USC RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Request For Proposals
President’s Sustainability Initiative Award

FUNDING ORGANIZATION  USC Research and Innovation (R&I)
APPLICATION DEADLINE  5 PM, Pacific Time, March 18, Annually. Proposals submitted after this deadline will be rejected without review. When a due date falls on a weekend, federal holiday, or when USC offices are closed due to weather or other circumstances, the application deadline is automatically extended to the next business day.

SCIENTIFIC MERIT REVIEW  April – May
PROGRAMMATIC REVIEW  June
NOTIFICATION  June - July
EARLIEST AWARD DATE  August
AWARD PROJECT PERIOD  Small Program Award: 1 year
                           Large Program Award: 1 year
AWARDS (UP TO)  Small Program Award: $ 50,000
                           Large Program Award: $250,000
The number of awards is contingent upon the receipt of a sufficient number of meritorious applications. All awards are subject to the yearly availability of funds, terms and conditions, cost principles, and other considerations.

BACKGROUND
Integrating sustainability as a core value in USC’s strategic planning is a critically important institutional commitment. In addition to implementing impactful sustainability initiatives across USC’s campuses, great opportunities exist to expand and enhance USC’s research strengths and capabilities in sustainability.

OPPORTUNITY
The President’s Sustainability Research Award will provide seed funding to enable researchers to submit highly competitive applications for federal funding, including large center and related programs, early career awards, and individual research projects. The goal of using these funds is to maximize the probability of obtaining federal research support for the proposed effort. The project period for awards made under this program will be one year.
TOPICS

Topics for this Request for Proposals are listed below in bold. Suitable projects within each topic include, but are not limited to, the following examples:

- **Human Health and Well-Being**: Health approaches to promote general well-being and wellness, community health, health equity, equitable and environmentally just infrastructure, promoting and creating healthier environments, and disease determinants spanning environmental, nutritional, social, psychosocial, genetic, and epigenetic factors.

- **Infrastructure and Built Environment**: Decarbonization, transportation operations and logistics, system design, integrated capacity planning, forecasting, and public health intervention for improved delivery.

- **Natural Environment/Ecosystem Services**: Natural environment resilience and ecosystem preservation, natural environments in the context of the green and blue economy, and holistic research across the natural and social sciences and humanities focused on understanding the environment.

- **Communications, Policy, & Institutions**: Policy improvement for the environment and sustainability, sustainability policies and planning, and analytic and methodological studies focused on the environment and communities impacted by the current environment.

- **Risk Analysis and Economic Impacts**: Economic impact modeling focused on the environment and sustainability, sustainable business solutions research, and planning for climate change and sustainability with an economics focus.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

It is expected that instrumentation funded under this program will yield a return on investment of at least 10 times the funding received for an application submitted to this Request for Proposals. For both subprograms, this will be determined by considering the magnitude of future funding awarded by federal agencies or other external sponsors that was enabled by the research funded under this award.

FUNDING TARGETS

Proposals submitted to the President’s Sustainability Research Award are required to apply to a federally funded grant program that broadly focuses on aspects of sustainability; the below list of example funding targets and grant mechanisms that support relevant projects is not exhaustive nor inclusive:

- **National Institutes of Health (NIH) Research Project Grant Program (R01)** ([https://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/r01.htm](https://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/r01.htm)).
  Annual Deadline: February, June, and October.

- **National Institutes of Health (NIH) Specialized Center Grants (U54)** ([https://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/ac_search_results.htm?text_curr=u54&amp%3BSearch.x=0 &amp%3BSearch.y=0&amp%3BSearch_Type=Activity](https://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/ac_search_results.htm?text_curr=u54&amp%3BSearch.x=0 &amp%3BSearch.y=0&amp%3BSearch_Type=Activity)).
  Annual Deadline: January, May, and September.

- **National Science Foundation (NSF) Environmental Sustainability Program** ([https://beta.nsf.gov/funding/opportunities/environmental-sustainability-1](https://beta.nsf.gov/funding/opportunities/environmental-sustainability-1)).
  Annual Deadline: Proposals are accepted at any time.

  Annual Deadline: January.

RESOURCES FOR SUBMITTING GRANT PROPOSALS

Applicants selected for funding are required to contact Research Strategy & Development (RSD), a Research
Innovation suboffice dedicated to supporting faculty in the preparation of competitive applications to federal funding agencies. RSD has considerable experience in generating and submitting proposals to federal agencies. RSD can provide support services to applicants, including science writing, budget preparation, and supporting documentation collection. Specific support provided is contingent on RSD workload and prior commitments. Applicants should contact RSD by sending an email to robyngil@usc.edu.

RESOURCES FOR PROMOTING INNOVATION

Applicants selected for funding are required to contact USC Stevens Center for Innovation (USC Stevens). USC Stevens is the university’s technology licensing office, responsible for the translation of USC research into products for public benefit through licenses, collaborations, and the promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation. USC Stevens staff can provide critical guidance related to the invention disclosure and technology licensing processes, as well as an overview of USC’s policies related to intellectual property, researcher IP rights, and responsibilities, amongst other topics. Specific support provided may include organized events through Research and Innovation’s Center for Excellence in Research, and is contingent on USC Stevens workload and prior commitments. Applicants should contact USC Stevens by sending an email to stvinfo@usc.edu.

PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

Applicants must carefully follow instructions. Information uploaded beyond what is requested will not be included in the proposal package provided to reviewers.

a) **Award Program:** Specify the program to which you are applying (Large Research Award or Small Research Award).

b) **Brief description:** (not to exceed 60 words): A brief description of the proposed work.

c) **Abstract:** (not to exceed 20 lines of text): Provide a stand-alone succinct description of the proposed work.

d) **Narrative:** (not to exceed 5 pages): Page limits are inclusive of figures and tables and include 1” margins of single-spaced text in Arial font. The following headers should be included:

   a. **Background, Significance, & Broader Impact:** Describe the societal relevance and benefit of the proposed project. Describe the area of research to be supported from the following perspectives: What is the goal of the research in terms of advancing fundamental knowledge in sustainability? In general, what is the importance of the project to USC, the research community, and society? What is the state of the research activity at USC and elsewhere, and what are the important research questions for the topic?

   b. **Approach:** Describe the scientific hypotheses and specific activities to be supported by the research award, and how these will contribute to the submission of a successful proposal to a federal agency.

   c. **Funding Target:** Describe the specific federal funding opportunity to be pursued (including URL) to which you commit to applying.

   d. **Project Team:** Identify a USC PI (or Co-PIs) and any USC Co-Is. Proposals should include a detailed description of the proposal team, including a discussion of each team member’s scientific expertise and contribution to the proposed effort, as well as past and current research that is relevant to this effort. Discuss why the proposal team would be successful in pursuing this opportunity, and how the research expertise of the PI/Co-PIs and any Co-Is will be integrated through the proposed project.

   e. **Timeline:** Provide a detailed timeline of activities and milestones to be completed, including a targeted submission date for the opportunity identified as the Funding Target.
e) **Budget and Budget Justification:** (not to exceed 2 pages): Specify a project start and end date. Utilize standard budget categories, only including the allowable budget cost categories as detailed in the **Grant Conditions** section.

f) **Return on Investment:** Identify a Federal agency Funding Target (including URL) of at least 10x the funds requested under this RFP. For example, proposals requesting $60,000 in funding from this opportunity would need to identify an NIH grant that will generate a cumulative award of $600,000 or more (this includes total costs summed over all award years).

g) **Grant Submission Commitment:** The proposal must include a statement in which the applicant commits to submit a proposal to the opportunity or opportunities identified as the Funding Target.

h) **Innovation Ecosystem Commitment:** USC Research and Innovation (R&I) is committed to establishing a thriving innovation ecosystem at USC that will build collaborations between USC researchers and venture capital firms, accelerators, incubators, small and large businesses, and foundations. R&I is working closely with USC University Advancement to develop these partnerships. The proposal must include a statement in which the applicant commits to contacting University Advancement at hpourman@usc.edu to discuss the potential for obtaining funding for research that may arise as a result of this research project.

i) **Active Funding:** List all sources of internal and external support awarded during the past five years, current or pending, for the PI/Co-PIs and Co-Is. For each source, specify who on this proposal was involved, their role on the project, title of the award, period, award amount, and sponsor (including subagency).

j) **Letter(s) of Support:** Provide a letter(s) of support from the applicable individual(s).

k) **Federal Agency Review Documents:** Provide a copy of an NIH summary statement or NSF review document from the last submission (as applicable).

l) **Scientific References:** This includes citations listed in the narrative.

m) **Curriculum Vitae** (not to exceed 5 pages per PI/Co-PI/Co-I): Applicants may use any standardized CV format (e.g., NIH Biographical Sketch, NSF Biographical Sketch, etc.).

**ELIGIBILITY**

PIs/Co-PIs must be permanent, full-time faculty at USC. Tenure track and non-tenure track faculty are eligible; visiting and adjunct faculty are not eligible to apply.

**GRANT CONDITIONS**

R&I’s awards and grant programs are administered by the Research Initiatives and Infrastructure (RII) office.

- If a faculty has an industry relationship, an approved management plan must be in place prior to receipt of award (https://disclose.usc.edu). Teams that will form a startup should anticipate submitting a conflict of interest disclosure. Questions regarding conflict of interest and disclosures can be directed to Ben Bell in the Office of Compliance (benjamab@usc.edu).

- At the time of being notified by RII that an award will be made and as a condition of funding, awardees will provide to RII the name, title, and email address of a USC senior business official who will establish an internal funding account in which RII funds for the award will be transferred.

- Within one month of being notified by RII that an award will be made and as a condition of funding, awardees will provide RII with an account number and enable view access for the account, such that RII staff will be able to view the account balance. If this information is not provided to RII within
this timeframe, RII may elect to rescind the award and use the funds to make an award to another applicant.

- Awardees commit to submitting in the future an application or applications to a funding opportunity (Funding Targets) sponsored by a federal agency.

- Awardees commit to contacting Research Strategy & Development (RSD) to explore obtaining support services for external agency grant submissions, including science writing, budget preparation, and supporting documentation collection. Awardees contact RSD by sending an email to robyngil@usc.edu.

- Awardees commit to contacting USC Stevens Center for Innovation to obtain guidance related to the invention disclosure and technology licensing processes, as well as an overview of USC’s policies related to intellectual property, researcher IP rights and responsibilities, amongst other topics. Awardees contact USC Stevens by sending an email to stvinfo@usc.edu.

- Failure to spend at least half of the awarded funds within six months of the project start date may result in the suspension of the remaining funds.

- Awardees commit to attend an in-person ceremony with R&I leadership.

- This award will not provide financial support beyond the duration of the award and does not carry the opportunity for renewal.

- Funds not spent by the end of the project period will be returned to R&I.

- Awardees have discretion in budgeting and re-budgeting funds to meet their research needs within the fund's guidelines and the terms of the proposal. However, funds may not be transferred to another project or other researchers or institutions.

- **Small Program Award**
  - Allowable Budget Expenses:
    - Postdocs/graduate/undergraduate student RAs/administrative personnel salary & fringe, excluding funding student tuition and other student-related fees.
    - Materials & supplies
    - Other expenses
  
  - Non-allowable Budget Expenses:
    - Faculty salary & fringe
    - Equipment
    - Travel
    - Consultant costs
    - Subcontracts

- **Large Program Award**
  - Allowable Budget Expenses:
    - Faculty salary & fringe
    - Postdocs/graduate/undergraduate student RAs/administrative personnel salary & fringe, excluding funding student tuition and other student-related fees.
    - Materials & Supplies
    - Other expenses
  
  - Non-allowable Budget Expenses:
• Awards include fringe benefits but are not assessed Facilities & Administration Costs (formerly known as Indirect Costs).

• All USC rules, concerning conflict of interest, human subject research, animal research, etc., apply to projects funded under this program. Funding will only be provided following confirmation that all pertinent reviews have been submitted for approval by relevant committees (e.g., IRB, IACUC).

SCIENTIFIC REVIEW CRITERIA
Application review criteria will be based on the following:

1. Scientific Approach: Rigor and technical merit. This includes an assessment of the investigators, innovation, study design and research approach, and the research environment.

2. Significance/Broader Impacts: An assessment of the likelihood for the project to exert a sustained, powerful influence on the research field. Describe the impact on knowledge, practice, outcomes, or policy, societal benefit, and the contribution of the proposed work to scientific inquiry and discovery.

3. Feasibility: The applicant describes their relevant and necessary experience in research and administrative duties in direct relevance to the research focus area and regarding potentially leading to future research support Ability of the project to be completed within the designated project period.

4. Potential of Future Funding: A Funding Target expecting to yield a return on investment of at least 10x the funding requested has been specified, and this is an appropriate and realistic Funding Target based on the PI/Co-PI/Co-I’s expertise and funding history with the specific subagency sponsoring the Funding Target.

5. Budget: Cost-effectiveness and availability of any support/match funding from a USC school or program. Reviewers will consider whether the budget and the requested period of support are fully justified and reasonable in relation to the proposed activities.

PROGRAMMATIC REVIEW
In addition to a peer review, applications will be evaluated programmatically in terms of this program's and the university's strategic research priorities. Funding decisions will be made based on both peer and programmatic reviews. We will incorporate aspects of existing policies and procedures regarding funding decisions that are utilized by major federal funding agencies like NSF and NIH, i.e., proposals will be subject to scientific peer review and programmatic review. Programmatic review assures maximum efficiency for funding awards and strategic alignment with this program's and the university's strategic research priorities. While financial support may be obtained from any external sponsor, proposals that target federal funding agencies are of greatest interest.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION
The R&I and RII strongly support a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Proposals should incorporate meaningful DEI practices across the project team and proposed activities. This will be a consideration during the programmatic review.

REPORTING AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF SUPPORT
Awardees will be required to submit a one-page progress report, which will be due six months into the project period and at the point of project period completion. This report must detail scientific, financial, and research
performance over the preceding months. Any and all publications arising from work supported wholly or in part by instrumentation acquitted under this program must acknowledge the USC Research and Initiatives President’s Sustainability Research Award.

PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

Submit your proposal application utilizing the RII application submission and reporting portal. Go to https://rii.usc.edu/funding/oor-portal/ to log in or create an account using your USC email address.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND PROGRAM CONTACT INFORMATION

We encourage inquiries to RII concerning this funding opportunity and welcome the opportunity to answer questions from potential applicants. For additional information or inquiries, please send an email to rii@usc.edu with “President’s Sustainability Research Award” in the subject line.

APPLICATION CHECKLIST

☐ Award Program
☐ Brief Description
☐ Abstract
☐ Narrative
  ○ Background, Significance, & Broader Impacts
  ○ Approach
  ○ Funding Target
  ○ Project Team
  ○ Timeline
☐ Budget and Budget Justification
☐ Return on Investment
☐ Grant Submission Commitment
☐ Innovation Ecosystem Commitment
☐ Active Funding
☐ Letter(s) of Support
☐ Federal Agency Review Documents (as applicable)
☐ Scientific References
☐ Curriculum Vitae
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

Q1: Can I work with faculty across multiple USC schools?
A1: Absolutely—we strongly encourage applicants to work with colleagues across multiple USC schools.

Q2: Why does my team have to provide information on our current funding from federal agencies?
A2: The President’s Sustainability Research Award intends to support projects that have a high likelihood of impacting the quality and breadth of sustainability research ongoing at our university; to achieve increased research in topics related to sustainability, we must obtain external funding to solidify our research base in this area. We request applicants provide their current funding to evaluate research experience and grant project management experience at the federal level.

Q3: Why do I need to document a return on investment?
A3: Much like federal funding agencies, R&I has a budget that needs to be re-authorized yearly. The university has many competing interests, and R&I needs to make a compelling case every year to receive funding. The likelihood of receiving funds – and increasing R&I funding – is contingent upon the demonstration that the activities we support offer a significant return on investment and generate creative and research products that have a significant societal impact. The greater your project's return on investment, the more you help us advocate for our research funding allocation.

Q4: What is the difference between the Small Program Award and the Large Program Award?
A4: The President’s Sustainability Research Award has two award tracks—the Small Program Award will support projects of smaller scale in the formative stages of development or research projects being conducted at the individual level, while the Large Program Award will support larger-scale, collaborative research projects involving multiple investigators, schools, and/or departments.

Q5: If I am awarded in August, I may have missed deadlines for potential funding targets, but it also may be too soon for me to apply to some of the recommended funding targets that do not have deadlines for the next several upcoming months.
A5: The program deadlines are not matched to federal funding program deadlines in a given calendar year. You certainly can apply to this program in advance of federal funding deadlines, for submission to the next year’s deadlines.

Q6: How much funding can I request?
A6: Program caps are listed on page 1 of this RFP. You should request an amount you think is scientifically appropriate and justified. The requested budget is subject to both scientific peer and programmatic review, and any RII award made could be for a lesser amount than requested.

Q7: If my proposal is selected for funding, will I automatically receive my requested amount?
A7: Not necessarily. The budget is subject to scientific peer and programmatic review, and a recommended award may be for less than what was requested.

Q8: I am dissatisfied with my review. Can I rebut the review and get a new one?
A8: RII goes to considerable effort to ensure that the scientific peer review is fair and impartial. Constituting review committees and organizing reviews takes considerable time and effort. Thus, RII does not have the resources or a mechanism to re-review proposals. Thus, the results of the scientific peer review are final.