



The Beginning Farmer competitive grant program is funded through the generous support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State legislature. It is administered by the New York Farm Viability Institute in partnership with NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYS AGM). The upcoming Request for Proposals (RFP) utilizes the generous appropriation from the New York State Governor and legislature in the 2023/24 and 2024/25 fiscal years.

Beginning Farmer Competitive Grant Program Round One Review

The first round of the Beginning Farmer Competitive Grant Program was extraordinarily competitive. 297 applications were submitted requesting more than \$22 million, with \$850,000 available for funding.

19 projects were funded among many, many, strong applications. A new round of this program with an RFP proposed for December of 2025 will have twice as much funding available and will have an even greater impact for New York’s Beginning Farmers. We encourage both new and returning applicants to apply to this next round.

To help past and future applicants understand the characteristics of competitive proposals, NYFVI analyzed all 297 applications for trends and insights that could prove helpful for the next round of funding. Past applicants are encouraged to review their previous submissions to see how they align with the recommendations in this article. The insights are organized to reflect the three key scoring criteria: Farmer readiness, business readiness, and business impact.

Program Background

The Request for Proposals (RFP) encouraged applicants to consider how best to use this funding opportunity to advance their plan to grow their business and become a financially sustainable, independent, agricultural enterprise.

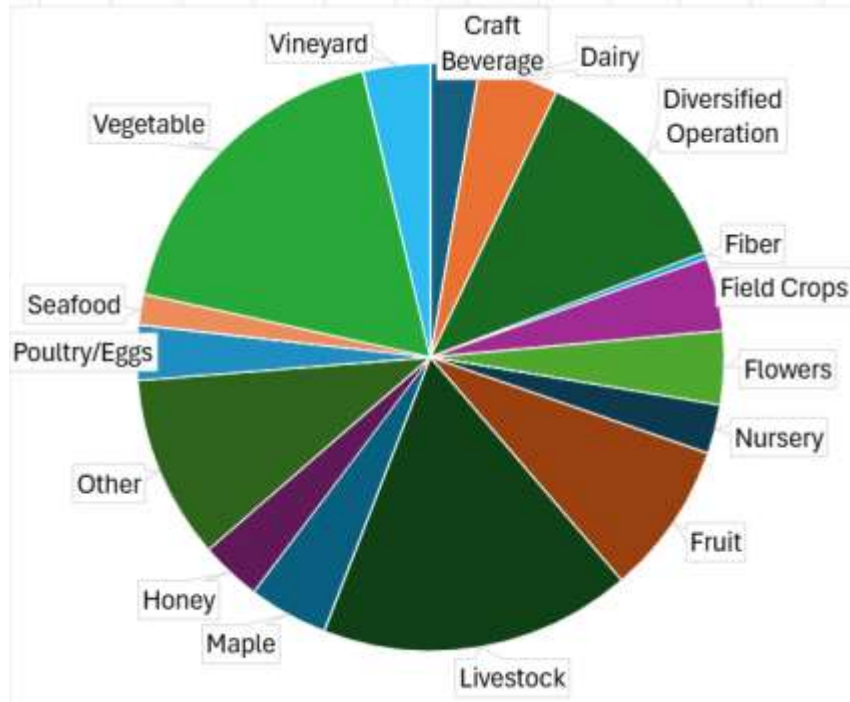
The RFP was open from October 25th, 2024 -January 24th, 2025. Proposals were accepted and evaluated in two groups, one for smaller projects and the other for larger ones. All grants required a 5% match.

	Proposals Submitted	Dollars Requested	Dollars Available	Projects Funded
Both Tracks	297	\$21,762,902	\$850,000	19
Track 1 (\$5k-\$25k)	145	\$2,9756,604	\$300,000	13
Track 2 (\$50k-\$250k)	152	\$18,787,298	\$550,000	6

Proposals were reviewed by individuals from across the state that work in organizations that support farmers. Expertise included both ag business management and production knowledge in a wide range of commodities.

Eligibility was limited to individuals who have not operated a farm for more than ten years; who would materially and substantially participate in the business and who were seeking to build an independent, commercial agricultural enterprise.

Beginning Farmer Round One Grant Applicants by Type of Organization



NYFVI coded data post application, since the initial form was not specific at this level. Consistent with NYS agriculture, applicants represented a wide range of operations. Not surprisingly, capital intensive operations such as dairy and field crops were underrepresented.

The 19 projects that were selected for funding included livestock, aquaculture, apples, wine grapes, craft beverages, poultry, vegetables, sheep dairy, nursery, cut flowers and diversified operations.

ROUND ONE GRANTEES

Track One

- Expanding Homegrown Fresh Produce Production to Meet Rising Demand, Carlberg Farm \$14,585.23
- Market Delivery Van, The Meadow Farmstead. \$15,375.24
- Mechanizing Weed Cultivation, Choy Division, \$15,565.71
- Apple Harvest Bins, A and M Hiller LLC, \$19,111.43
- Increasing profitability of leafy greens while preparing for GAP certification, North Point Community Farm, \$19,523.81
- Walk-In Cooler to Support an Increase in Sheep Dairy Production, Willow Pond Sheep Farm, \$22,009.04
- Potato Mechanization Project, Home Farm, \$23,619.05
- Apple Harvest Bins, Triple T Ranch, LLC, \$24,605
- Nursery Enterprise Expansion, Centurion Farm, LLC, \$25,000
- Expanding the Beef Herd, Johnk Family Farm, \$25,000
- Adoption of Vineyard Herbicide Spray Technology, Martin and Martin, \$25,000
- Deer Fence to protect a vegetable and flower farm, Thousand Leaf Gardens, \$25,000

Track Two

- Cargo Van to Increase Labor Efficiency & Profit Margins, Bottomland Farm \$42,089.11
- Expanding Poultry Housing for Started Pullet and Egg Production, Snowy Brook Farm LLC \$50,066.08
- Scaling up organic specialty dry bean and staple crop production, Buttermilk Bean LLC, \$60,000
- Scaling oyster cultivation through labor efficiency and technology adoption, Peeko Oysters, \$69,431.37
- Grain to Glass, Growing Great Malting Barley, Dancing Grain, \$109,257.14
- Oyster Processing Barn, Hampton Oyster Company, \$240,000

What We Learned

Farmer Readiness

Key Question:

Overall, does the applicant's experience and/or education indicate that they are reasonably prepared to oversee the grant request?

Key Observation: 37% of funded applicants work on their farm full-time. Most are working other jobs as they grow their business.

Key Observation: Applicants with more agricultural experience had a higher likelihood of being awarded larger grant sizes compared to those with less experience.

The program attracted a wide variety of beginning farmers from across the state. Some had many years of experience working on farms and studying agriculture, while others were new to the industry or had recently made the leap from a backyard hobby into a business as a second career. The following explores some of the farming and educational experience shown in the more competitive applications.

Farming Experience.

The applicants who were most competitive had more than 7 years of experience at an agricultural business and 5 or more years in an operational role. They represented 46% of all applicants, and 74% of all funded projects. The work histories of these individuals often demonstrated a clear progression from entry level work at other farms, to operational roles to then owning their own business. Other competitive applicants were able to build their businesses while working full-time at agricultural service organizations. Even if twice as much funding had been awarded, the experience profile of the most competitive proposals would remain largely the same.

37% of funded applicants work on their farm full-time. Most are working other jobs as they grow their business.

Education and Continued Learning.

The review of funded projects showed that although nearly 60% of these applicants did not study agriculture in school, they now actively engage with agricultural learning networks. They regularly attend workshops, field days, conferences, and other applied learning events offered through university Extension programs and other agricultural-focused organizations. These applicants were most likely to participate in marketing and business planning workshops. They also draw information and materials from multiple agricultural organizations, including NOFA-NY, USDA, NRCS, Northeast SARE, as well as other state and national resources.

Applicants who either did not keep up with their preferred agricultural industry or only received information via informal sources such as YouTube, 4-H or community interactions, were less likely to be among the funded group.

Experience and Grant Size.

Applicants with more agricultural experience had a higher likelihood of being awarded larger grant sizes compared to those with less experience. Applicants with less experience were more likely to be successful with a smaller request. While applicants transitioning from hobby farms often had several years of experience farming as a hobby, many were not able to demonstrate through business records or other means, the scale or relative success of these entities to show that they were ready to take on larger projects.

Key Question:
Overall, is the business at an appropriate stage to utilize the funds requested?

What We Learned

Business Readiness

New York has a wide range of agricultural businesses and applications reflected the diversity of New York agriculture. The type of product was not a predictor of whether an application would be competitive.

The majority of applicants' businesses earned less than \$50,000 annually; a third earned less than \$5,000. Applicants whose business was already generating revenue were more likely to succeed in the program. However, not all funded projects had high revenue numbers, with 26% earning less than 50,000.

Funded applicants had strong financial management routines, were very clear on what product(s) they were planning to produce, what the demand was for that product, and who their customers were.

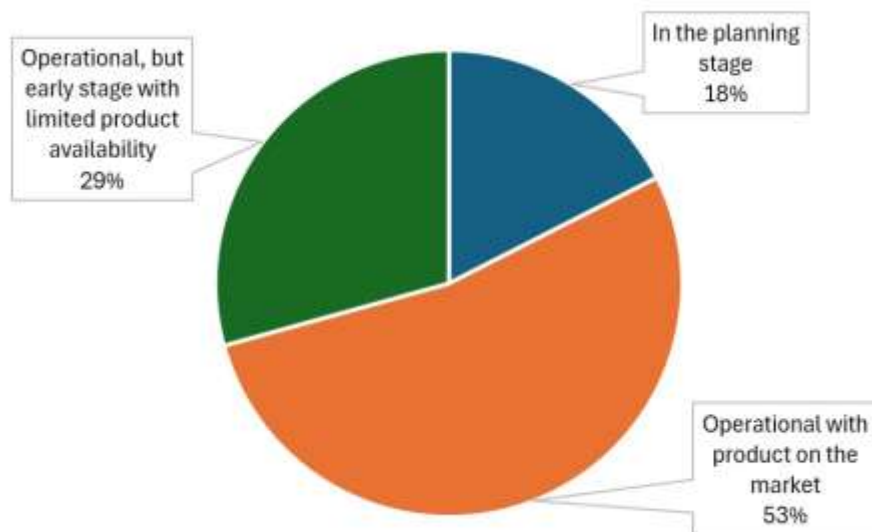
Stage of Business.

Businesses that were operational with product on the market, and that were more than 1 years old, were more competitive in the program. Among all applicants, 53% are operational with product on the market, among the funded projects that number is 100%. Even if twice as much funding had been available, 94% of the projects would have been operational with products on the market.

Among all applicants, 48% of their businesses were less than 4 years old with many being recently incorporated for the purpose of this grant. No business under 1 year old was funded, and even with twice as much funding available that would not have changed. Among the funded projects, the age of businesses ranged between 2 and 10 years old, with an average age of 5.8 years.

Key Observation: Funded applicants had strong financial management routines, were very clear on what product(s) they were planning to produce, what the demand was for that product, and who their customers were.

Percentage of Applicants by Stage of Business



What We Learned

Key Question:

Does the potential impact, either short or long term, warrant the investment?

Business Impact: SMART Goals

Applicants were asked to communicate not just what the business sought to use the grant funds to purchase, but also the operational outcomes and economic benefits of the project in the form of a SMART goal. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound. These SMART goals focused on how the goods or services purchased by the grant funds would support the applicant's business in its efforts to become financially sustainable. Examples were provided in the RFP.

The most competitive projects came from applicants who had a deep understanding of their farm business, a clear goal for growth, and a realistic plan to achieve it. Successful applicants focused their proposals on the assets that would create the greatest value and provided numerical estimates of the business impact these assets would have. They demonstrated strong research by identifying the right asset, explaining how it would address a specific problem, and offered realistic financial projections for their farm. They were able to clearly articulate a return on this investment of NY State funds in terms of business revenue and profitability, as well as provide a realistic timeline for that achievement. *Applicants who did not include measurable data or numbers in their SMART goals were not competitive.*

Below is the SMART Goal from a competitive application. The total request was \$14,585.

By the end of growing season 2026, my farm will increase average production capacity of tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet corn, winter squash, and pumpkins by 66% through the use of new equipment and season extension, resulting in an increase of revenue of \$15,896, with a savings of labor of \$1,024.

The applicant provided the following information about how the numbers were calculated.

I used my sales data from Square- pounds sold and price per pound to figure out 2024's total pounds sold and revenue for tomatoes (2,355 lbs.), cucumbers (267 lbs.), winter squash (2,055 lbs.), pumpkins (8,056 lbs.), and sweet corn (14,702 lbs.). I then calculated an increase in acreage due to efficiencies of equipment (sweet corn +3 acres, squash +1 acre, and pumpkins +1 acre) or an increase in yield due to earlier crops and higher yields via high tunnel production (tomatoes 72% and cucumbers 125%). I averaged these estimated yields to obtain 66% and applied that increase in production to 2024 revenue, assuming I charge the same price per pound. For labor savings, I figured how many hours each piece of equipment could save me, at \$16 per hour.

Additional examples of successful SMART goals can be found at the end of this document.

Key Observation:

The strongest applications came from beginning farmers who had a deep understanding of their operations and could clearly connect how a specific investment would improve their business.

What We Learned

Business Impact: Use of Funds

The type of project that an applicant chose to seek funding appeared to matter. When diving deeper into the use of funds amongst the competitive projects, NYFVI observed two key patterns.

Focused projects were more competitive.

Applicants with more focused projects that used fewer budget categories were more likely to be funded. 175 applicants (58%) used only a single budget category. Among the funded projects, that number was 73%. If resources were doubled and ~35 projects funded, a focused project was still more likely to succeed with around 75% of projects only utilizing a single category.

Machinery and Equipment projects were more competitive.

The data in the table below highlights how proposals that requested machinery/equipment were more competitive than other types of projects. This might be a result of those projects being more focused, or it could be that they have more immediate, measurable benefits.

Use of Funds by Budget Category, Count and Percentage						
Budget Category	All Data Number	All Data %	Count Funded	% Funded	Count Double Funded	% Double Funded
Construction/Improvements	158	29%	5	20%	10	21%
Inventory	45	8%	0	0%	1	2%
Land	11	2%	0	0%	0	0%
Livestock	27	5%	1	4%	2	4%
Machinery/Equipment	193	36%	13	52%	24	51%
Marketing	29	5%	0	0%	1	2%
Other*	30	6%	4	16%	5	11%
Training	12	2%	0	0%	1	2%
Wages	34	6%	2	8%	3	6%

The costs that are included in the 'Other' category are typically misclassified by applicants and are later moved to the correct designated categories for the funded projects.

Double shows what the data would look like if \$1.7 million had been awarded.

What We Learned

Summary

The first round of this grant program was competitive, and NYFVI expects that future rounds will also be competitive. Although more funds will be available, applicants should invest time now in thinking through their business goals and determining which of their needs may be the best fit for the grant program. A strong understanding of your market, and operational costs for each area of your business will help you both manage your farm and develop a competitive application.

It's important to remember that you don't need to think this through on your own. *Nearly 1/3 of all funded applicants sought support with their application either through workshops or one-on-one consultations.*

There are many FREE resources that can help you with business planning and will review grant applications. A list of organizations that provided support during the last grant round is available [here](#).

Top Five Takeaways for Competitive Grant Applications

1. **Check your eligibility** – Carefully read the RFP to make sure you meet all eligibility requirements and that this grant aligns with where you are in your beginning farmer journey.
2. **Know your business and its needs** – The better you understand your business and goals, the better you can explain why this funding is essential to help your farm grow.
3. **Be strategic** – Farmer readiness, business readiness, and business impact are all connected. Applicants were evaluated on their ability to lead the project they proposed. If you're at step 1, don't try to jump to step 10 in one grant cycle. Focus on taking the next realistic step forward.
4. **Show the value** – Demonstrate that this investment of New York State funds will lead to tangible benefits for your business, such as improved profitability. Think of it like a return on investment - how and when will the impact be realized?
5. **Ask for help** – Don't go it alone. Several organizations are available to guide you through the application process and strengthen your proposal.

EXAMPLES

SMART Goals

SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound. Strong SMART goals will always include numerical measurements.

Example 1: Vegetable Farm, \$14,585.

SMART GOAL: By the end of growing season 2026, my farm will increase average production capacity of tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet corn, winter squash, and pumpkins by 66% through the use of new equipment and season extension, resulting in an increase of revenue of \$15,896, with a savings of labor of \$1,024.

SMART GOAL ESTIMATES: I used my sales data from Square- pounds sold and price per pound to figure out 2024's total pounds sold and revenue for tomatoes (2,355 lbs.), cucumbers (267 lbs.), winter squash (2,055 lbs.), pumpkins (8,056 lbs.), and sweet corn (14,702 lbs.). I then calculated an increase in acreage due to efficiencies of equipment (sweet corn +3 acres, squash +1 acre, and pumpkins +1 acre) or an increase in yield due to earlier crops and higher yields via high tunnel production (tomatoes 72% and cucumbers 125%). I averaged these estimated yields to obtain 66% and applied that increase in production to 2024 revenue, assuming I charge the same price per pound. For labor savings, I figured how many hours each piece of equipment could save me, at \$16 per hour.

- Plastic mulch removal post-harvest clean up- 32 hours \$512
- Planting labor with 2 row planter vs. planting by hand-16 hours \$256
- Pre-Planting prep work with rototiller- \$256

There are additional benefits in crop health and vitality hopefully captured in the increase in yields for the fertilizer injector”

Example 2 : Apple Farm, \$24,605 requested

SMART Goal : By the 2025 harvest season (Sept./Oct. 2025), we will purchase 185 apple bins to support its expanding crop. This acquisition will allow us to pick an additional 4,070 bushels of apples. With an average sales price of \$20/ bushel, this acquisition will allow us to sell an additional \$81,400 of apples this coming year. This will be a sustaining investment because the bins are reusable and will last the full 25 year life of the orchard, and likely still be serviceable when the orchard begins replanting in 2045.”

SMART Goal Estimates : Our estimate on the price/bushel is based on our last three years of production. Production numbers are also historical. Last year we produced approximately 750 bins of apples. We maxed out the bin rentals from our buyers and were still short 70 bins, which we were able to rent from an orchard in our county that had a low crop due to hail. We do not expect that to be a repeatable opportunity and need to begin purchasing bins each year until we have sufficient bins of our own to guarantee our ability to pick our full crop. This grant would be used on a one-time basis to make our first annual purchase of 185 bins. We estimate that our increased production will even use all of the additional 185 bins and still require us to source additional bins from other growers.

EXAMPLES

SMART Goals

Example 3: Poultry farm \$50,066 requested

SMART Goal: By 2028, gross farm income will increase by 50% and we'll double profitability by increasing numbers and improving the quality of our laying flock, started pullet flocks, and breeding flocks. This will be accomplished through the renovation of a 35'x60' pole barn for added capacity and maintenance of bird health, an upgraded water system to improve egg and pullet quality, and a renovated driveway to improve delivery access, particularly feed deliveries.

Adding two pullet flocks per year adds 300 more birds and increases farm gross income by \$7,140 and net income by \$3,060 annually. By decreasing death losses and culls by 10% through better housing, water, and quality feed, our net pullet flock income will increase by 10%, or \$866 per year.

By doubling the number of laying hens from 250 to 500 hens, we will double the number of eggs produced to just over 4,150 dozen per year, earning an additional gross annual income of \$10,300 and net annual income of \$1,664. Decreasing production losses due to illness, nutrition, and water quality should result in a 10% increase in total net income of \$332 per year.

SMART Goal Estimates: The estimates for pullets and table eggs were calculated from the review of 2024 income, sales numbers, and costs. Our market demand increase has been relatively linear over the last three years, so I can predict what future demand will be with relative certainty.