

# VERMONT AGENCY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD & MARKETS WORKING LANDS ENTERPRISE INITIATIVE SERVICE PROVIDER GRANT

**FISCAL YEAR 2024 REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS (RFA)**

## KEY DATES

**Publication Date:** September 6, 2023

**Application Opens:** September 6, 2023

**Grant Application Webinar:** September 13, 2023 11:00 AM–12:00 PM

[Register for the webinar](#)

**Application Deadline:** October 16, 2023 at 8:00 PM

**Award Notification:** December 2023

**Estimated Project Start:** January 2024

## CONTENTS

Contact Information .....	2
Section 1: Overview & Eligibility .....	3
Section 2: Application Process & Content .....	6
Section 3: Application Review & Scoring.....	12
Section 4: Grant Management & Reporting.....	14
Appendix A: Program Provisions.....	16



## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

### **PROGRAM QUESTIONS**

Clare Salerno

[Clare.Salerno@vermont.gov](mailto:Clare.Salerno@vermont.gov)

802-917-2637

### **WEBGRANTS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

Diana Ferguson

[Diana.Ferguson@vermont.gov](mailto:Diana.Ferguson@vermont.gov)

802-622-4094

Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets staff can assist applicants during State of Vermont business hours, Monday–Friday, 7:45 AM to 4:30 PM. Please note that immediate assistance may not be available shortly before deadlines.

## **WEBGRANTS**

Applications for this program must be submitted through the [WebGrants](#) grants management system at [agriculturegrants.vermont.gov](http://agriculturegrants.vermont.gov).

### **REGISTRATION**

If you're new to WebGrants, submit the [WebGrants Registration Form](#). It usually takes about two business days to process registrations. Make sure to register for an account well before the application deadline.

### **SUBMISSION POLICY**

Applicants must follow all instructions in this request for applications (RFA), including the dates and times for submitting applications. The Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets will only consider the last complete submission through WebGrants before the deadline as the official application. We cannot accept incomplete or late applications after the deadline, barring exceptional circumstances. The WebGrants system will not accept applications after the deadline.

### **SUBMISSION CONFIRMATION**

After you've submitted your application successfully, you'll be taken to a page confirming your submission. This page will have an Application ID number. You'll also get an email confirming your submission.

# SECTION 1: OVERVIEW & ELIGIBILITY

## PROGRAM PURPOSE

Approximately 20% of Vermont's working landscape is used for agricultural purposes, and 80% is forested. Vermont prospers and its unique sense of place thrives because of intelligent investments in the people and enterprises that comprise its farm, food, and forest-based systems. Strong community engagement and support for the farm and forest sectors leads to enhanced quality of life for Vermont citizens and working lands business owners.

[Vermont Act 142](#) of 2011, An act relating to preserving Vermont's working landscape, created the Working Lands Enterprise Fund (WLEF) and the Working Lands Enterprise Board (WLEB). The WLEB is made up of:

- Private sector members throughout the agriculture and forest supply chains
- Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets staff
- Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation staff
- Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development staff
- Vermont Housing & Conservation Board staff
- Vermont Economic Development Authority staff
- Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund staff

## HISTORY OF SUCCESS TO DATE

Since its formation in August 2012, the Working Lands Enterprise Board (WLEB) has awarded over \$15 million in grant funds to over 400 grantees, leveraging more than \$26 million in matching funds. For lists of previous awards, visit the [Funded Projects](#) page.

## ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS

Service provider organizations must be based in Vermont and registered with the Secretary of State at the time of application submission. All structures are eligible (e.g., Partnerships, Limited Liability Corporations, Sole Proprietorships, Cooperatives, Corporations, S Corporations, L3Cs, B Corporations, and/or non-profits that are involved in the support of production of agriculture and/or forest products). Applicants must be in compliance with all state regulations (e.g., water quality, taxes, child support) and in good standing with the State of Vermont at the time of applying and must remain so during the entire grant period.

Previous recipients of Working Lands Service Provider Grants are eligible to re-apply for funding during Fiscal Year 2024. Applicants who are previous grantees must explain how the proposed project builds on previous work or is a separate project, as well as report on the results of previously funded projects and demonstrate how continued funding will be used to grow or improve the program. Services must be provided to a new cohort of businesses for each funding period. For optional further context about the

history of service providers and the Working Lands Enterprise Board, please see the [WLEI educational paper](#) on this topic.

A service provider organization may only apply to one WLEI grant opportunity per year. Producer associations that provide services to their agriculture or forest industry members should apply for the [Producer Association Development Grant](#). Service provider organizations applying to this opportunity should not apply for a Business Enhancement Grant or Supply Chain Impact Grant in FY 2024. Service provider organizations are not eligible for the ARPA-Funded Primary Producer Impact Grant or the Small Farm Diversification Grant offered this year.

## **ELIGIBLE PROJECTS**

Projects eligible for funding will include the provision of direct technical assistance and/or indirect services to support the development of Vermont-based working lands businesses. Vermont service providers, sub-state regional programs, and organizations are welcome to apply. Ongoing and pilot programs are acceptable, and services may provide support to businesses in any of the following areas:

- Market development, marketing plans, and sales strategies
- Business and financial planning
- Business responses to flooding, COVID-19 and/or other crises
- Enterprise transitions for next generation business owners and post-succession planning
- Access to capital
- Manufacturing efficiencies or process flow
- Business research and development
- Workforce development; professional skills training
- Exploration or expansion of production to address gaps along forest and agriculture supply chains (e.g., packaging, ingredients, etc.), including for substitution of imported items

## **AVAILABLE FUNDS & SOURCE**

Up to \$75,000 from a fiscal year 2024 State of Vermont legislative appropriation

## **MINIMUM & MAXIMUM AWARD**

\$10,000–\$25,000 per award

## **MATCHING REQUIREMENT**

Grant recipients must provide matching funds equal to 100% of the grant award (one-to-one) using **cash** (e.g., funds in the bank, paid staff labor hours toward the project) or **in-kind** items (e.g., donated goods, pro bono services, volunteer labor) that the grantee organization has received from other sources.

Match sources must be identified by the time of application submission and commitments in place by the time of grant agreement signing. Matching funds may not be sourced from other State of Vermont funding opportunities. Under limited circumstances, the matching requirement may be reduced or waived for applicants who demonstrate a clear need for this accommodation.

## **PROJECT LENGTH**

12 months

## SECTION 2: APPLICATION PROCESS & CONTENT

### HOW TO APPLY

Applications must be submitted via the online grants management system, [WebGrants](#), at [agriculturegrants.vermont.gov](http://agriculturegrants.vermont.gov) between Wednesday, September 6, 2023 and Monday, October 16, 2023 at 8:00 PM. Paper applications will not be accepted. Application components are outlined below as they will appear in WebGrants.

For technical instructions on the application submission process, please see the [WebGrants Application Guide](#) at [agriculture.vermont.gov/grants/howtoapply](http://agriculture.vermont.gov/grants/howtoapply).

### STANDARD APPLICATION QUESTIONS

The following four sections are asked to all applicants applying for any grants at the Agriculture Development Division. Questions marked with \* are required.

#### Applicant Information

- Which of the following categories best describes the person/people completing this application? Please select all that apply\*
- Name\*
- Email address\*
- Phone number\*
- Preferred method of communication\*
- Job title\*
- How did you hear about this funding opportunity?\*

#### Applicant's Business/Organization Information

Some questions in this section are optional because they are only applicable to businesses and not service provider or producer associations.

- Legal name of the organization\*
- Business or organization type\*
- Street address\*
- Town/City\*
- County\*
- Number of full-time employees, including owner(s)\*
- Number of part-time and seasonal employees
- Total number of volunteer hours that benefit your organizations in a typical year
- Years in operation\*
- Provide the organization's website if one exists
- Share any social media handles the organization uses
- Is the organization a farm, forestry or other land-based operation?\*
- If yes, how many acres are currently in production?
- How many acres, if any, are currently in conservation?

- How many acres of leased or rented land does the organization use for production and/or processing?
- Have you applied for or received a grant through the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets in the past 5 years?\*

### **Optional Business/Organization Information**

- What is the applicant business/organization's most recent annual operating budget?
- What is the median hourly wage for all employees?
- Does the organization provide any of the following benefits to its employees and/or volunteers?
- Does the organization hire H-2A farmworkers?

### **Voluntary Demographic Information**

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets is collecting voluntary demographic information to better serve our constituents and inform the development of future grant programs. Please click the link to be taken to complete this anonymous survey: <https://forms.office.com/g/dp8zqWrgxL>

The demographic survey is hosted through a separate online platform to ensure that any information collected through the survey cannot be linked in any way to your WebGrants application. Funding decisions are based solely on the information provided in your WebGrants application. Any information collected through the demographic survey is anonymous and will only be used to help improve the programming and services offered by the Development Division of the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets.

## **WORKING LANDS ENTERPRISE INITIATIVE APPLICATION QUESTIONS**

### **Project Information**

- Project title that briefly summarizes proposal (150-character limit)
- Project category (drop down menu)
- General sector(s) served by this project (agriculture, forestry, both)
- Amount of Working Lands grant funds requested (\$)
- Amount of matching funds committed (\$) \*Please note: must equal to or greater than the amount of grant funds requested, through either cash or a combination of cash and in-kind sources
- **Organization Description** (2000-character limit): Describe your organization, including the primary focus areas of your work, key activities, number of staff, years in operation, etc.
- **Project Summary** (2000-character limit): Provide a brief overview of your project, including how requested and matching funds will be used. Explain why your project is being proposed and reference key anticipated impacts.

- How many businesses or individuals do you aim to serve during the project period?
- Describe the core team of individuals who will be involved in the project and their expertise that will contribute to project success.
  - Identify any partner organizations expected to participate in the project and specify their role.
- **Outreach Plan** (2000-character limit): Provide a brief summary of the outreach plan for your project, including how your target audience will be reached and the process for evaluating your outreach efforts.
- If applicable, describe how the proposed project will fill an existing gap(s) in services available to working lands businesses, or will address identified barriers to these businesses' participation in continued education/skill-building programs.
- If applicable, describe how this project will reach historically underserved and/or marginalized communities. Identify strategies you will employ to engage these communities. Examples of historically underserved and/or marginalized communities are people living below the poverty threshold and/or facing food insecurity or homelessness, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, people of color, people with disabilities, veterans, women, etc.
- Describe how you will evaluate the results of your project (e.g., survey participating businesses) (1000-character limit).

### **Previous Funding**

- List additional grants received for this project (not for your organization as a whole) in the past five years, if any.
- Has your organization received a grant(s) from the State of Vermont or from the Federal government in the past?
  - If so, was this grant(s) successfully completed? If not, please indicate why.
  - If your previous funding includes a Working Lands grant, please describe how your proposed project relates to or builds upon your previous project, if applicable (1800-character limit).

### **Goals and Expected Measurable Outcomes**

Enter your project goals into the appropriate field. Enter at least three and not more than five goals. For each goal, enter an indicator of your organization's performance toward that goal (e.g., number of businesses reached). Finally, create a measurable outcome by adding anticipated numbers to your performance measure (e.g., 15 businesses will be trained by December 2024).

Expected measurable outcomes must be discrete and attainable within the 12-month grant period. You are encouraged to include at least two measures of increased well-being or viability for businesses served, such as new markets accessed, work efficiencies, business management skills acquired, etc.

For additional reference, view WLEI's [Goals and Expected Measurable Outcomes](#) page.



Goal	Performance Measure	Expected Measurable Outcome
Example: Forest businesses will learn their cost of production and establish pricing strategies, thus helping them to increase gross profit margins.	Example: Gross profit margins of forest business clients	Example: Forest business clients will, on average, increase gross profit margins by 15% between 2023 and 2024.

### Project Work Plan

Enter at least five project activities into the Project Work Plan table (1000-character limit per field):

- **Project Activity** – List the activities (i.e., milestone tasks) that are necessary to accomplish your project objectives. Include your performance monitoring/data collection activities. If you request funds for travel, these activities must also be included.
- **Personnel/Responsible Parties** – Indicate the project participants who will do the work involved in each activity, including yourself, employees, and/or contractors. Any personnel or contractors referenced in your budget must be included to demonstrate their role and justify associated funds.
- **Estimated Timeline/Completion Date** – Identify your project timeline, including the activity start date and projected completion date. Project activities must be completed within the 12-month grant period ending in January 2025.

Project Activity	Personnel/Responsible Parties	Estimated Timeline/Completion
Example: Advertise one-on-one business planning sessions	Example: Program manager	Example: March 2024 – May 2024

**Budget and Narrative** (1000-character limit for each question):

- Describe your intended use of Working Lands funds. Provide further detail on proposed amounts for all line items, as needed. Costs incurred prior to the signing of the grant agreement are not eligible.
- Match: Indicate whether all matching funds are committed (at the time of application submission). If not, provide your timeline for securing such commitments prior to grant agreement execution.
- Match Waiver: If a match waiver is requested, provide justification here.

- Please describe your intended methods of tracking staff time and expenses associated with the grant.
- If Working Lands funds are not received, explain how this will impact your project, e.g., adjusted scope, lower probability of success, would not happen, and/or an urgent window of opportunity would be missed.
- Describe efforts to fund this project with other sources, and if applicable why those efforts have not been sufficient. Identify other grants/loans you are currently applying for or plan to apply for in conjunction with this one, if any.

**Budget Template:** Enter the dollar amount for each line item of your budget into the appropriate field. Your budget should include any other funding sources supporting the proposed project as matching funds. Up to 10% of requested grant funds may be used for indirect costs (i.e., facilities/administrative costs).

Example Budget Calculations:

- \$20,000 Working Lands grant request x 10% = \$2,000 eligible as indirect costs
- \$20,000 grant request x 100% = \$20,000 minimum cash and/or in-kind match
- \$20,000 request + \$20,000 match amount = \$40,000 total project cost

Identify the source(s) for all matching funds with a timeline for securing these commitments:

- Examples of **cash match** include funds in the bank, third party funds, and applicant labor directly associated with the proposed project
- Examples of **in-kind match** include goods or services provided during the grant period for which no expenditure is made (e.g., contractors, consultants, or equipment provided pro bono, volunteer labor)

Expense Category	Grant Request	Matching		Match Source	Details/Purpose	Total
		Cash	In-Kind			
Salaries/Wages (Personnel)						
Benefits						
Travel						
Supplies						
Contractual						
Other Direct Costs						
Indirect Costs						
TOTAL						

**Additional Attachments** – space provided to upload up to five documents (must be in PDF format)

- At least one letter of support is required to justify the current need for and importance of this project. Additional letters of support are optional.
- Additional documentation is also encouraged, e.g., cost estimates for supplies, contractor fees.

**Signature of Compliance**

- Demonstration of applicant compliance with state regulations and good standing with the State of Vermont – e-signature and date
- Completed [Water Quality Compliance Form](#) upload

## SECTION 3: APPLICATION REVIEW & SCORING

### APPLICATION REVIEW

Working Lands grant funds will be awarded to applicants whose projects benefit agriculture and forest-based businesses through a competitive review process. A committee of Working Lands Enterprise Board (WLEB) members, State agency staff, and industry stakeholders will review submitted applications and make funding recommendations to the full WLEB for final awarding decisions. Applicants will be notified by email of application approval or denial, with specific feedback, in December 2023.

### APPLICATION SCORING

Priority will be given to service provider organizations that are not currently implementing WLEF funded projects or scopes of work at the time of application submission. An application can be strong without scoring highly in all scoring categories. Criteria that will inform scoring of application quality are as follows:

**Quality of Concept and Management Team:** The proposed activities are clear and can be conducted within the 12-month grant period. The proposed activities are a reasonable approach to addressing identified needs. The management team demonstrates previous experience in the sector necessary to conduct the proposed activities. If applicable, a strong board is in place to set priorities and provide oversight of operational leadership. Staff and/or contracted providers are selected at least in part based on relevant operational skill sets, such as marketing, business management, sales development, financial management, or production efficiency. (20 points)

**Expected Measurable Outcomes:** The applicant identifies clear and measurable project outcomes and demonstrates how services to businesses will enhance Vermont's working landscape, with measurable results that may include number of businesses served; and client outcomes such as production efficiencies, changes in annual revenue, product output, marketing skills, financial management skills, and increased and/or retained acres in active forestry or agricultural use. The proposed outcomes are a reasonable result of the activities proposed. (20 points)

**Collaboration:** The applicant demonstrates effective collaboration and leverages partnerships among working lands service providers and other organizations to promote project success. Relationships with statewide networks (nonprofit or for-profit) do not facilitate competition or redundancy with other services. A thoughtful and robust outreach/knowledge sharing strategy is incorporated to support the project. (15 points)

**Demonstrated Project Need:** The proposal demonstrates that there is a credible need for the specified support to be provided to working lands businesses. The need for the work outlined in this proposal is confirmed by letters of support. (15 points)

**Budget:** The proposed budget is clear and reflects realistic, well-planned components, including required matching funds. Budget narrative supports and further details items in budget table. (15 points)

**Engagement, Equity, and Equality:** The applicant demonstrates how this project will reach one or more historically underserved and/or marginalized community(ies). (10 points)

**Financial Need:** The applicant demonstrates financial sustainability of the organization, while showing an evident need for Working Lands Enterprise Initiative funding. Project cannot be fully funded through other sources sought by the applicant. (5 points)

## SECTION 4: GRANT MANAGEMENT & REPORTING

### GRANT AGREEMENT & PAYMENT

Prior to receiving funding, successful applicants must sign a grant agreement with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFAM) indicating their intent to complete the proposed project and authorizing VAAFAM to monitor progress. The grant agreement will include provisions (terms and conditions) set by the State of Vermont as well as any program-specific requirements. Review **Attachment C - Standard State Provisions for Contracts and Grants** (revised 12/15/2017) at [bgs.vermont.gov/purchasing-contracting/forms](https://bgs.vermont.gov/purchasing-contracting/forms) for the most recent state provisions.

Prior to commencement of work and release of any payments, grantees must submit:

1. A current [IRS Form W-9](#) (Request for Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification), signed within the past six months;
2. A certificate of insurance consistent with the requirements set forth in Attachment C of the grant agreement (not required if grantee already has a current certificate of insurance on file with VAAFAM);
3. Documentation that verifies pledged matching funds, as applicable.

### GRANTEE PAYMENT SCHEDULE

Except for the first payment following grant agreement signing, grant payments are based upon project performance and completion of project activities. Progress will be communicated via status reports, which must be approved by the State grant program manager before claims (payment requests) are approved. All claims will be submitted and approved via [WebGrants](#) at [agriculturegrants.vermont.gov](https://agriculturegrants.vermont.gov).

Working Lands grant funds are typically distributed according to the following schedule:

1. Up to 40% of the grant award following signing of the grant agreement, plus submission and approval of an initial claim;
2. Up to an additional 40% of the grant award (80% total) at the mid-point of the project, following completion and approval of the Interim Report demonstrating project progress, and a second claim;
3. Final 20% (or other remaining amount) of the grant award, following submission and approval of the Final Report demonstrating project completion and satisfactory achievement of expected measurable outcomes, and a final claim.

Grantees must maintain documentation of project costs, both those paid with grant funds and with matching funds, throughout the grant period. Accurate expense totals are a required component of status reporting.

### REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Prior to receipt of the second and third grant payments, respectively, grant recipients must complete an Interim Report and Final Report in [WebGrants](#). Reports will include a

narrative of project accomplishments to date, progress toward meeting expected goals and outcomes, a budget table showing amounts of expended grant and matching funds, and high-resolution digital photos in .jpg format that demonstrate project work. Grantees will be expected to collaborate with VAAFM staff to measure the impact of their project on businesses served.

Grantees must be willing to share project details, including successes and challenges, with the public, the WLEB, and the media, which illustrate how the grant is impacting Vermont's working lands economies. This may occur through media inquiries, press events on location, and/or site visits from VAAFM staff, WLEB members, and/or their stakeholder partners.

## APPENDIX A: PROGRAM PROVISIONS

Working Lands Grant agreements are held between the State of Vermont and the business or, where applicable, the business entity. Should the business entity cease to exist, or if the business entity to which this grant is issued becomes inactive, the State may suspend or cancel this Grant immediately, and the State shall be under no obligation to pay or further pay grantee.

Ready to begin work: Grantee must be ready to begin project work immediately following execution of this grant agreement. If grantee anticipates a delay or experiences a delay of more than two months, grantee shall submit to the grant manager via email an explanation for the delay and note the extent to which the delay will/will not impact project completion. Similarly, grantees should submit their initial claim for funds reimbursement within two months of receipt of the grant agreement. An explanation must be sent to the grant administrator if no request for reimbursement is anticipated within the first two months of the grant.

Publicly known and open to inspection: Except for grantee proprietary and personal identifying data, as noted per 1V.S.A. § 317(c), grantee names, projects, the amount of grant awards, and all other information regarding Working Lands grant projects are considered public information and are open to inspection. Grantee can also anticipate communication from other Working Lands partners and stakeholders regarding project successes and accomplishments.

Grantee Confidential and/or Proprietary Information: Grantee is responsible for noting all information, data, project results and narrative text which it considers confidential and/or proprietary in its reports and communications with the state. Grantee financials are automatically classified as confidential by the state.

Working Lands Enterprise Initiative, as a public instrumentality, is subject to the Vermont Public Records Law, 1 VSA § 315 - 320. The statute contains specific exemptions for tax-related information of persons, financial information of an individual or business, and trade secrets. This information will be held in confidential files by the Working Lands Enterprise Board and will not be available for public inspection under the Public Records Law.

The Working Lands Enterprise Board and the state of Vermont consider the following information about applicants to be subject to public record: contact information of applicants; names, description, and contact information of applying enterprise or organization; the purpose and amount of any Working Lands Enterprise Funds received; and grantee communications. Other information may be shared in aggregate form (without identifying individual business info).

Acknowledgement: All meetings and gatherings held because of this grant will recognize the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets and the Working Land Enterprise Board as a funder. Written and electronic materials produced shall include



text acknowledging the same and shall also feature a Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets graphic. Grantee may be required to reprint event flyers, posters, and/or brochures or repost meeting announcements if the State learns of grantee's failure to acknowledge the Working Lands Enterprise Board as a funder.

Tax Implications: We recommend that all entities consult with a tax accountant as needed regarding how to report grant awards for tax purposes, including advising on your tax return. State of Vermont staff and Working Lands partners are not authorized to advise or provide input on tax-related information, including the completion of federal forms.