

[Federal Register: January 5, 2004 (Volume 69, Number 2)]
[Rules and Regulations]
[Page 272-278]
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[DOCID:fr05ja04-10]

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

National Institutes of Health

42 CFR Part 52h

RIN 0925-AA

Scientific Peer Review of Research Grant Applications and
Research and Development Contract Projects

AGENCY: National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human
Services.

ACTION: Final rule.

PART 52h--SCIENTIFIC PEER REVIEW OF RESEARCH GRANT
APPLICATIONS AND
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CONTRACT PROJECTS

Sec.

52h.1 Applicability.

52h.2 Definitions.

52h.3 Establishment and operation of peer review groups.

- 52h.4 Composition of peer review groups.
- 52h.5 Conflict of interest.
- 52h.6 Availability of information.
- 52h.7 What matters must be reviewed for grants?
- 52h.8 What are the review criteria for grants?
- 52h.9 What matters must be reviewed for unsolicited contract proposals?
- 52h.10 What matters must be reviewed for solicited contract proposals?
- 52h.11 What are the review criteria for contract projects and proposals?
- 52h.12 Other regulations that apply.

Authority: 42 U.S.C. 216; 42 U.S.C. 282 (b)(6); 42 U.S.C. 284 (c)(3); 42 U.S.C. 289a.

Sec. 52h.1 Applicability.

(a) This part applies to:

- (1) Applications of the National Institutes of Health for grants or cooperative agreements (a reference in this part to grants includes cooperative agreements) for biomedical and behavioral research; and
- (2) Biomedical and behavioral research and development contract project concepts and proposals for contract projects administered by the National Institutes of Health.

(b) This part does not apply to applications for:

- (1) Continuation funding for budget periods within an approved project period;
- (2) Supplemental funding to meet increased administrative costs within a project period; or
- (3) Construction grants.

Sec. 52h.2 Definitions.

As used in this part:

(a) Act means the Public Health Service Act, as amended (42 U.S.C. 201 et seq.).

(b) Appearance of a conflict of interest means that a reviewer or close relative or professional associate of the reviewer has a

financial or other interest in an application or proposal that is known to the reviewer or the government official managing the review and would cause a reasonable person to question the reviewer's impartiality if he or she were to participate in the review; the government official managing the review (the Scientific Review Administrator or equivalent) will evaluate the appearance of a conflict of

[[Page 276]]

interest and determine, in accordance with this subpart, whether or not the interest would likely bias the reviewer's evaluation of the application or proposal.

(c) Awarding official means the Secretary of Health and Human Services and any other officer or employee of the Department of Health and Human Services to whom the authority involved has been delegated; except that, where the Act specifically authorizes another official to make awards in connection with a particular program, the awarding official shall mean that official and any other officer or employee of the Department of Health and Human Services to whom the authority involved has been delegated.

(d) Budget period means the interval of time (usually 12 months) into which the project period is divided for budgetary and reporting purposes.

(e) Close relative means a parent, spouse, domestic partner, or son or daughter.

(f) Contract proposal means a written offer to enter into a contract that is submitted to the appropriate agency official by an individual or nonfederal organization which includes, at a minimum, a description of the nature, purpose, duration, and cost of the project, and the methods, personnel, and facilities to be utilized in carrying it out. A contract proposal may be unsolicited by the federal government or submitted in response to a request for proposals.

(g) Development means the systematic use of knowledge gained from research to create useful materials, devices, systems, or methods.

(h) DHHS means the Department of Health and Human Services.

(i) Director means the Director of the National Institutes of Health and any other official or employee of the National Institutes of Health to whom the authority involved has been delegated.

(j) Grant as used in this part, includes cooperative agreements.

(k) Peer review group means a group of primarily nongovernment

experts qualified by training and experience in particular scientific or technical fields, or as authorities knowledgeable in the various disciplines and fields related to the scientific areas under review, to give expert advice on the scientific and technical merit of grant applications or contract proposals, or the concept of contract projects, in accordance with this part.

(l) Principal investigator has the same meaning as in 42 CFR part 52.

(m) Professional associate means any colleague, scientific mentor, or student with whom the peer reviewer is currently conducting research or other significant professional activities or with whom the member has conducted such activities within three years of the date of the review.

(n) Project approach means the methodology to be followed and the resources needed in carrying out the project.

(o) Project concept means the basic purpose, scope, and objectives of the project.

(p) Project period has the same meaning as in 42 CFR part 52.

(q) Real conflict of interest means a reviewer or a close relative or professional associate of the reviewer has a financial or other interest in an application or proposal that is known to the reviewer and is likely to bias the reviewer's evaluation of that application or proposal as determined by the government official managing the review (the Scientific Review Administrator, or equivalent), as acknowledged by the reviewer, or as prescribed by this part. A reviewer shall have a real conflict of interest if he/she or a close relative or professional associate of the reviewer:

(1) Has received or could receive a direct financial benefit of any amount deriving from an application or proposal under review;

(2) Apart from any direct financial benefit deriving from an application or proposal under review, has received or could receive a financial benefit from the applicant institution, offeror or principal investigator that in the aggregate exceeds \$10,000 per year; this amount includes honoraria, fees, stock or other financial benefit, and additionally includes the current value of the reviewer's already existing stock holdings. The Director, NIH, may amend the dollar threshold periodically, as appropriate, after public notice and comment; or

(3) Has any other interest in the application or proposal that is likely to bias the reviewer's evaluation of that application or

proposal. Regardless of the level of financial involvement or other interest, if the reviewer feels unable to provide objective advice, he/she must recuse him/herself from the review of the application or proposal at issue. The peer review system relies on the professionalism of each reviewer to identify to the designated government official any real or apparent conflicts of interest that are likely to bias the reviewer's evaluation of an application or proposal.

(r) Request for proposals means a Government solicitation to prospective offerors, under procedures for negotiated contracts, to submit a proposal to fulfill specific agency requirements based on terms and conditions defined in the request for proposals. The request for proposals contains information sufficient to enable all offerors to prepare proposals, and is as complete as possible with respect to: nature of work to be performed; descriptions and specifications of items to be delivered; performance schedule; special requirements clauses, or other circumstances affecting the contract; format for cost proposals; and evaluation criteria by which the proposals will be evaluated.

(s) Research has the same meaning as in 42 CFR part 52.

(t) Research and development contract project means an identified, circumscribed activity, involving a single contract or two or more similar, related, or interdependent contracts, intended and designed to acquire new or fuller knowledge and understanding in the areas of biomedical or behavioral research and/or to use such knowledge and understanding to develop useful materials, devices, systems, or methods.

(u) Scientific review group has the same meaning as peer review group, which is defined in paragraph (k) of this section.

(v) Solicited contract proposal has the same meaning as the definition of offer in 48 CFR 2.101.

(w) Unsolicited contract proposal has the same meaning as unsolicited proposal in 48 CFR 15.601.

Sec. 52h.3 Establishment and operation of peer review groups.

(a) To the extent applicable, the Federal Advisory Committee Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. appendix 2) and chapter 9 of the DHHS General Administration Manual \1\ shall govern the establishment and operation of peer review groups.

\\ The DHHS General Administration Manual is available for public inspection and copying at the Department's information centers listed in 45 CFR 5.31 and may be purchased from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402.

(b) Subject to Sec. 52h.5 and paragraph (a) of this section, the Director will adopt procedures for the conduct of reviews and the formulation of recommendations under Sec. Sec. 52h.7, 52h.9, and 52h.10.

Sec. 52h.4 Composition of peer review groups.

(a) To the extent applicable, the selection and appointment of members

[[Page 277]]

of peer review groups and their terms of service shall be governed by chapter 9 of the DHHS General Administration Manual.

(b) Subject to paragraph (a) of this section, members will be selected based upon their training and experience in relevant scientific or technical fields, or upon their qualifications as authorities knowledgeable in the various disciplines and fields related to the scientific areas under review, taking into account, among other factors:

(1) The level of formal scientific or technical education completed or experience acquired by the individual;

(2) The extent to which the individual has engaged in relevant research, the capacities (e.g., principal investigator, assistant) in which the individual has done so, and the quality of the research;

(3) Recognition as reflected by awards and other honors received from scientific and professional organizations; and

(4) The need for the group to have included within its membership experts from various areas of specialization within relevant scientific or technical fields, or authorities knowledgeable in the various

disciplines and fields related to the scientific areas under review.

(c) Except as otherwise provided by law, not more than one-fourth of the members of any peer review group to which this part applies may be officers or employees of the United States. Being a member of a scientific peer review group does not make an individual an officer or employee of the United States.

Sec. 52h.5 Conflict of interest.

(a) This section applies only to conflicts of interest involving members of peer review groups. This section does not cover individuals serving on National Advisory Councils or Boards, Boards of Scientific Counselors, or Program Advisory Committees who, if not already officers or employees of the United States, are special Government employees and covered by title 18 of the United States Code, the Office of Government Ethics Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch (5 CFR part 2635), and Executive Order 11222, as amended. For those federal employees serving on peer review groups, in accordance with Sec. 52h.4, the requirements of title 18 of the United States Code, 5 CFR part 2635 and Executive Order 12674, as modified by Executive Order 12731, apply.

(b) A reviewer with a real conflict of interest must recuse him/herself from the review of the application or proposal, except as otherwise provided in this section.

(1) A reviewer who is a salaried employee, whether full-time or part-time, of the applicant institution, offeror, or principal investigator, or is negotiating for employment, shall be considered to have a real conflict of interest with regard to an application/proposal from that organization or principal investigator, except that the Director may determine there is no real conflict of interest or an appearance of a conflict of interest where the components of a large or multicomponent organization are sufficiently independent to constitute, in effect, separate organizations, provided that the reviewer has no responsibilities at the institution that would significantly affect the other component.

(2) Where a reviewer's real conflict of interest is based upon the financial or other interest of a close relative or professional associate of the reviewer, that reviewer must recuse him/herself, unless the Director provides a waiver in accordance with paragraph

(b)(4) of this section.

(3) For contract proposal reviews, an individual with a real conflict of interest in a particular proposal(s) is generally not permitted to participate in the review of any proposals responding to the same request for proposals. However, if there is no other qualified reviewer available having that individual's expertise and that expertise is essential to ensure a competent and fair review, a waiver may be granted by the Director to permit that individual to serve as a reviewer of those proposals with which the reviewer has no conflict, while recusing him/herself from the review of any particular proposal(s) in which there is a conflict of interest.

(4) The Director may waive any of the requirements in paragraph (b) of this section relating to a real conflict of interest if the Director determines that there are no other practical means for securing appropriate expert advice on a particular grant or cooperative agreement application, contract project, or contract proposal, and that the real conflict of interest is not so substantial as to be likely to affect the integrity of the advice to be provided by the reviewer.

(c) Any appearance of a conflict of interest will result in recusal of the reviewer, unless the Director provides a waiver, determining that it would be difficult or impractical to carry out the review otherwise, and the integrity of the review process would not be impaired by the reviewer's participation.

(d) When a peer review group meets regularly it is assumed that a relationship among individual reviewers in the group exists and that the group as a whole may not be objective about evaluating the work of one of its members. In such a case, a member's application or proposal shall be reviewed by another qualified review group to ensure that a competent and objective review is obtained.

(e) When a member of a peer review group participates in or is present during the concept review of a contract proposal that occurs after release of the solicitation, as described under Sec. 52h.10(b), but before receipt of proposals, the member is not considered to have a real conflict of interest as described in paragraph (b) of this section, but is subject to paragraph (c) of this section concerning appearance of conflict of interest if the member is planning to respond to the solicitation. When the concept review occurs after receipt of proposals, paragraph (b) applies.

(f) No member of a peer review group may participate in any review of a specific grant application or contract project for which the

member has had or is expected to have any other responsibility or involvement (whether pre-award or post-award) as an officer or employee of the United States.

(g) The Director may periodically issue guidance to the government officials responsible for managing reviews and reviewers on what interests would constitute a real conflict of interest or an appearance of a conflict of interest.

Sec. 52h.6 Availability of information.

(a) Transcripts, minutes, and other documents made available to or prepared for or by a peer review group will be available for public inspection and copying to the extent provided by the Freedom of Information Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. 552), the Federal Advisory Committee Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. appendix 2), the Privacy Act of 1974, as amended (5 U.S.C. 552a), and implementing DHHS regulations (45 CFR parts 5, 5b).

(b) Meetings of peer review groups reviewing grant applications or contract proposals are closed to the public in accordance with sections 552b(c)(4) and 552b(c)(6) of the Government in the Sunshine Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. 552b(c)(4) and 552b(c)(6)) and section 10(d) of the Federal Advisory Committee Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. appendix 2). Documents made available to, or prepared for or by peer review groups that contain trade secrets or commercial or financial information obtained from a person that is privileged or confidential, and personal

[[Page 278]]

information concerning individuals associated with applications or proposals, the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, are exempt from disclosure in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. 552(b)(4) and 552(b)(6)).

(c) Meetings of peer review groups reviewing contract project concepts are open to the public in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. appendix 2) and the Government in the Sunshine Act, as amended (5 U.S.C. 552b).

Sec. 52h.7 What matters must be reviewed for grants?

(a) Except as otherwise provided by law, no awarding official shall award a grant based upon an application covered by this part unless the application has been reviewed by a peer review group in accordance with the provisions of this part and the group has made recommendations concerning the scientific merit of that application. In addition, where under applicable law an awarding official is required to secure the approval or advice of a national council or board concerning an application, the application may not be considered by the council or board unless it has been reviewed by the appropriate peer review group, in accordance with the provisions of this part, and the group has made recommendations concerning the scientific merit of the application, except where the council or board is the peer review group.

(b) Except to the extent otherwise provided by law, recommendations by peer review groups are advisory only and not binding on the awarding official or the national advisory council or board.

Sec. 52h.8 What are the review criteria for grants?

In carrying out its review under Sec. 52h.7, the scientific peer review group shall assess the overall impact that the project could have on the research field involved, taking into account, among other pertinent factors:

(a) The significance of the goals of the proposed research, from a scientific or technical standpoint;

(b) The adequacy of the approach and methodology proposed to carry out the research;

(c) The innovativeness and originality of the proposed research;

(d) The qualifications and experience of the principal investigator and proposed staff;

(e) The scientific environment and reasonable availability of resources necessary to the research;

(f) The adequacy of plans to include both genders, minorities, children and special populations as appropriate for the scientific goals of the research;

(g) The reasonableness of the proposed budget and duration in relation to the proposed research; and

(h) The adequacy of the proposed protection for humans, animals, and the environment, to the extent they may be adversely affected by the project proposed in the application.

Sec. 52h.9 What matters must be reviewed for unsolicited contract proposals?

(a) Except as otherwise provided by law, no awarding official shall award a contract based upon an unsolicited contract proposal covered by this part unless the proposal has been reviewed by a peer review group in accordance with the provisions of this part and the group has made recommendations concerning the scientific merit of that proposal.

(b) Except to the extent otherwise provided by law, peer review group recommendations are advisory only and not binding on the awarding official.

Sec. 52h.10 What matters must be reviewed for solicited contract proposals?

(a) Subject to paragraphs (b) and (c) of this section, no awarding official shall issue a request for contract proposals with respect to a contract project involving solicited contract proposals, unless the project concept has been reviewed by a peer review group or advisory council in accordance with this part and the group has made recommendations concerning the scientific merit of the concept.

(b) The awarding official may delay carrying out the requirements for peer review of paragraph (a) of this section until after issuing a request for proposals if the official determines that the accomplishment of essential program objectives would otherwise be placed in jeopardy and any further delay clearly would not be in the best interest of the Government. The awarding official shall specify in writing the grounds on which this determination is based. Under these circumstances, the awarding official will not award a contract until peer review of the project concept and the proposals has been completed. The request for proposals shall state that the project concept will be reviewed by a peer review group and that no award will be made until the review is conducted and recommendations made based on

that review.

(c) The awarding official may determine that peer review of the project concept for behavioral or biomedical research and development contracts is not needed if one of the following circumstances applies: the solicitation is to re-compete or extend a project that is within the scope of a current project that has been peer reviewed, or there is a Congressional authorization or mandate to conduct specific contract projects. If a substantial amount of time has passed since the concept review, the awarding official shall determine whether peer review is required to ensure the continued scientific merit of the concept.

(d) Except to the extent otherwise provided by law, the recommendations referred to in this section are advisory only and not binding on the awarding official.

Sec. 52h.11 What are the review criteria for contract projects and proposals?

(a) In carrying out its review of a project concept under Sec. 52h.10(a) or Sec. 52h.10(b), the peer review group shall take into account, among other pertinent factors:

(1) The significance from a scientific or technical standpoint of the goals of the proposed research or development activity;

(2) The availability of the technology and other resources necessary to achieve those goals;

(3) The extent to which there are identified, practical uses for the anticipated results of the activity; and

(4) Where the review includes the project approach, the adequacy of the methodology to be utilized in carrying out the activity.

(b) In carrying out its review of unsolicited contract proposals under Sec. 52h.9, the peer review group shall take into account, among other pertinent factors, the criteria in Sec. 52h.8 which are relevant to the particular proposals.

(c) In carrying out its review of solicited proposals under Sec. 52h.10(a) or (b), the peer review group shall evaluate each proposal in accordance with the criteria set forth in the request for proposals.

Sec. 52h.12 Other regulations that apply.

The regulations in this part are in addition to, and do not supersede other regulations concerning grant applications, contract projects, or contract proposals set forth elsewhere in this title, title 45, or title 48 of the Code of Federal Regulations.

[FR Doc. 03-32109 Filed 12-31-03; 9:46 am]

BILLING CODE 4140-01-P