



## Fiscal Year 2027 Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund Grant Guidelines and Criteria: Rural Entrepreneurship, Agricultural, Workforce, and Cooperative Development

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**Overview:** The objective of RMPIF is to help raise the overall standard of living in rural areas to a level that meets or exceeds statewide benchmark averages by 2030, while strengthening rural economies, supporting agricultural viability, conserving working lands and natural resources, and sustaining the quality of life and community character that are central to rural areas, including open spaces, farms, forests, and the shared values of rural residents. Resources provided to RMPIF are designed to facilitate significant targeted investments in important economic and community development programs and promote regional and intergovernmental cooperation. These investments will also enable local and regional public and nonprofit organizations to leverage additional non-state financial and human resources to facilitate the realization of sustainable rural development objectives. The Fund will serve the interests of the entire State by:

- Encouraging the increase of entrepreneurial activity and commerce and a balanced economy in the State;
- Relieving conditions of unemployment and underemployment in rural areas;
- Assisting in the retention of valuable farm and forest land for productive use by present and future generations;
- Promoting intergovernmental cooperation and public sector/private sector partnerships in and between rural and other areas;
- Enhancing the deployment of housing, transportation, water, wastewater, and broadband communications infrastructure and services in rural areas;
- Supporting rural commercial center redevelopment and community revitalization efforts; and,
- Generally promoting the health, happiness, safety, employment opportunity, and general welfare of the residents of each of the rural counties and municipal corporations of the State.

**Rural Entrepreneurship Development:** Between one-third and two-thirds of any economy's growth is attributable to entrepreneurial activity. Finding ways to transform the resourcefulness, innovation, and self-reliance that is so often found in rural communities into growing, innovative businesses is a challenge many rural economic development professionals are increasingly embracing as an effective and important strategy for growing the tax base, expanding economic opportunities, and creating sustainable local economies.

Because of the strong correlation between a high level of entrepreneurship and high economic growth, rural entrepreneurship may well be the best economic development option for communities where citizens are typically poorer, older, and more isolated from markets than their urban or suburban counterparts.

Traditional economic development strategies that tend to focus on recruiting larger companies to relocate their operations to the region may not work in rural communities which often do not have the infrastructure or skilled or low-wage labor force necessary to attract or keep big employers. Focusing more on helping existing businesses grow and new businesses start offers better long-term prospects for many rural areas.

The Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund will promote entrepreneurship and assist efforts that provide training and technical assistance to the entrepreneurs who can help build prosperous and

sustainable rural communities by creating jobs, raising incomes, creating wealth, and improving the quality of life.

Rural entrepreneurship development would provide grants for entrepreneurial development activities of rural-serving nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions. Entrepreneurship, a key economic development strategy, supports existing rural business sectors (including agriculture and tourism), as well as innovation in technology and other economic development areas. We strongly encourage building partnerships with rural and urban businesses and entrepreneurs.

**Rural Agricultural Development: Agriculture** remains Maryland’s largest commercial economic sector and is incredibly important to our rural areas. Agriculture contributes approximately \$16.5 billion to the state economy supports 73,009 jobs and adds nearly \$610 million in combined state and local tax revenue. The total economic impact of resource-based industries in 2022 equaled \$20.1 billion, supported over 88,610 jobs, and generated over \$755 million in state and local tax revenue. RMC supports programs and policies that will sustain and enhance agricultural production and agritourism.

**Rural Workforce Development:** The Council supports apprenticeships, transitioning programs, and community colleges so adults can stay in their rural areas and become part of the rural workforce. Efforts to improve career and technology education through the implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future, including specifically agriculture education. Examples include but may not be limited to apprenticeship programs, STEM education, and summer enrichment programs. *Note – The FY2027 grant period will run from July 1, 2026, to June 30, 2027. The Council understands that programs that take place during the summer months may fall outside this designated time frame and special consideration will be made to accommodate these programs.*

In alignment with statewide priorities, RMC encourages the development and expansion of agricultural apprenticeship programs that create career pathways for students and adults into both on-farm and agricultural support occupations. These efforts aim to strengthen the agricultural workforce pipeline by supporting hands-on training opportunities in fields such as agronomy, agricultural engineering, veterinary services, conservation, and agribusiness. Projects that address barriers to establishing or scaling agricultural apprenticeships, including partnerships with industry, educational institutions, and workforce entities, are strongly encouraged.

**Rural Cooperative Development:** The Council supports programs that improve the economic conditions of rural areas by helping individuals and businesses start, expand, or improve rural cooperatives and other mutually owned businesses. Types of Cooperative Developments include the following:

- Consumer Cooperatives are owned by the people who buy the goods or use the services of the cooperative. Examples include housing, electricity and telecommunications, credit unions, healthcare, childcare, and funeral services.
- Producer Cooperatives are owned by people who produce similar types of products and collectively market them to improve their incomes. Examples include farmers, craftsmen, artisans.
- Worker Cooperatives are owned and governed by the employees of the business. Examples include restaurants, taxicab companies, timber processors, and light and heavy industries.
- Purchasing/Shared Services Cooperatives are owned and governed by independent business owners and government agencies that band together to enhance their purchasing power. Examples include independent business owners, small municipalities, and, in some cases, state governments that band together to enhance their purchasing power.

**Decisions:** Grant award determinations on applications are made by the independent Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund Grant Review Board set by law and consisting of the Secretaries (or their designee) of the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Health, Housing and Community Development and Natural Resources as well as the Chair (or the designee) of the Rural Maryland Council. Decisions by the RMPHF Grant Review Board are final and binding. At the discretion of the Grant Review Board, RMC staff may reach out to applicants for additional information.

**Fiscal Year 2027:** For Fiscal Year 2027, the State has budgeted \$981,250 in General Funds for the entrepreneurship portion of the RMPHF program. *Grant awards are contingent on funding availability.*

**Important Dates:**

- Grant Process Opening: Monday, April 20, 2026
- Call for Letter of Intent Deadline: Friday, May 15, 2026
  - *Grantees will be notified the week of June 8, 2026, on the Phase 1 decisions.*
- Full Application Deadline: Friday, July 10, 2026
- Awards announced the week of August 17, 2026

**Guidelines and Criteria for FY2027 Rural Entrepreneurship, Agricultural, Workforce, and Cooperative Development RMPHF Grant Applications**

**Eligible Applicants:** Applicants must be a local government, institute of higher education, regional council, or be a 501(c)(3) IRS tax designation or similar and serve a regional or statewide rural constituency. Community Colleges, Career Technology Centers, Regional Councils, and Libraries are eligible applicants. The applicant does not have to be located in a rural area or in the area it serves.

The State Recognized Regional Councils are eligible entities to apply for RMPHF competitive funds. These projects are encouraged to have co-applicants and multiple sources of funds.

All applicants must include an official IRS-issued W-9 form with their application, allowing RMC to verify the organization's name, address, and tax identification number. The address on the W-9 must match the organization's grant award address. If they do not match, payment processing may be delayed.

For non-profits, Applicants must be in "Good Standing" with the State of Maryland. To check your organization's status, visit [Maryland Business Express](#). We do not require a copy of the certificate; it is sufficient to provide a screenshot and attach it with your application AS LONG AS IT SHOWS WHETHER THE ENTITY IS CURRENTLY IN GOOD STANDING. An explanation for an entity not in good standing must be included with the application otherwise, the application will be rejected.

If applicable, applicants must be registered with the Maryland Secretary of State. To verify your organization's registration status, please visit [Maryland OneStop](#). Applicants are required to upload a screenshot of their registration status. If your organization is not registered, you will be asked to provide a brief explanation of your status and any steps being taken to resolve it as part of the application.

**Eligible Projects:** To be eligible, **proposals must be regional (two or more counties) or intergovernmental (meaning two units of government)** and be completed between August 1, 2026 and June 30, 2027.

**Application Limit:** The Rural Maryland Council will accept one application per organization for this grant cycle.

**Rural Counties:** State-determined rural counties are the following: Allegany, Calvert, Caroline, Carroll, Cecil, Charles, Dorchester, Frederick, Garrett, Harford, Kent, Queen Anne's, St. Mary's, Somerset, Talbot, Washington, Wicomico and Worcester. Regional projects may include non-rural counties but the majority of service must be provided in the above listed rural areas.

**Grant Amounts:** *GRANT AWARDS ARE SUBJECT TO FUNDING AVAILABILITY.* There is no maximum grant amount; however, the Grant Review Board would optimally fund eight entrepreneurial projects in FY2027. Past and current RMPIF grantees are eligible for an FY2027 grant if they have met all the requirements of their previous grant agreements, including reporting deadlines.

**Eligible Expenditures:**

- Salaries and Wages are allowable expenses. It is strongly encouraged to include a statement on sustainability for future years.
- Administrative costs including construction, leasing, and renovation of buildings are eligible expenses. Acquisition of land is not. The purchase or rental of vehicles are eligible expenses. The purchase of equipment is an eligible expense. These administrative expenses should not exceed more than 25% of the grant request. Quotes for purchases and construction work should be included.
- Meals are allowable if the costs are reasonable and a justification is provided that such activity maintains the continuity of the meeting and to do otherwise will impose arduous conditions on the meeting participants.
- Indirect administrative costs are capped at 15%.

**Ineligible Expenditures:**

- Contributions, donations, or subsequent sub-awards to third parties are ineligible expenses.
- Gift cards are also ineligible expenditures.
- Organized fundraising including financial campaigns, solicitation of gifts or bequests, or similar expenses incurred to raise capital or obtain contributions regardless of the purpose for which the funds will be used are ineligible. Advocacy and lobbying activities are also ineligible.
- Grant funds may not be used to purchase live animals, as the Rural Maryland Council cannot assume responsibility for their care and well-being.

**Match Requirement: Applicants** must secure a minimum 25% cash match funds from non-state sources for the entire project proposed in the application. Federal funds are considered matching cash funds. A stronger cash match will result in a higher score on the grant evaluation. RMPIF funds will not be released until proof of a match is submitted.

**Changes and Unused Funds:** Only very minor changes in scope are allowed after a grant has been awarded. Some project timelines can also be modified. Unused grant funds must be returned to the Rural Maryland Council no later than July 15, 2027.

**Ranking Criteria:** The Grant Review Board uses the following criteria in reviewing applications.

1. Basic Criteria: Applicant meets all basic eligibility requirements – it serves a regional (multi-county) or statewide rural constituency; is a community college or institution of higher education; or is intergovernmental.
2. Applicant has clearly identified a well-substantiated need and developed a Scope of Work that clearly describes specific project activities and how an RMPIF grant will be used.

3. The proposal will significantly impact the quality of living in rural Maryland. The proposal demonstrates substantial value and lasting impact by providing information that includes relevant background research, opportunities for replication, and a statement of impact.
4. Specific goals and measurable objectives were clearly stated and appear to be achievable. Goals are specific, measurable, achievable, reasonable, and time bound. Its Mission Statement is included and lends itself to the activities and goals addressed in the proposal.
5. The organization has the experience, expertise, and resources to deliver on this scope of work. Operational and line-item budgets were included and seem reasonable.
6. The applicant has 25% cash match funds from non-state sources.
7. Other organizations, businesses, agencies, and/or other community-based entities have expressed strong support for the organization's work and planned grant activities. Letters of support and other supportive materials (newspaper articles, etc.) were included.
8. Project/proposal falls under one or more of the following priorities (entrepreneurship, infrastructure or health care) and clearly defines a designated benchmark and outcome associated with the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund.

**Grant agreements:** Awardees are required to execute a grant agreement. A sample grant agreement is available on the RMC grant opportunities webpage.

**Record keeping:** Grantees are required to record expenditures and file an interim and final report with the RMC. Reporting guidelines are available on the RMC grant opportunities webpage.

**Capitalizing grant funds:** If the approved project is for a Capitalizing Grant Loan Program then the organization will be required to submit an annual report for up to 3 years after the establishment of such Program.

**Application Process:**

- **Phase 1: Letter of Intent – Due Friday, May 15, 2026, at 11:59 pm**
- Access to the online grant platform:  
<https://www.grantinterface.com/Home/Logon?urlkey=ruralmaryland>
- **Submitted Proposals will be notified the week of June 8, 2026, of acceptance status.** An invitation to submit a full application and materials to Phase 2 will be provided to accepted proposal applicants only.
- Awards will be announced the week of August 17, 2026
- Don't let your proposal be declared ineligible on a technicality:
  - Proposals received after the deadline will not be accepted and will be deemed ineligible.
  - Proposals must be submitted electronically to be received.

Please contact the RMC Executive Director, Charlotte Davis at [charlotte.davis@maryland.gov](mailto:charlotte.davis@maryland.gov) or (410) 841-5772 for any administrative guidance or questions.