

National Supply Chain Optimization and Intelligence Network Expansion Award Pilot Program Frequently Asked Questions

As of March 7, 2023

1. Q: What is meant by Supply Chain Optimization?

A: PUBLIC LAW 117–167, Subtitle D, Sec. 10251, Sec 25B(e)(5), a purpose of the awards under the Expansion Awards Pilot Program is:

“(5) To build capabilities across the Hollings Manufacturing Extension Partnership for domestic supply chain resiliency and optimization, including — (A) assessment of domestic manufacturing capabilities, expanded capacity for researching and deploying information on supply chain risk, hidden costs of reliance on offshore suppliers, redesigning products and processes to encourage reshoring, and other relevant topics; and (B) expanded services to provide industrywide support that assists United States manufacturers with reshoring manufacturing to strengthen the resiliency of domestic supply chains, including in critical technology areas and foundational manufacturing capabilities that are key to domestic manufacturing competitiveness and resiliency, including forming, casting, machining, joining, surface treatment, tooling, and metal or chemical refining.”

The current Expansion Award Pilot Program is focused on the activities described in (A) above as a strategy for improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and resilience of domestic U.S. supply chains.

2. Q: What is a Supply Chain Intelligence Network?

A: The data from each Center represents information that can be utilized to identify gaps and weakness and develop strategies and programs to build larger domestic manufacturing supply chain for critical industry sectors. The intelligence or data from the Centers develops a national plan that can be used to develop policies and investment for the U.S. Government and private entities.

MEP’s Supply Chain Intelligence Network will consist of designated staff at each Center who responds to supplier scouting/matching inquiries, maintains knowledge as well as data on their local supply chain ecosystem, partners with key Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) in their region and coordinates frequently and effectively within the MEP National Network, including NIST MEP.

3. Q: Why can’t Centers generate program income under this Expansion Award program?

A: The Budget Narrative and Justification Section (Section 6) of the RFA specifically prohibits the generation of program income under these awards. The intent of the Expansion Awards is to build capability and capacity across the MEP National Network to support the delivery of supply chain optimization services, not to deliver those services. This is an investment in the National Network to support and grow the U.S. Domestic Supply Chain. Client projects, including the generation of program income, can be executed under the Center's Base Award.

4. Q: The RFA is prescriptive in terms of required Center tasks under this award. Can Centers do things that are not specified in the RFA? What other kinds of activities might be allowed?

A: See RFA *Program Objective*, Section #4 for information regarding activities not specified within the RFA but permitted under an award.

5. Q: Does the required minimum 1 FTE have to be an employee of the Center? If Centers don't want to hire additional staff for this program, what other options are available to satisfy the minimum 1 FTE requirement to be dedicated to this program?

A: A Center may opt to use the funds to support an FTE at a partnered organization. Also, the minimum FTE requirement can be met through the level of effort of more than one individual so long as the total commitment of all dedicated individuals totals at least 1 FTE. For example, a state with multiple SRAs may spread the FTE count over more than one SRA. Centers are advised to consult their Center Resource Management Team (CRMT) when deciding how best to meet the minimum 1 FTE requirement.

6. Q: Will the acceptance of expansion award funds impact my Center's IMPACT scores?

A: No. Expansion Award funding will be provided to Centers via a separate cooperative agreement from the Centers' base awards. Therefore, MEP will not include the amount of Expansion Award funding received by a Center in the total federal funding amount (i.e., the denominator) used to calculate that Center's IMPACT scores on their base awards.

7. Q: How often are Centers required to submit their SF-425 Federal Financial Reports? How often will performance reports be required?

A: Financial reporting will be reported on a semi-annual basis. Progress reporting on performance are required to be submitted on a quarterly basis.

8. Q: Do Centers have to propose a full two-year program? Can Centers propose a period of performance that is more or less than two years?

A: No. The period of performance for all Expansion Awards will be 24 months.

9. Q: Do Centers have to take the maximum \$400,000?

A: No. Centers may propose an amount less than \$400,000. Centers should consult with their CRMT when deciding an appropriate amount of Expansion Award funding to request.

10. Q: Can Centers use Expansion Award funds to buy a third-party database or similar services?

A: Yes. Expansion Award funds may be used by a Center to fund a database application for the purpose of supplier mapping and data collection. Centers are advised to consult their CRMT when making the decision to purchase a database application with Expansion Award funds. Please note that Centers need to ensure that the data from these services are not proprietary and can be transmitted to NIST for reporting. note: Centers must ensure that the data from these services are not proprietary and can be transmitted to NIST for reporting purposes.

11. Q: Does NIST MEP recommend a particular supplier mapping database for Centers to purchase?

A: No. NIST MEP will not suggest, recommend, or mandate that MEP Centers use a particular database. However, MEP may specify a common application programming interface (API). An API is a set of defined rules that enable different applications to communicate with each other. In every instance, however, database options selected by Centers must be capable of readily exchanging data and information with the MEP National Network.

12. Q: Since these funds were appropriated to the MEP program under the CHIPS Act, is this program focused on semiconductors?

A: No. While this funding was provided under the CHIPS act, the Expansion Awards Pilot Program authority covers a range of possible uses including workforce, supply chain, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing technology.

13. Supply Chain represents one-third of NIST MEP's focus areas. Does funding only one area imply that that other two are less important?

A: No, all three strategic goals are important. The Expansion Awards Pilot Program appropriation for FY 2023 was \$13 million. Even when supplemented with a substantial amount of funding from MEP's annual appropriation increase, the total amount of available funding for this purpose in FY 2023 is simply not large enough to address more than one strategic initiative at this time.

14. Q: Can a Center propose to do more outside of the RFA criteria areas?

A: No. A Center may not propose activities that are different from those described under the Program Objective section of the RFA. However, Centers can be creative within the parameters and objectives of the program. Centers may be creative with methods and approaches but not with topics or objectives. Also, refer to Question 4 above.

15. Q: If a Center has multiple SRAs, should they delegate work or is the prime recipient responsible for the work?

A: The prime recipient of the cooperative agreement is ultimately responsible for satisfying the requirements spelled out in this RFA. However, the prime recipient may opt to delegate by formal agreement responsibility (but not accountability) for a portion of the work to an SRA or other affiliated organization.

16. Q: Can Centers in the same region consolidate efforts to optimize the funding? (e.g., share database or FTE)

A: The intent of this pilot effort is to provide opportunities for each Center to build their own capacity and intelligence with respect to the supply chain ecosystem within its own state. Therefore, consolidated efforts between or among multiple Centers are discouraged. Our expectation for this award is that we create a national supply chain optimization network and that means we will have a contact point for the network in all 50 states plus Puerto Rico. To that end, if a group of Centers apply under one award, we will require performance and financial reporting to be completed and broken out by each individual Center.

17. Q: Is all the funding available for draw down after award, or is there a schedule requirement for draw down? Does it need to be tied to expenses since it does not require cost share?

A: NIST expects to fully fund the cooperative agreements upon award. Unless otherwise stated in a Specific Award Condition, the advance method of payment is authorized. Advances must be limited to the minimum amounts needed and be timed to be in accordance with the actual, immediate cash requirements of the non- federal entity (NFE)/MEP Center in carrying out the project. NFEs/MEP Centers must time advance payment requests that federal funds are on hand for a maximum of 30 calendar days before being disbursed by the NFE/MEP Center for allowable award costs. costs.

18. Q: Are pre-award costs allowed? If so, what is the maximum amount allowed for pre-award cost and how do we notate it in the budget forms?

A: In accordance with the Other Information section of the NIST MEP Expansion Awards Pilot Program (MEAPP) MEP National Supply Chain Optimization and Intelligence Network RFA, the recipient may request approval of pre-award costs; however, all costs incurred before the federal awarding agency makes the federal award are at the recipient's risk. Pre-award costs are allowable only to the extent that they would have been allowable if incurred after the date of the federal award and only with the written approval of the federal awarding agency. Prior approval is required for pre-award activities conducted by the recipient during the pre-award period of 90 calendar days before the federal award start date. This request may be included with the application and the budget, but all pre-award costs must be a portion of, not in addition to, the total approved budget.

19. Q: Will there be a separate ASAP account?

A: Each entity has the same ASAP/Recipient ID for all of its awards. Regarding accounts, each award has a separate Account ID which is also the award number.

20. Q: For Centers with multiple SRAs, managing the required 1 FTE could be challenging. Distributing a full-time equivalent over multiple SRAs would result in many people devoting little time to the effort. In that instance, it would make more sense for one individual to have sole responsibility to direct all Supply Chain activities. Will Centers that operate this way take a different approach to the RFA than other traditional Centers without a large SRA population?

A: In consultation with their assigned CRMT, a Center may choose to maintain a full-time equivalent staff member in a centralized role coordinating supply chain optimization activities for the entire MEP Center including SRAs. On the other hand, that Center may opt to distribute some amount of FTE resources to an SRA or a series of SRAs. Each Center has the flexibility to develop this capacity in the way that works best for the Center.

21. Q: Will the percentage of time allocated on the Current and Pending Support form only be an estimate?

A: The Current and Pending Support form should account for the actual level of effort of key personnel for this award. All activities requiring a portion of time of the investigator and key personnel must be included. This includes activities with no salary support.

22. Q: Are the activities on this award expected to be reported as facilitated projects in MEIS?

A: No. The recipient will be required to submit progress reports on performance on a quarterly basis (unless otherwise directed by the NIST Grants Officer) and in a specified format to NIST MEP.

23. Q: I noticed that the SF-424a is on the grants.gov site. Is that being used in place of the single-year workbook, or do we need to do both?

A: Both SF-424A and the NIST MEP Single-Year Budget Workbook are required.

24. Q: In terms of the metrics, should they align to the MEP scorecard? Or should there be unique measures since this is specific to one subject area?

A: No. The metrics for this program will not align to the MEP scorecard. The funds provided and activities to be carried out under this program are intended to build Center capacity to perform supply chain projects. The unique nature of the activities will require metrics that are different from those that populate the scorecard.

25. Q: My base award has less than 24 months remaining. Should the MEAPP award end date match the base award end date? Will my application be considered ineligible if I request less than 24 months?

A: No. The MEAPP award is tied to the Center's base cooperative agreement. If the base cooperative agreement should change, the MEAPP award will carry over to the next cooperative agreement. There will be a Specific Award Condition (SAC) in the award notification to clarify. If the Center is unsuccessful at winning the upcoming competition for the follow-on base award, then the MEP Expansion Award Pilot Program will terminate on the same date their current award ends.

26. Q: If Centers are applying as a consortium, how do they report out? I assume finance separately but overlap programmatically is inevitable. Larger joint report?

A: MEP's goal for this award is to create a national supply chain optimization network, and that means there will be a contact point for supply chain activities in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. To that end, if a group of Centers applies under one award, MEP will require performance and financial reporting to be done and broken out at the individual state level.

27. Q: Can an MEP Center with a large SRA community subcontract to one of their SRA's for the 1 FTE or equivalent?

A: The RFA requirement is for one FTE. It can be a direct employee, through an SRA, or through a contractor. The Center's application should be clear about how the FTE will be supported and utilized by the Center.

28. Q: What is NIST MEP calling this project arm? I see/hear the following: extension awards, RFA, pilot program, expansion awards, MEAPP. We should have one, unified nomenclature.

A: Officially, it is the Expansion Awards Pilot Program. It may also be referred to as "Expansion awards."

29. Q: How about Centers currently being re-competed, i.e. MD MEP? Are they eligible?

A: All current MEP Centers are eligible to apply for these expansion award funds. See the response to question #25 above.

30. Q: What are the acceptable means for which the data can be transferred to NIST MEP? Is there a requirement for a bridge connection to transfer large volumes of data? What means is acceptable?

A: The specific methods for data transfer have not yet been determined. Centers will be notified once common protocols have been established. See also the response to Question 10 above.

31. Q: Will there be an Intellectual Property Plan template?

A: That is not foreseen, as this is not an R&D investment.

32. Q: Are the awards funded for the full 24-month request or annually? The RFA says that NIST has the option.

A: See the response to Question 8 above.

33. Q: While the page limit is 10, what should we expect in terms of a page minimum? Is there a mandatory number of pages for suitable / acceptable RFA?

A: There is no page minimum. However, the narrative should be long enough to demonstrate responsiveness to the RFA. Applications should contain sufficient content to demonstrate how the Center will implement the objectives of the program.

34. Q: Can a Center's response to the RFA be "open ended" in that they submit a project plan with milestones that upon execution & burn rate, and the Center uses up the \$400K in the first year with more work to be done in Year Two (awaiting new/more funding)?

A: No. The period of performance for these awards is 24 months. Centers must plan to support the goals of this pilot project for the full period of performance. There is no additional funding anticipated for these awards.

35. Q: Expansion awards includes the three themes, and Centers are aware that this RFA focus is supply chain. For Centers' planning purposes, when will workforce and technology be addressed? Centers need to be thinking 2-3 years ahead. Is there a long-range plan for future pilot projects or is everything based on availability of funds?

A: Initially, expansion awards for three themes were tied to the anticipation of higher funding than what MEP received, and the higher levels of funding did not happen. Given the nature of Congressional appropriations, MEP cannot reliably predict funding levels 2-3 years ahead. Consequently, future funding plans will depend on availability of funding.

36. Q: Is there a maximum number of Centers that can make up a single consortium?

A: There is no maximum number; however, the number should be reasonable. Centers should consult with their CRMT when considering applying as part of a consortium.

37. Q: What is meant by a "consortium?"

A: Per 15 U.S.C.278k-2 (c): "Participants receiving awards under this section shall be Centers, or a consortium of Centers."

38. Q: Is it expected that clients reported will align with clients they report to MEIS (with completed projects)? Or, will this be a count in their Progress Plan?

A: Centers should not conduct reportable (or surveyable) projects under this pilot program. All such activities should be reported under the Center's base award. See also response to Question 43.

39. Q: For Centers with SRAs, how will the money be divided?

A: The MEP Center base award recipient may determine whether subrecipient agreements should be revised for additional funding and in what amounts.

40. Q: Where will the information gathered be stored and managed prior to any funding to develop a national database?

A: Information gathered by the Centers under this pilot project will be stored and managed as determined by each Center. Information shared with the National Network will be aggregated by or on behalf of NIST MEP.

41. Q: If the use of the RFA funding to generate program income is prohibited, is that expected to act as a disincentive for the Center to use existing staff as an FTE under the award? For example, this FTE may have to give up existing fee-paying project work, which could create a skill deficiency at a given Center and will potentially affect the absorption rate of overhead by projects (Center efficiency metrics could be negatively affected). However, by hiring a new FTE, this potentially creates a salary and overhead burden that continues after the expiration of the 2-year award. How can Centers avoid these two potential scenarios?

A: The prohibition on generation of program income is not intended as a disincentive. Rather, it is an indication that the purpose of this program is not to perform work (i.e., projects with clients) that is already being accomplished under the Center's base award. When determining how to meet the FTE requirement on this program, Centers should do so in a way that can best support the long-term sustainability of supply chain activities beyond the 24-month period of performance for this pilot project.

42. Q: when a Center submits early and the grant is reviewed, will there be an opportunity/process for a Center to modify its application if it misses "the mark"?

A: Yes. NIST MEP has a merit review process that will begin with a screening of the application and then a technical review. During the technical review, reviewers can ask questions to the Center which may lead to a revised application. However, NIST MEP highly recommends that each Center reach out and coordinate with their Resource Manager (RM) and Federal Program Officer (FPO) while drafting their application so that potential issues can be identified, discussed, and resolved before it is submitted.

43. Q: If some Centers do not request the allowed \$400K, will the remaining money be available to other Centers?

A: Each Center is expected to submit an application, and each center may request up to the maximum \$400,000. Per the RFA, if some MEP Centers do not apply for funding or request less than the maximum \$400,000 under this RFA, NIST MEP reserves the right to adjust funding levels for other Centers based on an unused funds.

44. Q: Does a part-time employee, like a student, count towards the 1 FTE minimum?

A: Yes, a part-time employee can count towards the full FTE requirement. Also, there is no prohibition on using students on this pilot project.

45. Q: The FAQs state that MEP may "specify a common application programming interface (API)". Is there a timeline that we can plan on understanding this so that we can propose effectively?

A: Currently NIST MEP does not have a planned timeline for the API. NIST MEP is asking each of the Centers to describe in the application and/or platform you are currently using or propose to use for capturing and managing supplier scouting data and supply chain information. It is envisioned that this information will be used to determine the common API in the future.

46. Q: Does the RFA include funding to support training across the MEP NN on how to perform supply chain development activities & lessons learned so far?

A: No. There is a NIST MEP working group that will coordinate efforts across the National Network to determine best practices and lessons learned. These efforts will allow for sharing of this information across all the Centers and does not place the workload at the Center level.

47. Q: It appears that the application requires two Single-Year Budget Workbooks? One for each year?

A: Yes, that is correct.

- 48. Q: Can the \$400K be budgeted for 12 months versus the full 24?**
A: No. NIST MEP expects each Center to support this pilot activity during the full 24-month period of performance and therefore to budget funds for the full 24-months.
- 49. Q: Can we accept state funds to support the project over the \$400K NIST funding?**
A: Yes. State funds may also be used to support the project.
- 50. Q: Can support in supply chain be extended to entities who support manufacturers such a freight logistics forwarder, warehousing operations?**
A: Mapping out these operations in the supply chain ecosystem is allowed as it feeds into the overall goal of understanding the supply chain intelligence network. Support and training would not be allowed under this award but may be allowed under the base award.
- 51. Q: Understanding that the goal is to participate over the full 24 months, can the funding be front-loaded, or does it have to be split evenly over the two years?**
A: Centers may request the funds to serve the proposed project as needed. NIST MEP expects that some Centers may spend more in Year 1, others may spend evenly over the 24 months, and still others may opt to spend more in Year 2. In every case, Centers need to indicate how the work will be conducted over the 24-month period of performance and budget accordingly.
- 52. Q: Is this considered a grant?**
A: No. This is not a grant. All awards will be issued as cooperative agreements.
- 53. Q: So, we would have to fund a full FTE for this award for two years?**
A: Yes. Per the RFA, Centers are required each year to dedicate to the award a minimum of 1 FTE in the form of one individual or a combination of individuals. Refer to the RFA for the FTE definition.
- 54. Q: Will Fixed Amount Awards be applicable if sub-awards are under \$250k. FAAs are allowable for programs that do not require cost share 2 CFR 200.201.**
A: Subawards will require prior approval from both NIST MEP and NIST Grants Management Division.
- 55. Q: The Multi-Year Funding Policy states: When an application for a multi-year award is approved, funding in some cases will be provided only for the first year of the project. Continued funding for the remaining year(s) of the project will be awarded or released by NIST, and may be adjusted, contingent upon satisfactory performance, submission of detailed budgets and budget narratives for each year proposed, continued relevance to the mission and priorities of the program, and the availability of funds. Does this mean that NIST will obligates the funding at time of award or over multiple years of the award?**
A: NIST will obligate the full amount at time of award for Centers to draw against over the 24-month period of performance.
- 56. Q: By “Ensure every MEP Supplier Scouting request receives a response, even if no suppliers are ID’d” What do you mean by this?**

A: Currently, Centers typically respond to a supplier scouting request only when they have identified a potential supplier. For this award, each Center will be required to reply to each supplier scouting request either with a positive response identifying a potential supplier or with a negative response acknowledging receipt and indicating that no supplier was identified.