

Rural Energy Startup Program Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)



This FAQ provides answers to common questions regarding the Rural Energy Startup Program (RESP). This document is intended to complement the application instructions and application issued on November 30, 2023. ([PSC REF#: 486067.](#))

Note: *The responses below to FAQs are intended to provide useful information to individuals applying for the RESP. The responses below do not and cannot limit the discretion of the Commission when it meets to decide which RESP applications should receive funds. To the extent that the responses below suggest policy choices different from the course of action the Commission’s order establishing the RESP, signed and served November 29, 2023, and the grant award order the Commission ultimately adopts, the Commission’s orders are controlling in all circumstances. The Commission has the discretion to prioritize certain applications over others in order to best distribute the available funds among the eligible grant applicants.*

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1. General Questions

1.1 Will the OEI review or provide feedback on draft application packages?

- No. Only complete and final application packages submitted to the PSC Grants System will be reviewed by the review panel.

1.2 What federal requirements should be considered prior to submitting the application?

- Yes. As this program is federally funded by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), all projects are required to comply with federal requirements discussed in section 8.1 of the Application Instructions.

1.3 Is my project subject to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)?

- Yes. Generally, NEPA **does** apply to projects funded through this program.
- Applicants should review Appendix B of the Application Instructions against their specific project activities to anticipate whether additional federal processing may be required of their project. For those projects that do not meet the parameters of the existing NEPA requirements and conditions described in Appendix B, and require federal NEPA review, Commission staff will provide additional guidance for grantees. Applicants should await further direction from Commission staff before proceeding with a project, or taking any steps to obtain official NEPA review and approval.

2. Eligible Applicants

2.1 Can a single eligible entity submit multiple applications?

- Yes, per Application Instructions section 1.3.1.2., an eligible applicant may submit one application per Activity.

2.2 Can multiple eligible applicants partner together to apply for a grant?

- No. Eligible Applicants must submit their applications separately. Eligible applicants may work together outside of and in preparation for their respective applications. The eligibility criteria are set forth in Application Instructions section 1.3.

2.3 Can eligible applicant funds be used to support non-government property, such as homes and businesses?

- No. Applicants must apply for planning and implementation projects that directly consider or affect government owned buildings and other assets. The eligible applicant types are described in Application Instructions section 1.3.

2.4 Can an ineligible applicant apply on behalf of an eligible applicant?

- No. For example, a county that may not meet the rural criteria or priority designation, may not apply on behalf of an eligible municipal applicant(s), but could rather coordinate with eligible municipal applicant(s) and can be considered a partner in their respective applications separately. An ineligible applicant cannot act as a pass-through entity for an eligible applicant described in Application Instructions section 1.3.

2.5 What role can consultants play in assisting eligible applicants with the application process?

- A third-party consultant may assist an eligible applicant in their application preparation and submission (however system limitations apply, see FAQ 9.2 and 9.3). Additionally, eligible applicants and their consultants should note that pre-award costs are not allowed, meaning any expense incurred for the consultant's services prior to the project performance period would not be reimbursable by the grant. Consultants and eligible applicants should refer to Application Instructions section 5 for instructions on submitting the application.

3. Eligible Activities

3.1 Are multiple eligible activities allowed in a single application?

- No. Applicants must select a single activity per application. Eligible applicants may submit one application per activity under section 1.3.1.2. Each activity type has a set amount of funding available and the applications in each of those categories will be processed as a group.

3.2 Is my project activity eligible if it is not expressly listed in the examples and descriptions provided for the Eligible Activities in section 1.3.1.2 of the Application Instructions?

- The scope of eligibility was established by Commission order, and eligible activity types were based on Department of Energy's (U.S. DOE) Blueprints described in section 1.3.1.2 of the Application Instructions. Where there is ambiguity, it is the responsibility of the applicant to demonstrate the eligibility of its project under a specific eligible activity for the Commission to consider. The Commission will ultimately determine what activities are eligible in this program.

3.3 Can energy utilities be paid project funds if they are working as subcontractors in local government plans or projects?

- If the utility is providing a service for a fee to the grant project, it can be treated as a subcontractor and paid project funds.

3.4 Can a single project take place on multiple sites or buildings? For example, could a town apply to conduct an audit project that takes place at multiple school buildings in the town?

- Yes. An applicant may apply to undertake a project that impacts multiple sites. The maximum grant request applies to the overall project, regardless of the number of project sites (multiple project sites do not increase the maximum grant request).

4. Funding Requests and Payments

4.1 Will up-front payments from PSC to grantees be allowed?

- No. Per Application Instructions section 4.2, grant funds will be issued as a reimbursement payment.

4.2 Will incremental requests for reimbursement be allowed?

- Yes. Per Application Instructions section 4.2, grant funds are issued as frequently as quarterly, as a reimbursement payment upon receipt of a complete and satisfactory performance report and request for reimbursement, which must include detailed supporting documentation for all costs.

4.3 Will partial awards be made?

- The Commission reserves the right to make partial awards.

5. Review Criteria

5.1 How do incentives and grants count towards cost share?

- All expected project funding should be described in responses to section 5.5 and 5.5.7 of the Application Instructions and referenced as applicable in other sections of the application narrative. The cost share reported in 5.5.7 and the –Budget Tab should be non-federal and limited to secured or prescriptive sources of funding. For example, prescriptive Focus on Energy incentives may be counted, but competitive grant funding that has yet to be awarded may not be counted as match.

5.2 Is a cost share (“match”) required for grant application?

- No. Cost share (“match”) is not required.

5.3 Are there different weights assigned to individual review criteria during the review and evaluation phase?

- Yes. Merit review criteria are weighted by the review panel as listed in Section 6.1 of the Application Instructions and in question 8.7 in the FAQ. Note that the Commission is not bound by the recommendations of the review panel (See section 6 and 6.1).

6. Eligible Costs

6.1 Can ineligible costs or those that are non-compliant with IIJA, be used as match or as part of the applicant's cost share in the budget?

- No, all project costs, whether grant-funded or applicant-funded (or contributed to the applicant from a third-party source), need to be reasonably associated with the eligible project activity, an eligible cost type Appendix A Budget Categories, and compliant with all state and federal provisions including IIJA.

6.2 Are pre-award costs allowed, such as preparation of the application or materials required for the federal review steps?

- No, pre-award costs are not allowed. All costs must be incurred during the project performance period, which begins on the date the grant agreement is countersigned by the Commission and ends approximately one year from that date.

6.3 Is there a list of eligible budget categories for this program?

- Yes, see Appendix A Budget Categories.

7. OEI and CEJST Mapping Resources

7.1 Is using the CEJST map and/or OEI Map a requirement of this application?



- Applicants are encouraged to use the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST) map in their analysis, or other tools or data as appropriate, to support their proposals. The OEI has created an additional, [OEI Map resource](#) that includes CEJST Disadvantaged Community (DAC) identification and rural designations, among other layers relevant across the range of OEI programs (e.g. FEMA National Risk Index hazard levels, and electric service territory boundaries).
- It is recommended that applicants also provide a visual, mapped representation, such as a screen image from the CEJST or OEI map, of the project location and the areas that will benefit from the project.

7.2 What source data did the OEI use to develop the OEI Map?

- Disadvantaged Communities, including Tribal communities, are identified from the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST) datasets. CEJST determines disadvantaged communities by census tract using the following indicators: climate change, energy, health, housing, legacy pollution, transportation, water and wastewater, and workforce development. Applicants should reference the CEJST map to determine which indicators are relevant for their project.
 - Wisconsin Rural Regions
 - Rural zip codes are identified as those within “any area of a State not in a city or town that has a population of more than 50,000 inhabitants, not in the urbanized area contiguous and adjacent to a city or town that has a population of more than 50,000 inhabitants, and excluding certain populations pursuant to 7 U.S.C. 1991(a)(13)(H) and (I).” OEI has aligned its definition of rural with that use in U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) Rural Energy for America Program and the [Focus on Energy program’s rural bonus incentives](#).
 - Rural counties: U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) uses census data to establish a range of rural and urban classifications known as Rural-Urban Continuum (RUC) codes, with an RUC of 4 to 9 considered rural. [USDA’s Economic Research Service](#) presents this information visually for Wisconsin by county.

- County and Municipal Boundaries: The boundaries should be viewed as approximate and are no guarantee of accuracy.


7.3 How do I navigate the OEI Map?

- Visit the OEI Map: [OEI Map](#)
- There is an “i” icon on the upper left side of the OEI map that includes the following support in navigating the map tool.
- Finding Location:
- Enter your address in the search bar.
- Click Search  button, or
- Click My Location icon  in upper left corner.


General Navigation:

- Click and drag on screen to move map.
- Scroll forward/backward on mouse to zoom in/out on cursor.


Turning Layers On/Off:

- Click on the Layer List icon  in the upper right corner of the screen.
- On: Click check box on the left of the layer name so that the box is checked.
- Off: Click check box on the left of the layer name so that the box is unchecked.

Save/Print:

- Click Save/Print icon. 
- Customize print settings if desired.
- Click Print button in dropdown menu.
- When export is finished, Click the file name.
- Save and/or Print from the internet browser.

Sharing:

- Click Share icon. 
- Choose medium to share with by clicking corresponding icon.
- Follow instructions in menu.

8. Grant Application

8.1 When will filed applications be made public for review?

- Once an application is submitted to the PSC Grants System, it is automatically uploaded to the PSC’s [ERF system](#). All submitted applications will be available for review in the docket [9714-FG-2023](#).

8.2 How do I know the character limits for a particular question on the application?

- Each response to narrative question subject to the merit review (noted in the Application Instructions with a specific point score) has a limit of 3,000 characters, or approximately one page.

8.3 To whom should letters of support be addressed, and how should they be submitted?

- Letters of support should be addressed to the Secretary to the Commission, Cru Stublely, and uploaded as a PDF on the Uploads Tab in the PSC Grants System.

Cru Stublely
Secretary to the Commission
Public Service Commission of Wisconsin
North Tower, 6th Floor
Hill Farms State Office Building
4822 Madison Yards Way
Madison, Wisconsin 53705

8.4 Is there a page limit for uploads in the grant application?

- There is no formal limit to the number of pages an applicant may include, but elaborate applications, such as those exceeding that sufficient to present a complete and effective application or using expensive artwork, are not necessary or desired. Applicants are encouraged to upload any relevant documentation such as a mapped, visual representation of the project, letters of support, data or any other supporting materials.
- Applicants are required to upload the 9714-FG-2023 Applicant Metrics.xlsx document in .xlsx format.

9. PSC Grant System

Applicants are required to submit applications using the [PSC Grants System](#). Detailed instructions on submitting an application are available as part of the Application Instructions:

<https://psc.wi.gov/Pages/ServiceType/OEI/EnergyEfficiencyConservationBlockGrant.aspx>.

9.1 How do I access the PSC Grant System?

- To begin the application, from the OEI webpage, select Rural Energy Startup Program (RESP). From this page, select 'PSC Grants System Login' or visit this link: [Online Grant System Login PSC Grants \(wi.gov\)](#). This will lead applicants to the login page of the PSC Grants System. For new applicants (those who have not logged into ERF), an applicant will first need to create an ERF system account and can do so from the PSC Grant System login page. (See Section 5.3 of the Application Instructions, and the [User's Guide](#).) Remember your username and password for future access to the system. For all subsequent instances, you should be able to log-in to the system with that User Name and Password.
- Upon completing the login, the homepage for the PSC Grants System will display the page titled Available Grants. Find the line for the Rural Energy Startup Program (EECBG) and click on 'Apply.' (See [User's Guide](#).) The application is arranged in a series of tabs along the top of the form. Each tab brings a page to the top so you can fill it in. It is important that you save your work (using the save icon at the bottom of the page) before you leave a page. Unsaved entries will be lost once you leave the page. Please note: Hover over the tooltip icon and use the hyperlinks for more information about each question.

9.2 Does the new PSC Grants System allow for multiple users on a single application?

- At this time the PSC Grants System does not have functionality to allow multiple individuals to access an application to make edits or changes. We encourage the person who will be responsible for finalizing and submitting the application to create a PSC Grants System account and application within the system.

