



# Request for Proposals: Evaluation of ARC’s Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Grants

Open date:	May 22, 2024
Questions due:	June 7, 2024
Answers posted on ARC website:	June 14, 2024
Proposal due date:	July 12, 2024
Selection date:	August 30, 2024
Contract period:	October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025 (with possible extension up to March 31, 2026)

## Overview of Request for Proposals (RFP)

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) invites proposals from qualified consultants to assess the performance of ARC’s tourism and outdoor recreation grants and better understand the grant implementation experiences of grantees. ARC investments in tourism and outdoor recreation assist Appalachian communities in leveraging the Region’s rich cultural and environmental resources sustainably for job creation and local economic growth. Supported projects can involve a wide range of both construction and non-construction activities, from strategic planning and hospitality training to technology implementation and recreational trail and facility construction.

This program evaluation will examine roughly 170 grants that closed between fiscal years 2018 and 2022, representing over \$33 million in ARC funding. These projects aimed to create over 1,200 jobs, serve roughly 350 communities and over 2,200 businesses, and attract almost 800,000 new day visitors to Appalachian communities.

The evaluation should include quantitative analysis of the grant portfolio, input from grantees, and to the extent possible, input from grantee beneficiaries. Questions to be addressed should cover grant performance, factors of successes and challenges, and how ARC and grantees foster access to funding and tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Required deliverables include the following:

- Final report that includes key findings and recommendations
- Staff presentation, which may be conducted virtually
- Data files, including raw data, edited datasets, and results of statistical analyses. This will include an Excel spreadsheet formatted for uploading updated grant performance data to ARC’s grants management database.

# Background

## About Appalachia

The Appalachian Region (the Region), as defined in ARC's authorizing legislation, is a 206,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Forty-two percent of the Region's population is rural, compared with twenty percent of the national population.

The Region's economy, which was once highly dependent on extractive industries, has become more diversified in recent times and now includes larger shares of manufacturing and professional services, among other industries. Appalachia has made significant progress over the past five decades: Its poverty rate, which was 30.9% in 1960, fell to 14.5% over the 2017–2021 period. The number of high-poverty counties in the Region (those with poverty rates greater than 1.5 times the U.S. average) declined from 297 in 1960 to 116 over the 2017–2021 period. Since the 2012–2016 period, the share of Appalachian adults ages 25 and over with a bachelor's degree or higher has risen by nearly three percentage points, to 26%, in 2017–2021. Additionally, the high school completion rate for the Region is now almost equal to that of the country, after decades of lagging behind.

These gains have transformed the Region from one of widespread poverty to one of economic contrasts. Some communities have successfully diversified their economies, while others still require basic infrastructure such as roads, health clinics, and water and wastewater systems. The contrasts are not surprising in light of the Region's size and diversity—it extends more than 1,000 miles from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi and is home to over 26 million people.

## About the Appalachian Regional Commission

The Appalachian Regional Commission is a regional economic development agency serving 423 counties across the Appalachian Region. Established by an act of Congress in 1965, the Commission is composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states, as well as a federal co-chair appointed by the president of the United States and confirmed by the Senate. Annually, the group of governors elects one governor to serve as the states' co-chair. To strengthen local participation, ARC works with the Appalachian states to support a network of multicounty planning and development organizations, or local development districts (LDDs), throughout the Region. Seventy-four LDDs cover all 423 counties in the Region. The LDDs help identify needs of local communities, assist with participation in ARC programs, and at times serve as pass-through entities or fiscal agents to local grantees.

ARC's mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia. ARC funds projects that address the five goals identified in its [strategic plan](#):

1. Strengthen and diversify the Region's economy through inclusive economic development strategies and investments in entrepreneurship and tourism and outdoor recreation.
2. Expand and strengthen community systems (education, healthcare, housing, childcare, and others) that help Appalachians obtain a job, stay on the job, and

advance along a financially sustaining career pathway.

3. Ensure that the residents and businesses of Appalachia have access to reliable, affordable, resilient, and energy efficient utilities and infrastructure in order to successfully live and work in the Region.
4. Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by preserving and investing in the Region's local, cultural heritage, and natural assets.
5. Invest in the capacity of local leaders, organizations, and communities to address local challenges by providing technical assistance and support to access resources, engage partners, identify strategies and tactics, and conduct effective planning and project execution.

Each year, ARC provides funding for over 500 projects in the Appalachian Region in areas such as tourism and outdoor recreation, education and job training, telecommunications, infrastructure, community development, housing, and transportation. These projects create thousands of new jobs, improve local water and wastewater systems, train the Region's workforce, assist local communities with strategic planning, and provide entrepreneurial assistance to emerging businesses.

Additional information about the Appalachian Regional Commission can be found at [www.arc.gov](http://www.arc.gov).

## **About ARC's Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Grants**

ARC investments in tourism and outdoor recreation assist Appalachian communities in leveraging the Region's rich cultural and environmental resources sustainably for job creation and local economic growth. Supported projects can involve a wide range of both construction and non-construction activities, from strategic planning and hospitality training to technology implementation and recreational trail and facility construction.

ARC generally categorizes tourism and outdoor recreation development activities under Goal 4 of its strategic plan. Examples of eligible tourism and outdoor recreation projects include, but are not limited to:

- Developing a comprehensive tourism strategic plan to identify and connect existing assets, explore business growth opportunities, and prioritize future investments.
- Creating a network of arts, crafts, or food tourism trails (activities could include research and data collection, site documentation, web portal and visitor itinerary development, etc.).
- Expanding or improving an existing regionally connected trail system (activities could include enhancing trail access and trailheads as well as installing parking areas).
- Conducting market analysis and business planning to assess the financial viability of a tourism-related construction project.
- Developing a tourism-based entrepreneurship training program to improve artisans' business and marketing skills.
- Implementing innovative technologies that create new visitor experiences.

## **Construction Projects**

Many ARC tourism and outdoor recreation grants are administered by other federal or state agencies. This is because ARC does not administer any construction projects. ARC operates in partnership with federal and state agencies under an MOU (Memorandum of

Understanding) to manage federal construction grants throughout the region. Applicants for construction grants must secure a letter from the appropriate federal or state agency, known as a basic agency letter, indicating their willingness to administer ARC funds for any proposed infrastructure project.

ARC's Policy for the Development of the Travel and Tourism Industry requires that tourism-related construction projects meet the highest standards for cost-benefit analysis and estimation and documentation of economic outcomes. Proposals to use ARC funds for capital investments in this area undergo a stringent review process.

More information about ARC's tourism and outdoor recreation grants is available at [www.arc.gov/investment-priority/building-regional-culture-and-tourism](http://www.arc.gov/investment-priority/building-regional-culture-and-tourism).

### **Grant Cohort**

This program evaluation will examine roughly 170 grants that closed between fiscal years 2018 and 2022, representing over \$33 million in ARC funding. These projects aimed to create over 1,200 jobs, serve roughly 350 communities and over 2,200 businesses, and attract almost 800,000 new day visitors to Appalachian communities.

ARC investments in the tourism and outdoor recreation portfolio typically track one or more of the following ARC performance measures:

- Acreage
- Businesses served and improved
- Communities served and improved
- Jobs Created
- Leveraged Private Investment
- Linear Feet
- New Visitors – Days
- New Visitors – Overnights
- Participants served and improved
- Plans/Reports
- Square Feet

## **Scope of Work**

The goals of this evaluation are to assess the performance of ARC's tourism and outdoor recreation grants, better understand the grant implementation experiences of grantees, highlight promising practices among grantees, and provide ARC with a set of recommendations for improvement.

This project aims to achieve the above goals by summarizing grant data, collecting updated grant performance data from past grantees, and collecting additional feedback from past grantees, including qualitative input on their experiences implementing their ARC grants.

To the extent possible, ARC is also interested in direct feedback from grantee beneficiaries/clients. ARC does not have contact information for grantee beneficiaries, and we recognize that some grantees may not be able to share such information.

Proposals should include an outline of the data collection and analysis to be conducted, a work plan, and a schedule for reports and deliverables. The evaluation should address the following questions:

### **Description of the grant portfolio**

- What were the goals of the projects?
- What approaches did the projects use to meet these goals?
- What types of organizations received the grants and what are the characteristics of their beneficiaries?

### **Grant performance**

- What specific outputs and outcomes were projects designed to achieve, and to what extent did projects meet their performance goals?
- To what extent were project-related activities sustained beyond the period covered by the ARC grant and for what amount of time?
- To what extent do planning grants result in the subsequent implementation of a project?
- What changes did grant beneficiaries (i.e., grantee clients) experience as a result of these projects?

### **Factors of successes and challenges**

- What factors influenced projects' successful implementation and sustainability?
- What challenges/barriers to success did projects face and how were they addressed?
- What factors influence the likelihood that a planning grant will result in the subsequent implementation of a project?
- What impacts did the pandemic have on tourism and outdoor recreation grantees' ability to serve their communities/beneficiaries?
- What changes have tourism and outdoor recreation grantees implemented in response to needs and opportunities that emerged from the pandemic?
- What impact do ARC policies and supports have on grantee success?
  - To what extent has the ARC Policy for the Development of the Travel and Tourism Industry<sup>1</sup> influenced grantees' emphasis on economic development? To what extent has the policy posed a challenge for grantees?
  - What impact do ARC-supported technical assistance initiatives have on applicants' ability to design a project, craft a grant application, and implement a grant?
    - [Appalachian Communities Gateway Initiative](#)
    - [Local Foods, Local Places](#)
    - [Recreational Economies in Rural Communities](#) (RERC)
    - Grant application technical assistance offered to potential ARC applicants
- Which external data sources (e.g. local chamber of commerce, county parks and recreation, state tourism agency, etc.) do grantees find most helpful for designing their projects and crafting their grant applications, as well as for tracking grant performance?

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix of [ARC Project Guidelines](#).

## **Fostering Access**

How has ARC fostered access to funding for diverse potential applicants?

How have grantees fostered access and lowered barriers to their programs/services/sites for diverse populations?

## **Recommendations**

The final report should include strategic, actionable recommendations, for both ARC and the local communities and organizations that are implementing tourism and outdoor recreation projects, related to the following topics:

- Implementation of tourism and outdoor recreation grants
- Support provided by ARC to applicants and grantees throughout the grant lifecycle
- Assessing grant performance
- Fostering access

## **Methodology**

The successful applicant will develop a feasible methodology to complete the scope of work within the given timeframe. The methodology should include the following:

- Quantitative analysis of the grant portfolio
- Framework for gathering and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data from grantees (may include surveys, focus groups, interviews, site visits, and/or other methods)
- Framework for completing at least 10 case studies to highlight promising practices and/or innovative approaches. Specific attention should be given to best practices in communities that are rural, economically distressed, or otherwise underserved.

## **Data Provided**

ARC will provide the contractor with an Excel file dataset that includes the following:

- Descriptive information about each grant (start date, close date, strategic plan goal and objective, grant type, subtype, etc.)
- A narrative description of the grant
- Grantee contact information
- Projected performance measures
- Closeout performance measures

The selected contractor will also have view-only access to ARC's grants management database, where further information may be accessed (such as a history of correspondence between the grantee and ARC staff and interim progress reports from the grantee).

## **Deliverables**

### *1. Final Report*

The final report will summarize evaluation findings and synthesize themes in the areas of grantee successes and challenges and progress towards performance goals. The report will include actionable recommendations aimed at ARC's implementation of the tourism and outdoor recreation grant program. A Microsoft Word file and an Adobe PDF must be submitted when the project is complete.

## 2. *Staff Presentation*

Findings and recommendations will be shared with ARC staff during an all-staff presentation. This presentation may be conducted virtually.

## 3. *Data Files*

The data files must include electronic versions of all relevant databases compiled during the study, including raw data (to the extent possible while protecting confidentiality of survey responses), edited datasets, and results of statistical analyses. This will include an Excel spreadsheet formatted for uploading updated grant performance data to ARC's grants management database.

## 4. *Other Deliverables as Suggested by Contractor*

# Technical, Management, and Cost Proposal Contents

## A. Technical Proposal

The technical proposal should not exceed 15 pages, not including the abstract, accompanying resumes, and organizational background materials.

### 1. *Summary Abstract (300 words)*

In this section, provide a brief abstract of the proposal by summarizing the background, objectives, proposed methodology, and expected outputs and results of this project.

### 2. *Methodology*

Describe the approach or methods you intend to use to accomplish all the tasks specified in this RFP. The proposal should identify the tasks in this project that will require participation by ARC staff. Further, the proposal should identify specific information needs, including sources, procedures, and individual research tasks that may need to be performed by ARC staff. Finally, the proposal should identify any difficulties that may be encountered in this project and propose practical and sound solutions to overcome these difficulties.

### 3. *Project Work Plan and Milestones*

The proposal should describe the phases into which the proposed work can be logically divided and performed. A schedule of milestones and deadlines should be specified for the completion of various work elements, including, for example, interviews, analyses, written progress reports, preliminary drafts for review, and final report. Regular check-in meetings with ARC staff are also required. Please note: It is the responsibility of the contractor to provide line editing of the final report/deliverable. Contractors should budget accordingly.

### 4. *Key Personnel*

Personnel performing the work must be described in this section, including the number of people and their professional classifications (e.g., project director, meeting facilitator, analyst, business consultant, writer, line editor, etc.). Brief resumes of the education and relevant experience of all key personnel are required. The selected contractor will be required to

furnish the services of those identified in the proposal as key personnel. Any change in key personnel is subject to approval by ARC.

## B. Management Proposal

### 1. *Business Management Organization and Personnel*

Furnish a brief narrative description of the organization, including the division that will perform the proposed effort, and the authority responsible for controlling these resources and personnel.

### 2. *Staffing Plan*

A staffing plan is required that describes the contractor's proposed staff distribution to accomplish this work. The staffing plan should present a chart that assigns the time commitment of each staff member to the project's tasks and schedule. In addition, the proposal should include a detailed description of activities for key project-related personnel and anticipated deliverables. Finally, the proposal should identify the relationship of key project personnel to the contracting organization, including consultants and subcontractors.

### 3. *Relevant Prior Experience*

The proposal must describe the qualifications and experience of the organization and the personnel to be assigned to the project. Information provided should include direct experience with the specific subject-matter area and must provide examples (links and/or attachments) of the three most similar projects undertaken by the applicant organization and the extent to which performance goals were achieved. Provide client organization names and addresses, names of contact persons, and email addresses and telephone numbers for reference.

### 4. *Contract Agreement Requirements*

This section of the proposal should contain any special requirements that the contractor wants included in the contract.

## C. Cost Proposal

The contract awarded for this project will be a FIRM FIXED-PRICE CONTRACT, with a total budget not to exceed **\$250,000**. Payments shall be made on a monthly or quarterly schedule (depending on contractor preference). The contract terms shall remain firm during the project and shall include all charges that may be incurred in fulfilling the terms of the contract.

Proposals must contain all cost information, including direct labor costs (consistent with the staffing plan), labor overhead costs, travel, estimated cost of any subcontracts, other direct costs, total direct cost and overhead, and total cost and fee or profit.

Proposals should include a plan for a kickoff meeting, regular check-in meetings, and a final presentation of key findings and recommendations to all staff. We anticipate these meetings will be conducted virtually. However, proposals should include travel costs, if applicable, for any potential in-person activities such as site visits.

ARC policy on allowable indirect overhead costs for university-based contracts is to permit universities to charge the same rates charged to their own state agencies. ARC will honor



indirect rates as suggested by the contractor. However, be aware that a lower indirect rate may be more competitive in the selection process.

## Proposal Submission

Proposals are due at or before 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time on July 12, 2024. Please send proposals as one Word file or PDF to Regina Van Horne, Program Evaluator, at [rvanhorne@arc.gov](mailto:rvanhorne@arc.gov).

Additionally:

- Submissions must be sent via email.
- Responses or unsolicited amendments will not be accepted after the closing date and time.
- Requests for time extensions past any deadlines will not be considered.
- Questions may be submitted to Regina Van Horne ([rvanhorne@arc.gov](mailto:rvanhorne@arc.gov)) by close of business on June 7. Answers will be posted on the [Contract Opportunities](#) section of the ARC website on June 14.

## Proposal Evaluation

ARC will select contractors through a competitive process based on the following criteria:

- A complete, clearly articulated study design and technically competent methodology that, at a minimum, addresses:
  - Analysis of grantee portfolio
  - Grantee survey
  - Gathering feedback from grantee beneficiaries
  - Case studies
  - Final report
  - Staff presentation
  - Excel spreadsheet for uploading performance data to ARC grants management database
- Qualifications and relevant prior experience evaluating tourism and outdoor recreation grant programs
- Relevance of similar projects undertaken by the applicant and inclusion of contact information for three references
- A credible management proposal for staffing, and the capability to carry out and support the project in a timely fashion
- Cost effectiveness of the proposal

It is anticipated that the contractor will be selected by August 30, 2024, for an estimated contract start date of October 1, 2024, and completion date of September 30, 2025. Depending on the project plan, contract extensions will also be considered up to March 31, 2026.