



Competitive Grants Program

FY2026

Proposal Submission Deadline: Friday, January 16, 2026, 5:00 PM EST.

Anticipated Project Start Date: March 1, 2026

Project End Date: September 30, 2026

Funding Available from Sun Grant: up to \$60,000 per project

Note: Eligible applicants are state agricultural experiment stations; colleges and universities; university research foundations; other research institutions and organizations; Federal agencies; national laboratories; private organizations or corporations; or individuals within the Sun Grant Program – Northeast Region. Projects must fit into the regional priority areas and feedstocks categories outlined in this RFA to be considered for funding.



2024-2025 NORTHEAST SUN GRANT COMPETITIVE RESEARCH SUPPORT

ABOUT THE SUN GRANT PROGRAM

Authorized by Congress in 2004, the mission of the Sun Grant Program is to (1) enhance national energy and climate security through development, distribution, and implementation of biobased technologies, (2) promote diversification in, and the environmental sustainability of, agricultural production in the United States by developing new markets for biomass feedstocks; (3) promote economic diversification in rural areas of the United States through biobased manufacturing; and (4) enhance the efficiency of biomass, bioenergy and bioproduct research and development programs through improved coordination and collaboration between colleges, universities, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, other federal and state departments and agencies, and other research organizations including the private sector.

The Sun Grant Program is organized as a network of five land-grant universities serving as regional Sun Grant Centers: South Dakota State University (North-Central), Oregon State University (Western), Oklahoma State University (South-Central), the University of Tennessee – Knoxville (Southeastern), and The Pennsylvania State University (Northeastern). Additional information about the Northeast Regional Sun Grant Center is at <https://agsci.psu.edu/research/sungrant>.

These centers each facilitate federally funded research, extension, and education programs in their respective regions. These programs embrace the multi-institution, multi-state, multi-disciplinary integrated approach that is at the heart of the land-grant method of addressing problems.

SUN GRANT PROGRAM - NORTHEAST REGION

The Northeast Regional Sun Grant Center (NE Sun Grant Center), located at The Pennsylvania State University (also referenced as Penn State University or PSU), carries out administrative functions for the northeastern region of the United States, composed of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia, as well as the District of Columbia.

APPLICATION GUIDELINES for 2025-2026 NE Sun Grant Competitive Research Support

The NE Sun Grant Program requests proposals that focus on providing education and training to graduate students or post-doctoral trainees from a college or university within the Northeast Sun Grant Region who are conducting research benefiting the region or university under the guidance of a faculty mentor/faculty mentors. Funding will be awarded for graduate student assistantship support up to 7 months duration. At least 50% of the total federal funds awarded must go to student/trainee stipends, salary or wages. Tuition or tuition remission is allowable, according to the recipient university's policy, and some funds can be designated for other direct costs within the maximum award amount of \$60,000 including indirect costs (see below).

Deadline

Applications should be submitted as a single PDF (filename: "Last name_NESGP2026") via email to Stephen Chmely at (smc6932@psu.edu) by **Friday, January 16, 2025, at 5:00 PM EST**, using subject line: "**NE Sun GrantReg2025_Last name**". Project funding is contingent upon agency availability of funds, Federal government operations, competitiveness of proposal submissions, and adherence to the instructions provided in this funding announcement.

Types of Research Funded

The NE Sun Grant Program invites proposals that will further its mission of developing viable alternative biobased energy sources and products while enhancing economic opportunities in rural areas.

Funded grants will support fundamental or applied research, education, and Extension programs on technology/process development, and integrated research, Extension, and education programs on implementation.

Funding is available to support biofuel, bioenergy, and/or biobased product related projects. Applications must focus on efforts to support efficient, economically viable, and sustainable supply chains for development of bioenergy and biobased products. Research proposals in areas of feedstock development, processing operations and methods, conversion, and separation technologies for the advancement of biobased industries and markets may be submitted. Projects encompassing agronomy, engineering, chemistry, materials science, microbiology, policy, and/or economic or commercialization evaluation and advancement are welcomed.

Feedstocks for Consideration

This solicitation will not prioritize feedstocks, therefore, any and all feedstocks relevant to the NE region may be considered. Examples of feedstocks include (but are not limited to):

- Perennial grass (e.g. switchgrass, miscanthus, mixed grasses, etc.)
- Annual grasses (e.g. biomass sorghum, etc.)
- Agricultural residues
- Oilseed feedstocks
- Woody biomass (short rotation woody crops, forest residues, etc.)
- Biobased byproducts and/or co-products

Who Can Apply

Applications must be submitted by a university/college faculty mentor supporting an eligible postdoctoral trainee or graduate student. The lead PI must be employed within the Northeast Region. Co-PIs and collaborators may be from inside and outside the region. Eligible graduate students and postdoctoral trainees are those currently enrolled or employed at higher education institutions located in the states of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia, as well as the District of Columbia; and conducting research in one of the research areas mentioned above.

Funding Information

The maximum award amount per proposal is \$60,000 including indirect costs (IDC). At least 50% of the budget must be used for salary or stipends of graduate students, postdoctoral trainees, or undergraduate research assistants, and the remaining funds can be allocated for tuition, travel, materials and supplies, or other related direct costs. Indirect costs are limited to the USDA-NIFA rate of 30% of Total Federal Funds or the university's federally negotiated rate, whichever is less. **Cost Sharing/Matching Requirements**—Not less than 20% of the total project costs or 25% of the Total Federal Funds requested must be matched with non-federal funds. Note: Matching requirements do not apply to fundamental research. Fundamental research is defined as research that increases knowledge or understanding of the fundamental aspects of phenomena and has the potential for broad application; and has a positive effect on agriculture, food, nutrition, or the environment. The budget

justification should include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions). For additional details see **Indirect Cost Limitation** and **Cost Share Requirement** sections below.

Award Duration

Grants will be supported for up to 7 months **starting March 1, 2026**, with a project end date of **September 30, 2026**. No-cost extensions may be allowed pursuant agency approval, availability of funds, Federal government operations, and timely submission of all required reporting documents.

Application

Applications must consist of:

1. Proposals, which are limited to a maximum of **four** single-spaced pages with 1" margins and 12-point Times New Roman font. The page count includes graphics and tables but excludes references. Proposals must include the following:
 - a. Project title
 - b. Faculty Mentor Contact Information
 - c. Type of project: Applied or Fundamental
 - i. If fundamental, the PI must provide a justification statement to be reviewed by agency personnel (not included in the page limitation)
 - ii. **NOTE:** Given the applied nature of research supported by the Sun Grant Initiative, we expect most project types to be Applied and will thus require cost share
 - d. Graduate Student or Postdoctoral Trainee Information (Name, graduate degree name, email).
 - i. **NOTE:** If more than one graduate student or postdoctoral trainee is funded, each must be identified here, included in the professional development plan (section 1.f.) and a biosketch provided as indicated in item #4 below.
 - e. Non-technical abstract, 200 words maximum
 - f. Project Narrative (Background, Objectives, Methods, Timeline, and Professional Development Plan for Student/Trainee)
 - g. Expected Project Outcomes and Deliverables
 - h. Statement of Outcomes from Prior Sun Grant Funding (if applicable)
2. Budget and Budget Justification (not included in the page count). Budget must be allocated to benefit the graduate student or postdoctoral trainee and the research they are working on with the faculty mentor. At least 50% of the budget must be allocated for stipend, salary or wages of graduate student, postdoctoral trainee, and/or undergraduate research assistants, while the rest of the budget will be used for research support (e.g., tuition, travel, supplies, etc.). Faculty salary is not allowed. See Indirect Cost Limitation and Cost Share Requirement sections below.
3. References Cited (not included in the page count)
4. 2-page Biographical Sketch for the faculty mentor and graduate student or postdoctoral trainee, including student/trainee graduate program GPA. *Note: if more than one graduate student or postdoctoral trainee is funded, a biosketch must be provided for each.* (not included in the page count)
5. Faculty mentor's conflict of interest (COI) list.
6. An official letter of commitment from the PI's Dean/Dept Head stating the non-Federal match

Indirect Cost Limitation

Indirect costs are limited by USDA to the lesser of the applicant's official negotiated indirect cost rate or 30% of Total Federal Funds provided (TFF). 30% of TFF is equivalent to 42.857% of Total Direct Costs (TDC). Thus, if the project is requesting \$60,000 TFF, the indirect request is limited to \$18,000 and total direct costs would be

\$42,000. The NE Sun Grant Center asks that the calculation using 30% TFF be used for consistency among proposals.

Cost Share Requirement

USDA NIFA requires successful applicants to provide a minimum of 25% cost share on a TFF basis. 25% of TFF is equivalent to 20% of the total project cost. For example, if the NE Sun Grant Center awards \$60,000 as TFF then \$15,000 must be provided as cost share and the total project cost will be \$75,000. Grantees may provide auditable cost-share funds through in-kind contributions including salaries, facilities, or from state, local, nonprofit or private funds. No federal funds may be used as cost share. **Waived or reduced indirect costs cannot be counted as cost-share.**

The matching requirement does not apply to fundamental research using the USDA NIFA definitions (see <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resource/AFRI-Project-Types.pdf>).

Fundamental research means research that (i) increases knowledge or understanding of the fundamental aspects of phenomena and has the potential for broad application and (ii) has an effect on agriculture, food, nutrition or the environment.

Applied research means research that includes expansion of the findings of fundamental research to uncover practical ways in which new knowledge can be advanced to benefit individuals and society.

Given the stated NE Sun Grant priorities, most successful proposals can be expected to be classified as applied research and thus match will be required. Any proposal that wishes to be exempted from this match requirement will have its request for classification as fundamental research reviewed by USDA prior to any award.

METHOD FOR SUBMITTING APPLICATION

Applications should be submitted as a single PDF (filename: **Last name_NESGP2026**) via email to Stephen Chmely at (smc6932@psu.edu) by **Friday, January 16, 2025, at 5:00 PM EST**, using subject line: **“NE Sun GrantReg2025_Last name”**. Project funding is contingent upon agency availability of funds, Federal government operations, competitiveness of proposal submissions, and adherence to the instructions provided in this funding announcement.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The guiding principle for application review and evaluation is to ensure that each proposal is treated in a consistent and fair manner.

Late proposals will not be reviewed. Upon timely receipt, all applications will be evaluated for responsiveness to the administrative requirements set forth in the RFA. Applications that do not meet these requirements may be eliminated from competition. However, the Center retains the right to conduct discussions with applicants to resolve technical and/or budget issues as deemed necessary.

Proposal reviews are undertaken to ensure that projects supported by the Center are awarded on the basis of merit, quality, and relevance to advancing the purposes of and are consistent with the goals and requirements of the funding program. As such, applications submitted will undergo a programmatic evaluation by USDA-NIFA to determine the worthiness of Federal support.

Proposals will be evaluated using the following criteria:

1. Relevance and scientific merit (innovative, and/or significantly contributes to the knowledge in field, scientifically sound and appropriate methods used to meet goals and objectives).
2. Potential outcomes and accomplishments
3. Past performance with prior Sun Grant funding, including timeliness of report submissions (if applicable)
4. Budget and budget justification

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Recipients will be required to submit quarterly progress reports, which are due June 10, 2026 and September 10, 2026. A quarterly report template will be provided. Projects will be reviewed quarterly to ensure satisfactory progress up to the maximum period allowed.

A final technical report (3-5 pages) on project results and impacts is due October 30, 2026. A report template will be provided.

Note: Invoices are subject to non-payment until the Center receives any and all required reports.

APPLICATION OF PRIME AWARD TERMS AND CONDITIONS

The USDA-NIFA terms and conditions of PSU's prime agreement will be provided to applicants selected for funding.

QUESTIONS: Contact NE Sun Grant Director Dr. Stephen Chmely at smc6932@psu.edu

