Agricultural Marketing Resource Center

Quarterly Report – July - September 2014

As a condition of its USDA Rural Development grant, the cooperating universities comprising AgMRC were tasked to prepare four reports a year and submit them to USDA. These reports summarize the activities completed during each quarter, including website development and functions, value-added business and economic analysis tools and outreach activities (workshops, seminars, newsletters and WebMail inquiries).

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Goal 1. Maintain an electronic, web-based library.

This quarter, the average number of visits per day to the AgMRC website was 8,983, up from 6,219 per day last quarter, while the average number of pageviews per day was 14,382, slightly down from 21,665 per day last quarter.

Within the Commodities and Products section, the top three topics visited during this quarter were:

1. Fruits
2. Livestock
3. Grains and Oilseeds

A complete Google Analytics report is attached to this quarterly report.

Goal 2. Provide value-added business and economic analysis tools.

The Renewable Energy and Climate Change newsletter is written by Don Hofstrand and Robert Wisner, retired professors at Iowa State University.

The newsletter contains pricing, profitability and supply/demand tools used for analysis of ethanol, biodiesel and distillers grains.

These tools are distributed bi-monthly through the AgMRC Renewable Energy & Climate Change newsletter, with approximately 3,000 subscribers. An issue went out for July/August. In addition to the profitability tools and pricing models, articles included, "Do Ethanol Returns Serve as a Hedge against Low Corn Prices?" and "Long-term Trends in U.S. Crude Petroleum Production and Net Trade."

AgMRC

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The mission of AgMRC is to continue to provide independent producers and processors with critical information needed to build successful value-added agricultural enterprises through the www.agmrc.org electronic resource information website.

AgMRC continues to serve a national value-added agriculture audience, with more than 4,000 unique visits per day.

An analysis of the Renewable Energy & Climate Change newsletter was conducted.

Goal 3. Link producers with electronically available information and resources.

AgMRC staff researched and responded to 72 e-mailed questions pertaining to the Value Added Producer Grants, the Commodities and Products section, the Markets and Industries section, the Renewable Energy section and the Directories and State Resources section of the website this quarter. The questions requested information about such topics as aquaculture, industrial hemp, organic eggs and chickens and aronia hybrids.

As of June, AgMRC staff reported receiving 87 toll-free phone inquiries from 9 different states.

AgMRC has expanded its public outreach by creating a page on Facebook. During this quarter, the AgMRC Facebook page had the following 22 posts, which were seen by more than 5,889 people.

A Google + page was created in mid-May. AgMRC has 169 followers and 18,615 views.

One radio spot was created – How Farmers are Benefiting from Ethanol. Spots were picked up by 10 stations with 74 affiliates.

The AgMRC staff created a survey instrument for use on the AgMRC website, asking for effectiveness of content, organization and likelihood of recommending AgMRC to others. The survey summary data are at the end of this report. Additional survey instruments are planned, as is a reconstruction of the content organization and display on the site itself, based on survey results.

Staff members in Iowa conducted a survey of Value Added Producer Grant reviewers for additional input into the VAPG program for USDA Rural Development. The survey instrument and analysis follows.

Tools with Google Analytics

Global Reach, our web designers, mentioned to work on our Search Engine Optimization with the added tool of Google Analytics. Starting May 29th, 2014 AgMRC incorporated Google Analytics into our code to track our data. Previously, we used Urchin to track our data, but Google Analytics is much easier to use and gives us more information.
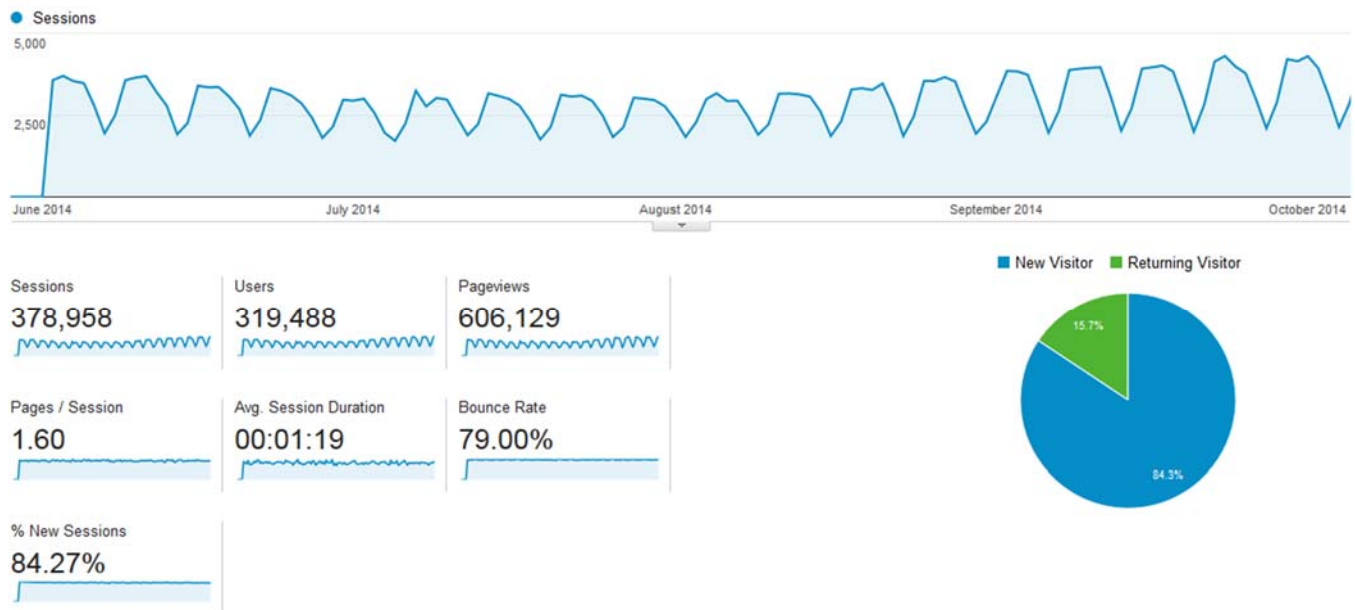
- Sessions represent the number of individual sessions initiated on our site. If a user is inactive on our site for 30 minutes or more, future activity will be counted as a new session.
- Bounce rate is the percent of users who navigate away from the site after viewing one page
- Interesting note: You see a pretty constant up and down movement of the graph of all sessions. We have significantly more views during the week than on weekends.
- For our type of website, it is pretty normal to have a bounce rate that high because our users are coming to find a fact or information on one thing so they exit the page after one page.

Real-Time Tool

This tool shows you:

- How many people are on the sight right now. (Top Left)

- What page they are on. (Bottom Right)
- How they got there with top referrals, social traffic, keywords. (Lower Left)
- Type of device. (Top Left)
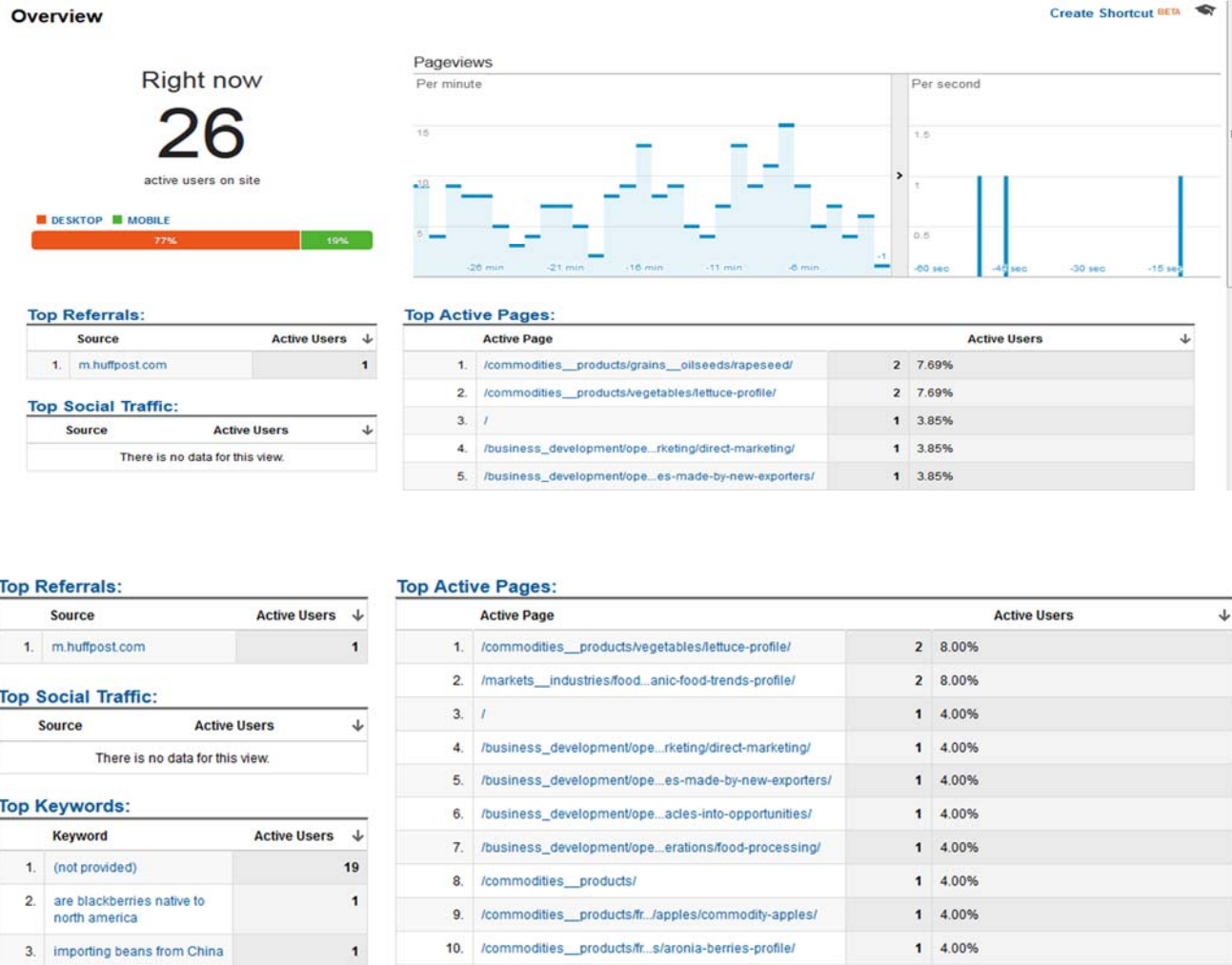- Where in the world they are from. (Figure 1 on Page 4)
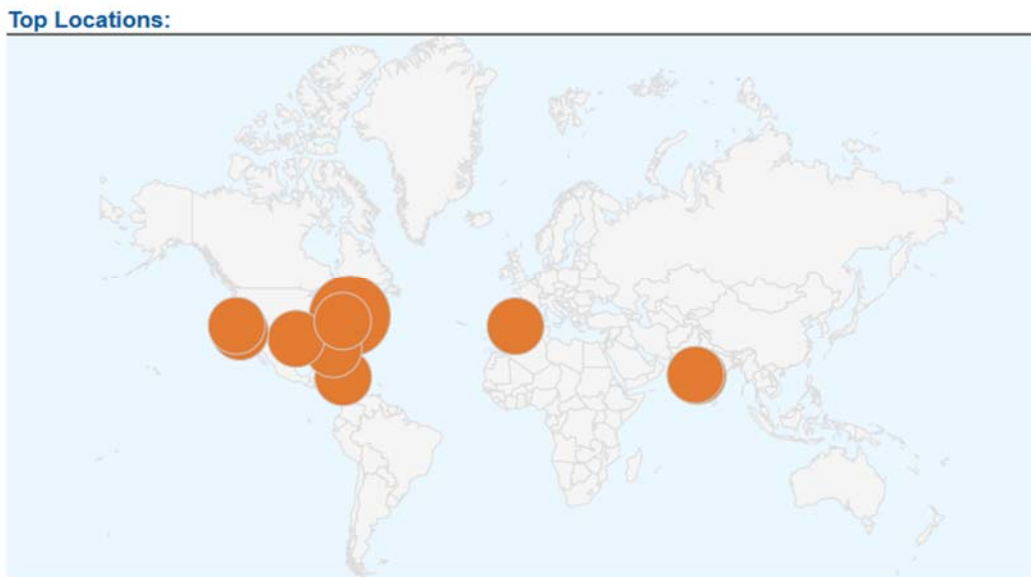

Figure 1

Top Locations:

Figure 2
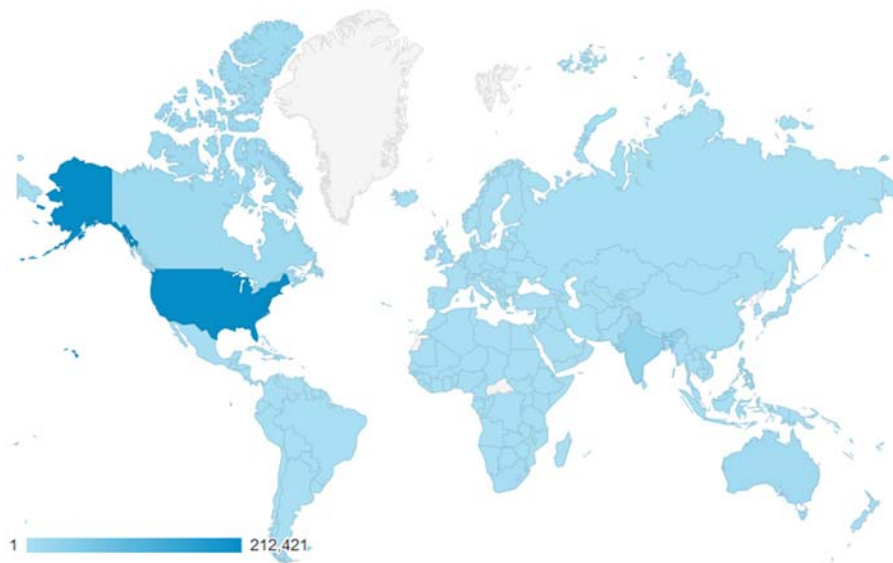
In-Page Analytics

This tool shows you:

- Real view of the website of what is being clicked.
- Top white box will show up on each page and tell the statistics of each.
- Orange boxes show the percent and number of times each link is clicked.

- One drawback is we link to a lot of pages off of AgMRC and we cannot track that.

Comparison Tool

What this tool shows you:

- You are able to compare different time periods.
- You will be able to see how one period compares to another by the percent change

Sessions Per Topic Area

Sessions on Topic Area

- Commodities & Products-391,506
- Business Development-91,173
- Renewable Energy-42,233
- Markets & Industries-32,890
- AgMRC Homepage-12,637
- Directoreis & State Resources-9,942
- Search-8,810
- Contact Us-3,647
- AgMRC Blog-2,218
- Upcoming Events-2,128

Technology Audience Tool

What this tool shows you:

- What kind of devices are used to view our website
- We are able to use this to better accommodate our viewers
- If mobile users suddenly dominated the sessions, then we would want to make a more mobile friendly site

	Device Category	Acquisition			Behavior		
		Sessions ↓	% New Sessions	New Users	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Bounce Rate
		378,958 % of Total: 100.00% (378,958)	84.31% Site Avg: 84.27% (0.05%)	319,510 % of Total: 100.05% (319,355)	1.60 Site Avg: 1.60 (0.00%)	00:01:19 Site Avg: 00:01:19 (0.00%)	79.00% Site Avg: 79.00% (0.00%)
☐	1. desktop	274,795	84.24%	231,482	1.68	00:01:26	77.42%
☐	2. mobile	77,657	85.46%	66,368	1.35	00:00:55	84.24%
☐	3. tablet	26,506	81.72%	21,660	1.54	00:01:19	80.10%

<u>Referral Acquisition Tool</u>

What this tool shows you:

- What websites are referring our website
- We should go to these sites and make sure our links are active (not broken links)
- We could also link to these websites from our website

	Source	Acquisition			Behavior			Conversions		
		Sessions ↓	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Goal Conversion Rate	Goal Completions	Goal Value
		15,473 % of Total: 4.08% (378,958)	80.56% Site Avg: 84.27% (-4.41%)	12,465 % of Total: 3.90% (319,355)	71.19% Site Avg: 79.00% (-9.89%)	2.03 Site Avg: 1.60 (26.65%)	00:01:43 Site Avg: 00:01:19 (30.09%)	0.00% Site Avg: 0.00% (0.00%)	0 % of Total: 0.00% (0)	$0.00 % of Total: 0.00% ($0.00)
☐	1. afsic.nal.usda.gov	1,125 (7.27%)	79.29%	892 (7.16%)	67.56%	2.47	00:02:26	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	2. search.tb.ask.com	1,028 (6.64%)	86.77%	892 (7.16%)	73.54%	1.85	00:02:07	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	3. google.com	762 (4.92%)	79.53%	606 (4.86%)	69.55%	1.88	00:01:40	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	4. extension.iastate.edu	609 (3.94%)	75.86%	462 (3.71%)	57.47%	3.32	00:02:36	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	5. us.wow.com	519 (3.35%)	85.36%	443 (3.55%)	69.17%	1.80	00:01:41	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	6. beginningfarmers.org	381 (2.46%)	81.10%	309 (2.48%)	53.81%	2.64	00:03:01	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	7. en.wikipedia.org	372 (2.40%)	84.14%	313 (2.51%)	81.45%	1.37	00:00:52	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	8. webcrawler.com	358 (2.31%)	90.78%	325 (2.61%)	77.37%	1.59	00:01:06	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	9. libguides.calpoly.edu	312 (2.02%)	41.35%	129 (1.03%)	19.87%	4.99	00:04:17	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)
☐	10. nal.usda.gov	194 (1.25%)	81.44%	158 (1.27%)	49.48%	3.05	00:02:14	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	$0.00 (0.00%)

AgMRC Survey Results

Introduction

In utilizing Google Analytics for the statistical analysis of the site, we also wanted to look more at the qualitative data. We developed a survey to implement on AgMRC.

In the efforts of simplifying what we truly needed, we asked three questions:

1. How easy was it to navigate the site, www.agmrc.org?
2. Did you find the information you were looking for?
3. How likely are you to recommend www.agmrc.org to a friend or colleague?

The survey ran on the left side of AgMRC for six weeks. We had 324 responses.

Responses

Site Navigation

- 98 responses rated the site as difficult or very difficult to navigate (roughly 30%)
- 65 rated the site navigation as average (roughly 20%)
- 143 rated the site as easy or very easy to navigate (roughly 45%)

Locating Information Needed

- 135 responses said they could not find the information needed (roughly 42%)
- 186 responses said they did find the information needed (roughly 57%)

Likely to Recommend AgMRC to Others

- 191 respondents said they were likely to recommend AgMRC (roughly 59%)
- 130 respondents said they were not likely to recommend AgMRC to others (roughly 40%)

Common Comments

- Pro Comments
  - Very informative
  - Looks very professional
- Con Comments
  - Too much information
  - Enterprise budgets needed
  - More information than I needed
  - Too many links
  - Hard to find the facts I wanted
  - Very outdated information/statistics
  - Great detail – too many words

Page Where They Took the Survey

- Homepage was #1
- Agritourism   Aquaculture   Broccoli
- Alligator   Carrots   Chickpeas
- Almonds   Dairy Goats   Mushrooms
- Organic Food Trends   Rapeseed
- Pumpkins

Value Added Producer Grant Reviewer Survey Analysis - 2014

Question 1: Please rank the following areas regarding the evidence of these good grant writing practices in the VAPG grant applications you reviewed.

The strongest evidence for good grant writing practices, according to the reviewers, was a majority of these VAPG grant applications clearly demonstrated the purpose, need and use for the grant funds, a concise budget, and a realistic scope/size of the project compared to the dollars requested and available. The weakest evidence for a majority of these VAPG grant applications were the applicants did not identify potential risks or constraints. Applications were average in the areas of the application that included a method to measure the success of the project and evidence of strong support from community, customers and technical providers.

Question 2: Please provide generalized feedback regarding the grant applications you reviewed. Briefly describe general characteristics of strong grant applications you reviewed.

In general, reviewers said the strongest applicants reviewed were those who were clear, well thought out, specific, and followed the grants rules. They also noted that the strongest applicants had previous experience and had developed ties and also had ties from other organizations and people.

Question 3: Describe the most common weakness you observed in the grant applications you received.

In general, reviewers said the weakest applicants were those who did not include realistic information, like an increase in yield each year. The applicants did not keep in mind the other risks involved in producing a value-added product. Weak applicants were very wordy, incomplete, and showed inexperience in their grant writing. Common characteristics of a weak application were no evidence of an effective marketing plan, budget or letters of support.

Question 4: How many years have you been a reviewer?

A majority of the 50 reviewers, or 62%, were first time reviewers. The other 19 reviewers ranged from 2-11 years with 1 reviewer having reviewed applications for 40 years.

Question 5: If you have been a reviewer for longer than one year, what is the biggest change you have noted over time in the applications you reviewed?

Most reviewers found that each year applicants are get stronger. They feel that the template and point system makes it easier to judge and compare to others. They have noticed that those who have a third party write their grant proposals do not do well because they use jargon. Reviewers have seen an increase of outside support being reflected in the grant proposal.

Question 6: If you could identify one thing that would make the reviewing process easier, what would it be?

Things that could make the reviewing process easier would be to make sure the deadline sticks and isn't extended multiple times. Reviewers agreed to a timetable because that worked into their schedule, but with extended deadlines, it conflicted with other time commitments reviewers had already made. Reviewers said not to send the grant proposal in entirety, but instead only send reviewers what needs to be reviewed. Reviewers stated that the grant application should follow a template so that the reviewers aren't searching 100 pages for information. In order to make things fair for all grant applicants, reviewers would like a checklist of what SHOULD be in the proposal so everyone is following the same checklist. There were a few reviewers stressed the need of stricter criteria for applications to get past the state level. Reviewers also suggest that the grant has specific guidelines (i.e. 3 support letters), and then document those on the extra documents so the reviewers aren't wasting time searching for things. Also for a follow up survey, like this, send closer to the close of the reviews, so that the applications are still fresh in their mind.

Question7: Additional feedback?

There was still a lot of concern over the deadlines and the extending of deadlines. Be considerate of the timetable that the reviewers committed to because they have other obligations. Poor quality grants that get passed at the state level are an inefficient use of time when reviewing a document of that length. Overall, reviewers learned something from each grant proposal and enjoyed the process.

VAPG Reviewer Survey

Q1 Please rank the following areas regarding the evidence of these good grant writing VAPG **practices in the grant applications you reviewed.**

Answered: 50   Skipped: 1

clearly...

Applicant presented a...
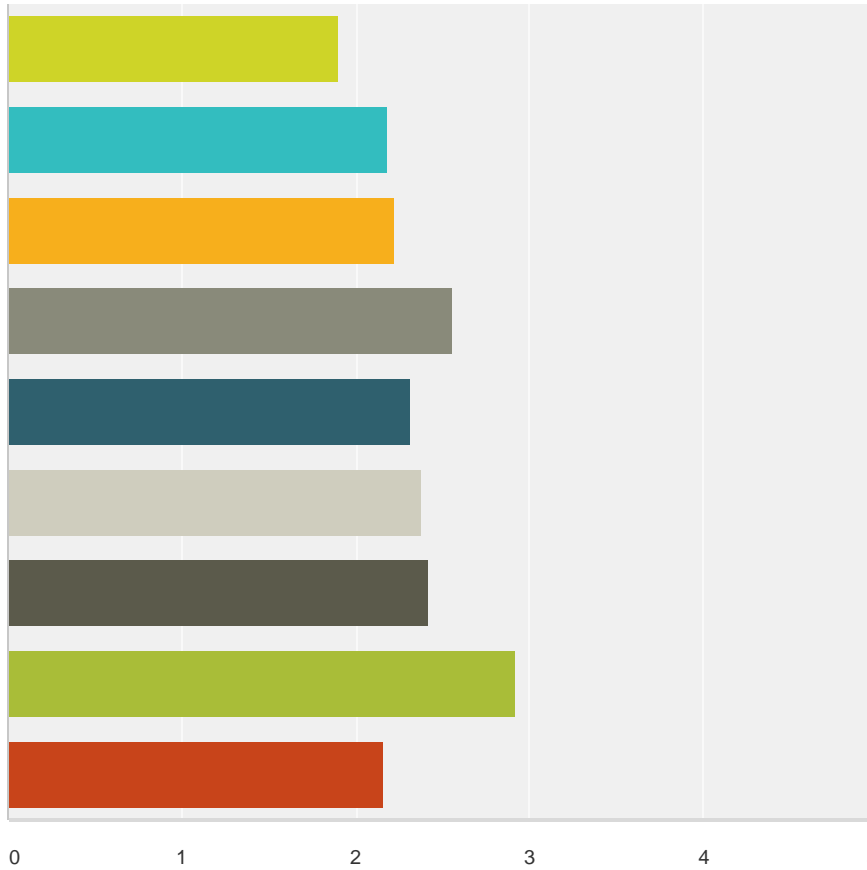
	Always Evident	Mostly Evident	Occasionally Evident	Rarely Evident	Never Evident	Total	Average Rating
Applications clearly demonstrated the purpose, need and use for the grant funds.	14.00% 7	82.00% 41	4.00% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	50	1.90
Applicant presented a clear manageable work plan.	10.00% 5	64.00% 32	24.00% 12	2.00% 1	0.00% 0	50	2.18
Applicant presented a clear, concise budget.	8.00% 4	66.00% 33	22.00% 11	4.00% 2	0.00% 0	50	2.22
Applicant included a method to measure the success of the project.	6.00% 3	46.00% 23	36.00% 18	10.00% 5	2.00% 1	50	2.56
Applications presented a creative concept or unique innovative solution to add value to the product.	12.00% 6	54.00% 27	24.00% 12	10.00% 5	0.00% 0	50	2.32

Applications clearly proved financially feasible with appropriate financial details and marketing plans.	**8.00%** 4	**56.00%** 28	**26.00%** 13	**10.00%** 5	**0.00%** 0	50	2.38
Applicant shows evidence of strong support from community, customers, technical providers and others.	**8.00%** 4	**48.00%** 24	**38.00%** 19	**6.00%** 3	**0.00%** 0	50	2.42

Applicant presented a...

Applicant included a...

Applications presented a...

Applications clearly prov...

Applicant shows eviden...

Application identifies...

Applicants presented a...

...lication identifies potential risks or constraints.	**4.08%** 2	**26.53%** 13	**44.90%** 22	**22.45%** 11	**2.04%** 1	49	2.92
...licants presented a realistic scope/size of project compared ...e dollars requested and available.	**10.20%** 5	**69.39%** 34	**14.29%** 7	**6.12%** 3	**0.00%** 0	49	2.16

Q2 In this next section, please provide generalized feedback regarding the grant applications you reviewed - DO NOT reference specific applications. Briefly describe the general characteristics of strong grant applications you reviewed.

Answered: 50   Skipped: 1

Responses	Date
The potential product buyer is well-understood. The applicant is closely acquainted with potential buyers and with distributors.	9/22/2014 1:41 PM
A strong application would address all parts of the application and would be well thought through. They would have contacted others to discuss their ideas and market potential.	9/12/2014 1:49 AM
Strong Support from community, staff etc.	9/4/2014 9:49 AM
They fully understood their business and the needs to move the next level of production.	8/24/2014 10:41 AM
Well organized narrative that directly addressed grant outline / originality / strong support from community / workplan directly correlates with personnel and timeline	8/23/2014 11:41 AM
Stronger applicants were: larger in scope , some had consultants or professionals prepare the applications, unique products for targeted markets, phased in small business approaches, collaborative business models, cash flow statements in appendix, buckets of activities in the work plan, product fills gap in market achieving competitive advantage, summary income statements, and economic and environmental sustainability.	8/22/2014 2:00 PM
It was easy to find that they fit into the top categories of the rubric. They were well thought out with their part of the financing clearly stated. They were plans that would be successful.	8/22/2014 12:12 PM
Applications followed the instructions provided and detailed clearly and concisely the various aspects of the value-added projects.	8/21/2014 3:35 PM
They fully followed instructions.	8/21/2014 2:49 PM
They were clear as to the purpose and they concisely provided all of the relevant detail requested.	8/21/2014 7:36 AM
well thought out, explaining the back story that describes the need of the applicant. The best applications I think had redundant information in some sections, but that worked for me as the reviewer. The best applications also had well developed tie-ins from other organizations/people.	8/21/2014 4:47 AM
The applicants had built up experiences which demonstrated that they had the knowledge and support to succeed. They also very closely followed the directions of the grant proposal, even if it meant repeating information in multiple sections. They provided extensive details and were honest when a skill or support was missing or weak.	8/20/2014 11:26 PM
Clear statement of purpose. Defined outcomes. Clear qualifications for all participants, Good indication of support from all segments. All evaluation criteria addressed to allow for proper scoring.	8/20/2014 12:25 PM
Concise, followed the grant rules and well thought out ways to measure success.	8/20/2014 11:20 AM

Clear work plan with a reasonable budget directly linked to it	8/20/2014 11:01 AM
Well written project description that doesn't assume the reader knows about the project's technical aspects, thorough and well thought through budget with detailed plans that include accountability and costs for specific tasks, and a reasonable request that doesn't use "convoluted" methods of accounting for match funds (or materials/labor in kind).	8/20/2014 8:14 AM
well written, clear focus, realistic goals	8/19/2014 10:22 PM
They clearly answered the required questions.	8/19/2014 9:24 PM

Some referenced that they had applied and received grant funding in previous years and those applications were well thought out and thorough. Experience provide to be the stronger applications.	8/19/2014 5:12 PM
Feasible plans, lots of outside support, clear goals, financial component in line with true costs	8/19/2014 4:02 PM
Those that had not necessarily the greatest impact but an impact on the greatest number of people	8/19/2014 3:26 PM
They are well justified. Many applicants didn't know how to set up the background and information I needed to review the project well. Applicants should show the need for these projects more in the beginning. Some idea of the possible market potential. Many times this was lacking.	8/19/2014 2:35 PM
Easy to follow. Strong support from end users, service providers, etc. Detailed budget narrative. Addressed assumptions.	8/19/2014 1:26 PM
Thorough yet concise, Well organized	8/19/2014 1:18 PM
Organized and clear documentation.	8/19/2014 12:19 PM
The stronger applications were very clear on how grant funds were to be used and the goals of the project were	8/19/2014 10:47 AM
The strong applications were clear and concise with a creative and realistic plan, clear and strong support, a detailed and feasible budget and strong desire to make it happen.	8/19/2014 10:45 AM
The strong applications were the one's that were not long and wordy. They got to the point of their application, made their case, told how much and how the money would be used; then, presented a strong case for evaluation.	8/19/2014 10:33 AM
Well organized, clear writing,	8/19/2014 10:26 AM
The strongest grant applications stand out because they reflect the authenticity of the applicant. By this I mean that the applicant conveys a thorough working knowledge of the subject matter addressed in the proposal and validates their own qualifications for taking on the work. No wishful thinking or romantic projections - just real farmers ready to move their operation to the next level.	8/19/2014 10:02 AM
Well written and easy to read with sufficient details provided when appropriate.	8/19/2014 9:57 AM
Applications that stood out had a realistic workplace and budget, aligned tasks/goals with impacts and outcomes for both value added venture and the end users, had a clear understanding of target market/customer base, and strong letters of support and commitments from project partners, end users. Also were able to demonstrate a clear need for their business and innovation/contribution to agriculture beyond the farm gate.	8/19/2014 9:55 AM

Overall, the applicants presented very well	8/19/2014 9:54 AM
The strong applications began with a clear statement of what they plan to do and why. This was followed by a work plan that stated tasks, personnel responsible, and budget allocations for these tasks. Finally, the letters of commitment from buyers and other supporters were included.	8/19/2014 9:51 AM
The strongest grant applications explained relationships from several other producers, consumers, and community partners. This demonstrated that the applicant had spent time developing the work plan and had a strong support network.	8/19/2014 9:42 AM
applicants did a good job presenting information given the format	8/19/2014 9:37 AM
A strong group of highly qualified management and available workers. Also when willing to provide matching funds in money instead of in-kind work or product seemed to lead to a stronger application.	8/19/2014 9:27 AM
College educated, has a strong interest in the success of their program. Has a step by step outline that is required for the success of this program. Surrounds themselves with individuals will help in their idea success.	8/19/2014 9:10 AM
The applications were all over the board. Two of the 16 were very well done and showed the promise of the Value Added Project, most were done on a wing and a prayer and 2 to 3 should not even have gotten to the review process, they did not have a clue, or thought because of high amounts of acreage they should be funded on that alone.	8/19/2014 7:44 AM
The best ones were the ones that accurately described what their project was all about in the summary. That summary is critical; if they've thought through all the nuances of their project, it'll be eveident in that summary.	8/19/2014 7:41 AM
Evidence that there is a market for the product, strong support from the community, qualified collaborators, matching funds.	8/19/2014 7:29 AM
They detailed how and who was producing the crop as well as who was adding value and who were potential buyers. The best applications had letters of interest from potential buyers, not just letters of support.	8/19/2014 7:10 AM

Strong grant applications developed a good narrative of project need, impact, and benefits. The best applications were strengthened by letters of support and/or collaboration from third-party professionals.	8/19/2014 7:07 AM
Understood the purpose of the VAGP program. Addressed the application questions	8/19/2014 7:04 AM
Well organized and being concise was most important. Reviewer should not have to get frustrated trying to find and extract essential info.	8/19/2014 6:27 AM
Well written and concise	8/19/2014 3:45 AM
Follow guidelines; provide enough detail to judge likelihood of success and level of importance.	8/19/2014 12:49 AM
Followed RFA guidelines, Provided adequate documentation of stakeholders and collaborators participation.	8/18/2014 11:13 PM
Detailed yet concise. Applicant had clearly thought out proposal, and had carefully read grant application/requirements	8/18/2014 11:03 PM
short concise message with requested funds tied very closely to specific need or part of the application.	8/18/2014 9:05 AM

Q3 Briefly describe the most common weaknesses you observed in the grant applications you received.

Answered: 50   Skipped: 1

Responses	Date
Applicants who have little idea of how their product is to be manufactured and almost no idea of how it will be sold.	9/22/2014 1:41 PM
Some applications did not present a great budget and could have put more effort into that area.	9/12/2014 1:49 AM
Measurements of success were often unclear.	9/4/2014 9:49 AM
The outcome measurements were not always realistic but rather more optimistic.	8/24/2014 10:41 AM
Poor narrative / lack of supporting documentation, especially support letters / pie-in-the-sky plans without good documentation	8/23/2014 11:41 AM
No work plan or income statement or cash flow summaries, no letters of support, no testing of the product in the market, no buckets of activities, and mimimal description of actual process.	8/22/2014 2:00 PM
When the financing was not clearly stated or they tried to be too creative in where to get money to fund the matching funds. Also, when an applicant had an idea, but it had not been well thought through and planned.	8/22/2014 12:12 PM
Details of projects were obscured in unneeded or unrelated verbage and/or extraneous information; projects were not innovative, i.e., often simply requesting funding for routine production costs, etc.	8/21/2014 3:35 PM
Many of the projects don't pay attention to environmental sustainability. This should be an explicit review criterion.	8/21/2014 2:49 PM
There were a few that had bad grammar and spelling. A couple did not provide all of the information requested.	8/21/2014 7:36 AM
Overly simplified or just not well thought out. Too little information to understand how the project would work. Little or no information about project collaborators and especially how or why they would contribute to the project. Some apps had too little detail about the budget.	8/21/2014 4:47 AM
Most common weakness in poorly ranked proposals was that they appeared to be overly ambitious. The applicants had a great idea, but didn't demonstrated they had experience or existing capital to make it succeed. The details were too thin to make me believe in them.	8/20/2014 11:26 PM
unclear value added process. not all evaluation criteria are addressed.	8/20/2014 12:25 PM
Poorly itemized budget and weak marketing plan.	8/20/2014 11:20 AM
Lack of information and not directly answering the questions	8/20/2014 11:01 AM
Poorly written -- incomplete thoughts, inadequate details or descriptions, generic budgets without details on tasks to be accomplished, responsible parties for each task, task costs, and/or inadequately thought through breakdown of tasks, and implausibility of proposed tasking. For example, it is simply impossible for one person to accomplish everything (or nearly everything) in a typical proposal.	8/20/2014 8:14 AM

unrealistic goals, lack of expertise in business areas or lack of appropriately consultants	8/19/2014 10:22 PM
WC apps that were not required to include a feasibility study or business plan rarely cited findings/documentation from these documents or any estimated financials or third-party data to support the application.	8/19/2014 9:24 PM
Assuming higher values in return is common. Ag production is volatile when you are reliant on weather and growing conditions. Not every year will produce a boom crop.	8/19/2014 5:12 PM
Poor definition of background, poorly planned outline fo work to do, poor financial outline.	8/19/2014 4:02 PM
Budget itemization	8/19/2014 3:26 PM
Again, there were many applicants who didn't make the case for their potential market.	8/19/2014 2:35 PM

Budget narrative lacked sufficient detail. Obvious assumptions that are not addressed. Not paying attention to the proposal criteria (e.g., X quantity of end-user commitments). "Cobbled together" feel.	8/19/2014 1:26 PM
Form letters of support	8/19/2014 1:18 PM
Goal of project and supporting documentation not matching.	8/19/2014 12:19 PM
Work plans could have been more specific as to what was to be accomplished; who was responsible for each task and the specific budget as well as the time frames for each task..	8/19/2014 10:47 AM
Redundant information that you had to sift through multiple times, unrealistic financial projections and the worst is a desire to demonize competitors that chose to use a different methodology - ie commercial vs organic.	8/19/2014 10:45 AM
As with most panels upon which I sit, for multiple agencies, applicants tend to try to put a square peg into a round hole. that is, they have something in mind they want to do, then try to figure a way to make the federal program fit their plan, not the intent and purpose of the funds.	8/19/2014 10:33 AM
Some are not easy to read (hand written), sometimes extra material included that does not seem relevant	8/19/2014 10:26 AM
I wouldn't call it a weakness, but there are a sizable number of applicants who are new or relatively new to agriculture who do not have a particularly strong proposal to differentiate themselves. I don't fault people for trying to access public resources to improve their farm operations - the commitment in and of itself is commendable. However, VAPG resources are very limited and I tend to reward farmers with more skin in the game who also convey keen insight into what success will actually require. I do respect the more humble proposals and have never - after many, many reviews - found one that I did not consider valid or legitimate in its intentions.	8/19/2014 10:02 AM
Poor grammar and math coupled with typos in the context of an application that did not fully address application requirements.	8/19/2014 9:57 AM
In general proposals had a strong workplan, though fell short when it came to aligning marketing and sales goals with target audience, rationale. Wanted to see more evidence of understanding of customer/end user perspective, whether it's testimonials, surveys, etc…or if a new project/market area, some general assumptions about what to expect, how will reach audience/rationale. Personnel/work plans were vague, lacked justification for budget/project needs.	8/19/2014 9:55 AM
Some of the budgetary information was conflicting	8/19/2014 9:54 AM

By far, the most common weakness was extensive philosophical justification for something associated with the product that was not actually the product (e.g., organically grown, homegrown, local). This kind of "lifestyle" statement is not appropriate in a business discussion and detracts from the true value of the product or service. Another weakness is over-valuing of a person's time or expertise for work that is not extremely technical nor unique.	8/19/2014 9:51 AM
Lack of detail or clear explanation was the most common weakness in the applications I reviewed. Even a good idea seemed less likely to succeed if the applicant failed to explain the budget, community support, or other plans.	8/19/2014 9:42 AM
better guidelines from the granting agency would make it easier to review these applications. There are a lot of "required" pieces of information that are not needed to understand the technical merit of proposals so that we had to wade through a lot of paper work to get to the actual proposal. Clearly marking the actual proposal and the supporting documents would make it easier to review the proposals	8/19/2014 9:37 AM
Unprepared staffing and unrealistic views of market for the finished product.	8/19/2014 9:27 AM
Think they can write the grant by themselves, and usually gets lost in the details. Starts out with a good idea, but usually does have all the ducks lined up.	8/19/2014 9:10 AM
While they briefly identified adding more profit to the VAP product they did not compare to the cost of the process to see if there was actually a profit to be had or if the cost of the change would over ride the possible gain.	8/19/2014 7:44 AM
Surprisingly to me, I thought the weaker ones came from the ones who hired a consultant. Some of the consultants used their jargon, which assumes we all understand their terminology. ALSO -- oh my goodness, people need to decrease their need to bury us under a lot of words. If the project is worthy, they really do not need to add fluff to convince us.	8/19/2014 7:41 AM
Lack of evidence that the market is strong for the product they are proposing.	8/19/2014 7:29 AM

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Did not discuss who was producing the crop or how the crop was going to be produced. Applicants in their first year of crop production had very weak track record of their ability to produce the crop to provide the raw product to add value to. Weak applications did not have an indication that anyone was interested in buying their product once value was added.	8/19/2014 7:10 AM
Lack of third-party support, unclear budget including matching funds, incomplete work plans.	8/19/2014 7:07 AM
Did not fill application with unnecessary papers, and data, much did not apply only made it more difficult to wade through. Did not understand the purpose of the VAPG grant	8/19/2014 7:04 AM
Poor budget breakouts in many cases. In most cases In Kind contributions could not be substantiated. Was just listed as a general figure. Formats varied for the apps, I was constantly looking for apps to have used the same format and they didn't.	8/19/2014 6:27 AM
Too wordy and a tendency to repeat same facts over and over	8/19/2014 3:45 AM
Did not have third party support; did not have demonstrated market; did not speak in detail about budget items	8/19/2014 12:49 AM
Poorly written and exceed page limits. Not following RFA, , lack of critical documents.	8/18/2014 11:13 PM
Appeared hastily put together, assumed reviewer could fill gaps, had not done market research and/or did not reference third-party studies, etc.	8/18/2014 11:03 PM

lack of market evidence such as 'Letters of Intent' or meaningful market analysis, to much blue sky on market potential..	8/18/2014 9:05 AM

Q4 How many years have you been a reviewer?

Answered: 50   Skipped: 1
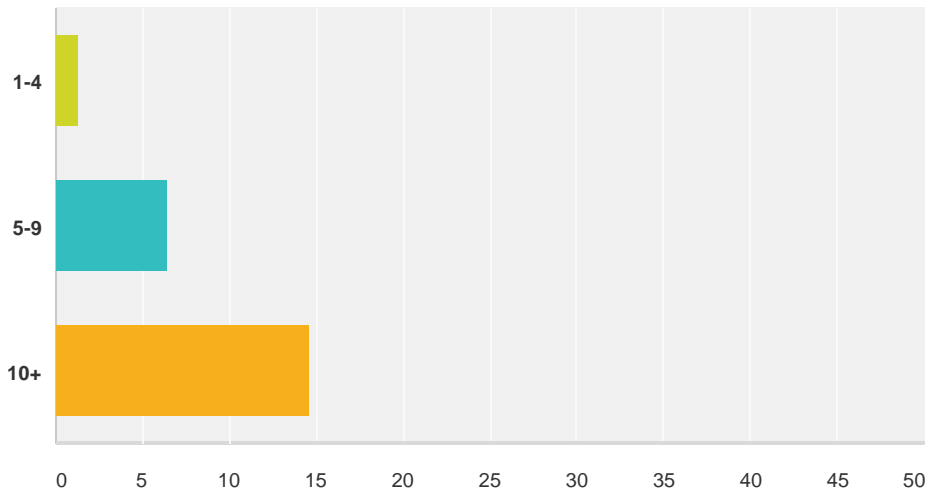
Choices	Average Number	Total Number	Responses
	1	47	36
	6	45	7
	15	102	7
pondents: 50			

1-4	Date
4	9/22/2014 1:41 PM
1	9/12/2014 1:49 AM
1	9/4/2014 9:49 AM
1	8/24/2014 10:41 AM
1	8/23/2014 11:41 AM
1	8/22/2014 2:00 PM
1	8/22/2014 12:12 PM
1	8/21/2014 3:35 PM
1	8/21/2014 7:36 AM
1	8/21/2014 4:47 AM

1	8/20/2014 11:26 PM
1	8/20/2014 11:20 AM
1	8/20/2014 11:01 AM
1	8/19/2014 10:22 PM
1	8/19/2014 5:12 PM

1	8/19/2014 4:02 PM
1	8/19/2014 3:26 PM
3	8/19/2014 1:26 PM
1	8/19/2014 1:18 PM
1	8/19/2014 12:19 PM
2	8/19/2014 10:26 AM
1	8/19/2014 9:57 AM
1	8/19/2014 9:55 AM
1	8/19/2014 9:54 AM
4	8/19/2014 9:51 AM
1	8/19/2014 9:42 AM
1	8/19/2014 9:37 AM
1	8/19/2014 9:27 AM
1	8/19/2014 7:41 AM
1	8/19/2014 7:29 AM
1	8/19/2014 7:10 AM
1	8/19/2014 7:07 AM
3	8/19/2014 7:04 AM
1	8/19/2014 6:27 AM
1	8/18/2014 11:13 PM
1	8/18/2014 11:03 PM

5-9	Date
7	8/20/2014 12:25 PM
6	8/20/2014 8:14 AM
8	8/19/2014 2:35 PM
6	8/19/2014 10:45 AM
7	8/19/2014 10:02 AM
5	8/19/2014 3:45 AM
6	8/18/2014 9:05 AM
10+	**Date**
10	8/21/2014 2:49 PM
10	8/19/2014 9:24 PM
11	8/19/2014 10:47 AM
40	8/19/2014 10:33 AM
11	8/19/2014 9:10 AM
10	8/19/2014 7:44 AM
10	8/19/2014 12:49 AM

Q5 If you have been a reviewer for longer than one year, what is the biggest change you have noted over time in the applications you reviewed?

Answered: 30   Skipped: 21

Responses	Date
Applications are getting stronger. The point rubric system designed by USDA is very, very helpful.	9/22/2014 1:41 PM
n/a	9/12/2014 1:49 AM
NA	9/4/2014 9:49 AM
This was my first VAPG panel. I've been on at least 20 panels. I expected to to review as a panel of some sort before submission. So this was new to me.	8/24/2014 10:41 AM
don't think I've seen a lot of change	8/21/2014 2:49 PM

n/a	8/20/2014 11:26 PM
The applications were more thoroughly completed in the evaluation criteria than before.	8/20/2014 12:25 PM
NA	8/20/2014 11:01 AM
The scope and range of the types of projects being proposed has expanded. Simultaneously, the quality of the proposals has seemed to decline.	8/20/2014 8:14 AM
The application process has become so tedious, I believe a farmer cannot practically complete the application process and expect to compete successfully without RD or third-party assistance. The application package has become excessively focused on eligibility. Some years it seems the applicant must state and restate eligibility. This is magnified when an applicant applies on grants.gov or uses the RD-supplied template, I've seen applicants respond to questions they did not have to answer (ex producer group answering co-op questions) because they got hung up trying to answer all the questions. The one-size fits all application template can also lead to confusion at times when reviewing the applications especially when the app is 100+ pages. These comments also apply to the short application. It seems the VAPG program has strayed from original intent with the inclusion of "local", "organic" or GMO-free. With some of these newer eligible activities, it seems like there are more applicants that might be trying to game the program. It is ironic that one year projects that added value by changing the physical state of the commodity were eligible for bonus points.	8/19/2014 9:24 PM
n/a	8/19/2014 5:12 PM
n/a	8/19/2014 3:26 PM
They have become less narrative and more prescriptive. I'd like to have a bit more narrative about the background in the beginning of the application. "Why do you think this project is warranted in your area?"	8/19/2014 2:35 PM
The quality and quantity is consistently increasing.	8/19/2014 1:26 PM
Overall, the quality of the applications are getting better each year. There seems to be more community support for the projects and application packages are getting more voluminous.	8/19/2014 10:47 AM
The are much better organized and easier to compare since most use the template.	8/19/2014 10:45 AM
the best applications are the one written locally. that has always been the case. too many applicants pay for a "cookie cutter" consultant company who write to the technical aspects of the NOFA - not the innovation or local application of the project funds.	8/19/2014 10:33 AM
Some improvement in quality	8/19/2014 10:26 AM
The pool of proposals has improved over time and top quality proposals have become exceptional. The VAPG model of agriculture is gaining momentum. When properly executed, it works for farmers, it works for consumers and now USDA is more supportive than ever. As a result, the bar for proposals has been elevated significantly and top tier applicants demonstrate a very thorough and convincing knowledge of production as well as marketing. I also see fewer of the more generic promotion campaigns from commodity style groups and more boots on the ground game plans for successful commercial operations.	8/19/2014 10:02 AM
N/A	8/19/2014 9:54 AM
The applications have improved in that the purposes are stated more concisely and the writers generally included logical numbers in the work plan.	8/19/2014 9:51 AM

n/a	8/19/2014 9:42 AM
Grading of each grant has actually got easier. The spread sheets are a great help.	8/19/2014 9:10 AM
The Quality of application is either good or horrible, few in between	8/19/2014 7:44 AM
n/a	8/19/2014 7:29 AM
NA	8/19/2014 7:10 AM
need to be filter better at the sate. Quality has not improved in time I have reviewed grants	8/19/2014 7:04 AM
Excessive verbage	8/19/2014 3:45 AM
Not much really.	8/19/2014 12:49 AM
the template has made it easier to review - unless uneccesary text is not removed. I would suggest that applicant text should be a different font or even different color.	8/18/2014 9:05 AM

Q6 If you could identify one thing that would make the reviewing process easier, what would it be?

Answered: 44   Skipped: 7

Responses	Date
I feel the process is very sound.	9/22/2014 1:41 PM
Perhaps just sending the information we will be reviewing instead a the whole long application, which takes awhile to skim through to find the relevant sections to our review.	9/12/2014 1:49 AM
A clearer definition of value added. I expected that value added meant a physical change in the commodity where as AMS's definition is also including value added for marketing.	8/24/2014 10:41 AM
A generic, blank chart for comparison purposes so that we all use the same format. I was concerned that my scoring might vary from other reviewers just because I made my own comparison chart.	8/23/2014 11:41 AM
On the application template list the items we review in the exact same order and using the same language such as economic sustainability. We also need a summary of cash flow and income statements to better understand the projects.	8/22/2014 2:00 PM
I understand that computer problems arise, but being able to log in to the system when needed is really nice!	8/22/2014 12:12 PM
Possibly eliminate or reduce amount of application paperwork unrelated to application ranking, e.g., environmental reviews and similar "checklist" type pages that were included with applications.	8/21/2014 3:35 PM
I think you've done a nice job of making the review criteria, forms etc. user-friendly. It perplexes me when proposals leave out required information - a great idea goes unfunded because they didn't put their proposal together well. Do you provide models to producers of good proposals? I think that would be helpful.	8/21/2014 2:49 PM
A checklist of information required could be helpful, although I made my own.	8/21/2014 7:36 AM
I had a couple of questions about how the budgets would work, and didn't always understand "in-kind" donations of product or labor and how the applicants could afford such provisions.	8/21/2014 4:47 AM
Make the spreadsheet an online form. The excel sheet was clumsy.	8/20/2014 11:26 PM
Nothing. It is working well for me.	8/20/2014 12:25 PM
Example step-by-step practical procedure of reviewing a grant from the initial registering as a grant revewer, grant reviewer training and rules, to turning it in via a ppt presentation.	8/20/2014 11:20 AM
A simple flow chart of the major steps and what's expected at each step	8/20/2014 11:01 AM
More clearly define the criteria for rating an application. For example, if an application should never receive a 0 for any criteria, either don't include 0 in the possible score range or define 0 in such a way that allows for its use.	8/20/2014 8:14 AM
I would simplify the template and create one template for each applicant type. I would say you could include PL and WC in the same template for each applicant type. Either that or make a smart application capable of producing a concise printed report.	8/19/2014 9:24 PM

Timing / schedule of review period. The delays were unforeseen and came at a time that was much busier for me than originally scheduled.	8/19/2014 5:12 PM
As each application has its own basis it would be difficult to come up with an easier way	8/19/2014 4:02 PM
Follow an organized outline from introduction to attachments consistently within all grants.	8/19/2014 3:26 PM
You all have made the applications more standardized over time. That has been a really good change for the reviewers. It used to be that Working Capital and Planning grants had different criteria. I can't think of anything really. The process was fairly smooth for me.	8/19/2014 2:35 PM
For a survey like this, I would administer it closer to the close of the reviews. My minds has forgotten most of the details and trends that would have been evident months ago.	8/19/2014 1:26 PM
Hyperlinks within the document to hope to the page referenced and then back again. Would have cut hours off the process.	8/19/2014 12:19 PM
The applications need to be more streamlined. It seems that there is a considerable amount of unnecessary documentation in some of the packages.	8/19/2014 10:47 AM
Encourage them to get rid of the samples and basic template directions and just provide us with their information under the respective headings. Minimize duplication.	8/19/2014 10:45 AM
in the training curriculum and on-line. It would REALLY help if sample evaluation statements were made available and discussed. that is, "what is a good "evaluative" statement - as compared to a note that something was or was not included... and, from the perspective of USDA/VAPG - for example, I just completed another review for OCS, they were more interested in "adjectives" than my assessment of the application.. so, my intent in the response is to make sure that the comments and evaluations we send back are useful and productive for the VAPG program. for the long term best interest of the program, we need to make sure that the projects funded have solid evaluation measures to report back for appropriations.	8/19/2014 10:33 AM
The reviewers should NOT have to deal with eligibility issues-- that should be determined prior to review. Do not even include information about eligibility, it is too confusing	8/19/2014 10:26 AM
I have had no difficulty as a reviewer and I commend the USDA staff managing this program for their professionalism and courtesy.	8/19/2014 10:02 AM
The spreadsheet format for writing reviews was a little clunky, especially when trying to go back edit/re-write feedback in the space provided. Not sure if there is a different format that can be used.	8/19/2014 9:55 AM
I felt it flowed well	8/19/2014 9:54 AM
Put a summary sheet at the beginning with a paragraph describing the project, type of grant (WC or Planning), and amount requested.	8/19/2014 9:51 AM
Standarized format. Most of the applications followed a standard format and answered each question explicitly in each section. Some of the applications explained the plan as a narrrative and then failed to explicitly answer each section because they assumed it was previously mentioned. Searching for a response was not a good use of the reviewer's time.	8/19/2014 9:42 AM

clearly mark different sections of the submission: supporting documents, actual proposal, letters of support etc.. the proposals I read did not read consistently from proposal to proposal so helping applicants be a bit more linear would be extremely helpful	8/19/2014 9:37 AM
That the grant writer understands that all areas must to fully completed for their request to meet all requirements.	8/19/2014 9:10 AM
Scoring Guidance followed and if 0 is not a point you can assign, make the scale from 1 to 5 instead of 0-5	8/19/2014 7:44 AM
For me, if the apps would have arrived when originally stated. My farming operation in the Spring is pretty labor & thinking intense.	8/19/2014 7:41 AM
If the applications were a little more standard. With some of them I had to hunt for certain criteria and ended up reading most of 80-90 pages.	8/19/2014 7:29 AM
Sticking with the original timeline of reviewing. Be sure states review applications to be sure they are complete. Perhaps states could be charged a fee for incomplete applications that are passed forward?	8/19/2014 7:10 AM
Require electronic grant preparation- handwritten applications were difficult to read, especially after copying.	8/19/2014 7:07 AM
Same as 5. Sort out poor quality grants at state level. I had several which should not have been reviewed this year.	8/19/2014 7:04 AM
Grant apps should have a much better Executive Summary section to enable the reviewer to get a clear picture of the proposed project right at the outset. Instead of continually paging through the app looking for info, there should be an index also. II felt like I spent 50% of the time trying to just find info in the app, instead of using that time to evaluate and analyze the info.	8/19/2014 6:27 AM
STOP EXTENDING DEADLINES! When time's up, time's up; next time start earlier.	8/19/2014 3:45 AM
Provide more applications per applicant even if it limits number of reviewers. "Set up" time to do it right is not insignificant but monetary compensation is not enough to warrant reviews unless one is really in need or interested in learning from the application about new ideas.	8/19/2014 12:49 AM

Have the applications written in the order of the reviewing criteria; try to have all the information for each criteria located in one area of the application	8/18/2014 11:03 PM
See #5 - applicant text in a different font and color than the template, and extra text removed.	8/18/2014 9:05 AM

Q7 Any additional feedback?

Answered: 32   Skipped: 19

Responses	Date
Nicely done. Thank you for this opportunity.	8/24/2014 10:41 AM
It was interesting to note that some were in it for the money and others were in it for the project ideas. I haven't reviewed the list of grants that were approved, but I hope that it reflects my take on the types of applicants.	8/23/2014 11:41 AM
The environmental sustainability of all projects should absolutely be included as one of the evaluation criteria. I would suggest changing the application template to be more user friendly and consistent as a system for applicants and reviewers. Make it easier for applications without business backgrounds to compley with the requirements to get higher points. Include a checklist for applicants such as ..has 3 letters of support. Have reviewers like myself look at an edited version of your applicant templates before next review period.	8/22/2014 2:00 PM
I enjoyed being a reviewer and reading everyone's ideas. I'm glad that most of the ones I reviewed were funded.	8/21/2014 7:36 AM
This was my first year reviewing and I found it very enjoyable. I learned a lot about what makes a good or poor grant proposal that will be useful to my own proposal writing. It was difficult to answer question #1 accurately: the eleven applications that I reviewed ranged from completely unacceptable 25 % to extremely fundable 25%. The remaining 50% were fundable, but had some shortcomings or I considered them more risky because of the lack of staff experience.	8/20/2014 11:26 PM
It was a lot of work, but I enjoyed and learned something while reviewing each grant.	8/20/2014 11:20 AM
Interesting process and it is impressive to see the breadth of activity and creative folk from across the country	8/20/2014 11:01 AM
There are several requirements built into the application itself that result in information being repeated several times in the narrative. The length of the narrative response could be reduced by reviewing and rewriting the application to eliminate the repetition of requested information.	8/20/2014 8:14 AM
During many recent years, the application and review process has encountered numerous delays which potentially damage both the VAPG and agency's credibility and leads to additional external scrutiny of both. Ex. apps submitted end of August 2011 were not announced as approved until April 2012. The application extension this year was announced a couple weeks after the initial February deadline and the CFR extension notice didn't provide enough time for any veteran to start and complete an app without some sort of unofficial heads up the extension was in the works.	8/19/2014 9:24 PM
Since this was my first time as a reviewer, I am not sure if the deadline dates gets moved around every year or the Farm Bill budget issues changed the scheduling in 2014. I wonder if in previous year the scheduled deadlines were more static.	8/19/2014 5:12 PM
A wonderful opportunity	8/19/2014 3:26 PM
Thank you for the opportunity to be a reviewer for VAPG.	8/19/2014 1:26 PM
It would be nice to be compensated for grant applications that we discovered were not eligible (especially after deemed "qualified" by state offices). Of the grant applications I reviewed, the one that consumed the most time was one that was eventually disqualified. It took so long to read though the app (multiple times, look up the qualifications, search for information that may have been misread/misplaced, email the federal office, etc.) only to find that it was not eligible and I wasn't compensated for reviewing it and discovering the flaws in it.	8/19/2014 1:18 PM

Some of the applications should not have been submitted by the state. I was shocked that certain applications made it through the State review process.	8/19/2014 12:19 PM
Overall, I have really enjoyed reviewing the applications and am continually amazed at some of the ideas the producers have for their products.	8/19/2014 10:47 AM
Timeline was a little challenging this year just because the dates kept changing but overall it is a pretty well-run machine.	8/19/2014 10:45 AM

Since I do not know the funds available for proposal evaluation, most panels upon which I serve have at least three reviewers, each of which independently reviews and scores the application, then the Chair moderates a discussion in which the scores are presented and the strength/weakness outlined. we reach a consensus on the score and the wording of the strengths/weaknesses noted. I do not pretend to be an expert in every field and I teach grant writing, so I am fairly comfortable giving my assessment. But, in a lot of instances, one can misread or completely miss something in an application than a colleague could point out. that happens all the time. and, I enjoy meeting new people and learning new things... Wado (thank you in Cherokee) Charly	8/19/2014 10:33 AM
I think that VAPG is a great USDA success story. As I said above, this type of direct producer-to-consumer marketing works very well and provides a viable commercial path forward for many, many farms which do not see one down the conventional road. The VAPG has been very efficient in allocating resources and provides an excellent return on investment.	8/19/2014 10:02 AM
are you asking as a reviewer for VAPG program only?	8/19/2014 9:57 AM
A review criteria to consider adding to proposals would be a question around, In what ways will your business/value added venture be sustained beyond the life cycle of this grant? or how does your proposed project contribute/impact economic, social, and ecological sustainability? Rationale for this in the assessment would be to help applicants think through what next when federal grant funds go away, and what the benefit of their product/venture is beyond the farm gate.	8/19/2014 9:55 AM
No	8/19/2014 9:54 AM
Thank you for including me among the reviewers again this year. This activity has helped me in our own local business assistance projects through Extension.	8/19/2014 9:51 AM
I would love to receive notification of the final VAPG recipients.	8/19/2014 9:42 AM
Every year VAGP seems to show improvements in the quality of grant writing and grading requirements.	8/19/2014 9:10 AM
I support VAPG and always enjoy seeing the innovation on keeping producers in Agriculture by this process	8/19/2014 7:44 AM
Since it was my first year, if anyone wanted to give me feedback on my reviews, that could help me be a better reviewer. I appreciated this opportunity; I learned a lot from my fellow innovative farmers.	8/19/2014 7:41 AM
Enjoyed the process!	8/19/2014 7:29 AM
Look forward to being a reviewer next year.	8/19/2014 6:27 AM
Would glady do it again	8/19/2014 3:45 AM
no, good work administratively; you are a pleasure to work with.	8/19/2014 12:49 AM

Panelist had to wait nearly six weeks to receive honorarium; due in part to others that did not meet timelines - this is unacceptable and unfair	8/18/2014 11:13 PM
shorten up total time from deadline to announcement. and get it back on a predictable schedule so it is easier to allocate time to review.	8/18/2014 9:05 AM