impacts of not carrying out the project.	Did not provide clear justifications with evidence of the importance and need for the project, lacked information about the activities, and/or did not provide information about how the project would deliver benefits to the broader farming community. Often provided too much high level background information.
Clearly described the proposed project activities - what and why these activities would be performed, when they would occur, who would do them and what outcomes would be achieved that met the goals of the Smart Farms Small Grants program.	Did not clearly describe the project activities - what and why these activities would be performed, when they would be delivered, by whom, who else would participate in the project, and did not clearly describe the effectiveness of the project to achieve the overall proposed project's outcome/s.
Clearly explained why the grant amount requested for the project is appropriate, described the public benefits of the project, identified the private benefits and how these would be offset by appropriate co-contributions, and included clear and realistic budgets in the required format and used the template provided.	Included ineligible activities and/or budget items and/or activities that could be seen as business as usual - for example improvements on an individual private property, the application of fertiliser to improve pasture, etc.

A full list of ineligible items and activities can be found at Section 5.3 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

Did not provide detailed information on how the requested grant amount is appropriate to conduct the proposed activities and to achieve the project objectives, and/or how the project will deliver public benefits and how these will be measured and/or how they would offset any private benefits from the project.

Did not use the mandatory budget template. |

Good applications	Poor applications
Clearly described the applicant's previous management experience in delivering projects with similar outcomes, scope and budget. Described the capability to effectively engage with relevant stakeholders and communities as part of project activities. Described the methods to be used in promoting the project's outcomes to land managers and the broader community, and how the project outcomes and legacy will be maintained into the future. Identified the major risks to achieving the project outcomes, and the strategies to ensure that these identified risks would be appropriately managed and mitigated.	Did not clearly demonstrate that the applicant has the skills and appropriate processes in place to ensure that the project will be well managed and that timelines and milestones will be met, and/or the describe the applicant's capacity to monitor the progress of project activites and meet project reporting and financial management requirements. Poor applications also did not identify the major risks to achieving the project outcomes or the strategies to ensure that the identified risks would be appropriately managed and mitigated. Did not outline how the relevant stakeholders would be engaged and how roles and responsibilities would be distributed among the parties involved. Did not demonstrate how the project outcomes will be promoted to the broader community and how those outcomes will be maintained into the future.

5. 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 DAWE assessment team and the SAP during the third round, as well as experience and feedback provided by the Hub and DAWE from previous small grant programs funding rounds. Unsuccessful applicants are encouraged to consider how this feedback may apply to their own application before applying for future rounds.

Application writing and providing details

Before beginning any application, it is critical to read and understand the Grant Opportunity Guidelines to ensure that the application meets the program outcomes and objectives, and provides a demonstratable public benefit.

When writing applications it is important to remember that the assessors will only have the information that the applicant provides to assess the application.

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

A number of applicants did not effectively utilise the word limits in their applications, and/or provided 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 to program outcomes 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 measureable contributions 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 against the program objectives.

The key objectives of 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 – Increased adoption of best practice sustainable agriculture.
- Outcome 2 – Increase the capacity of land managers to adopt best practice sustainable agriculture.

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 by the target industry and/or geographic area;
- justifying the delivery approach; and
- describing the mechanisms to extend information and knowledge to farmers and stakeholders, and contribute to the uptake of new practices.

Capacity to deliver

Unsuccessful 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 implementation, monitoring and reporting of a project and be able to clearly demonstrate that project outputs and outcomes are measureable and will be monitored and reported on;
- 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); and
- 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 private 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 and value for money, 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); and
- 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 could be seen as business as usual. A full list of ineligible items and activities can be found at Section 5.3 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. In particular there were unsuccessful applications that included:

- over 10% of the budget for capital items – such as large investments for fencing, earthworks 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 of common district crop and grazing management practices);
- activities that are regarded as new research with limited proof of concept or practical application in the foreseeable future; and/or
- '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.

Provision of required attachments

The Grant Opportunity Guidelines state that *"You must attach supporting documentation according to the instructions provided within the application form. You should only attach requested documents. Do not attach any other documents to your application form."* The Grant Opportunity Guidelines also state that *"for the proposed project budget the **mandatory template must be used**. In the template, for each proposed project activity, **you must**:*

- *include information about the cost of each of the proposed project activities and the overall project; and*
- *identify the amount and identity of each contributor to the cost of the activity. You must separately identify cash and in-kind contributions. You must say what contributions you, your partners and other private beneficiaries are making to the proposed project."*

A number of applications did not include their budgets in the specified format or on the mandated template, or presented unrealistic budgets - in particular in regards to managements costs associated with the project, private benefit gains, and cash and in-kind co-contributions. These applications were either deemed ineligible or scored poorly against the *"suitability for public funding and value for money"* criteria of the application.

6. Specific feedback

Please note that the assessment criteria for Smart Farms Small Grants round 4 may be different from the round 3 assessment criteria listed below.

Criterion 1 – Appropriateness of the proposed project objective and activities

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described:
1a - described what the proposed project wants to achieve.	• how the proposed activity protects or improves the condition of eligible natural resources and improves food and fibre business productively and profitability, and • how the proposed 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.
1a - defined what was the project's objective.	• how well the proposed project objectives match and deliver the purpose and outcomes of the Smart Farms Small Grants Program to the wider community.
1b - explained the importance of the project and why the project is needed.	• the importance and need for the proposed activity with enough information and clear justification, and • how the proposed activity will deliver benefits to industry, the area and the broader community.
1b - explained the impact of not carrying out the project.	• the impact if the proposed project did not go ahead, for example the negative impact on farming practices and profitability, the wider community, natural resources and the environment.

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; and • providing more detailed information about how the activity delivers benefits to the natural resource condition and the broader farming community.

Criterion 2 – Effectiveness of the proposed project to achieve the proposed project outcomes. Contribution of proposed project to Program Outcomes

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described
2a - described the proposed project activities - what activities will be performed.	• how each of the activities is appropriate to achieving the proposed project objectives, and • how the proposed activity aligns fully with best available knowledge, science, established research results or best practice.
2a - described the proposed project activities – when the activities will be delivered.	• the timing for delivery of each of the activities, • why the timing was important, and • how the timings are realistic.
2a - described the proposed project activities - who will deliver the activities.	• Who would participate in each of the proposed activities, • who will deliver of each of the proposed activities, and • why those people were most appropriate to deliver them.
2a - clearly described the effectiveness of the project to achieve the overall proposed project's outcome/s.	• how the project would deliver positive benefits and that there will be mechanisms in place to measure these benefits.
2b - 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, and • when the benefit would be realised.
2b - 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, and • 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:

- clearly describing the proposed project activities - what activities will be performed, when they would be delivered, by whom, and who else would participate in the project; and
- clearly describing the effectiveness of the project to achieve the overall proposed project's outcome/s:
- 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 – Suitability of project proposal for public funding and value for money

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described
3a - 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), and - who would benefit from the project and by how much.
3b - described the public benefits of the project.	- the public benefits of the project, and - how the public benefits of the project are additional to those that would otherwise be achieved, i.e. the value that the proposed project would add to the community that would not occur without the project.
3c - outlined any private benefits of the project.	- where there would be a private benefit resulting from the project, - what would the private benefits be, - how they have been valued, - who the beneficiaries would be, and - who will contribute to the cost of the proposed project and the extent of their contribution to offset private benefits accrued.
Included clear budgets in the required format and template	- detailed budgets for all components of the proposed projects including what the proposed grants monies would be used for and what cash and in-kind contributions would be included in the overall proposal budget. - Budget must be compiled on the supplied mandatory template.
Areas for improvement	

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

- providing their budgets in the correct format and on the mandatory template;
- 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; and
- outlining any private benefits from the project and details of the beneficiaries.

Criterion 4 – Applicant suitability

Quality applications:	Example – Quality responses clearly described
4a - 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 reporting, • how the applicant's previous experience demonstrated their ability to deliver a project of similar outcomes, scope and budget, and • 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.
4b - 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, and • that the applicant knows who needs to do what and when to ensure the project is successful.
4c - described the ways to promote the project's outcomes to land managers and the broader community, and to maintain these into the future.	• that the applicant has a clear plan of what will be done and how they would successfully promote the project outcomes to land managers and the broader community.
4c - described the ways to maintain the proposed project outcomes into the future.	• 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 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; • demonstrating capacity to engage with the broader community; • demonstrating that the proposed project has long-term benefits; • 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, and • outlining how the project outcomes will be promoted to the broader community and how those outcomes will be maintained into the future.

7. 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.