



Forest Restoration and the National Fire Plan: Tools for Communities and Contractors **TIPS FOR CONTRACTORS: SIMPLE HINTS FOR SUBMITTING A REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL**

The need for ecosystem restoration on our public lands is shifting the way the Forest Service offers work. Traditionally, there was a greater emphasis on timber sales awarded to the highest bidder and service work that mitigated the impacts of timber sales (site prep, tree planting, brush disposal, etc.). Today, the range of services being sought by land management agencies is broader and contracts are increasingly complex, sometimes combining service work and timber removal in one contract. Because of changes in procurement laws in the mid-1990s this work is increasingly offered through a Request for Proposals (RFP). The purpose of this tip sheet is to provide contractors with some simple advice on how to respond to a Request for Proposal.

WHAT IS A REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP)?

A RFP is a procurement tool used by agencies such as the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to solicit bids for larger and technically complex projects. In general, an RFP is used when the agency expects the project to cost more than \$100,000. In most cases, an RFP is evaluated as a best value basis, which means that considerations other than price are used. In addition, an RFP is often a “negotiated” contract, rather than a “sealed bid.” This means that you can change your bid after it is submitted or withdraw it any time *prior* to the award. It also means the contracting officer may come back for clarification. So, it is important to prepare the best proposal you can initially. For a more detailed description of RFP and other contracting mechanisms, please see “Procurement & Timber Sale Contracting Definitions” published by the Ecosystem Workforce Program.

THREE COMPONENTS TO SUCCESSFULLY OFFERING ON AN RFP

When competing for an RFP, contractors are asked to make an “offer” rather than a “bid.” Solicitations involving an RFP generally have three components: 1) A pre-offer process; 2) Proposal Evaluation; and 3) Price. Understanding these three components will help you write a more competitive proposal. It is important to invest the time and be thorough in submitting a proposal. In addition, if your offer is denied you are entitled to an explanation of why your bid was not selected. Below are some basic tips to guide you through that process.

The pre-offer process

Most commercial solicitations valued over \$25,000 must be posted on the web at www.fedbizopps.gov for a minimum of 30 days (this system has recently replaced the Commerce Business Daily). Under the National Fire Plan the 30-day requirement has been suspended. Generally, the pre-bid process involves advertising the solicitation, and at the discretion of the contracting officer, a pre-bid tour.

There are three layers of authority in procurement decisionmaking: 1) The contracting officer (CO), 2) the contracting officer representative (COR), and 3) the contracting inspector. Knowing who these individuals are will help you through the pre-bid, award, and implementation process.

- ❑ **Make no assumptions:** Thoroughly read and review the entire contract: both the boilerplate and technical specifications. Make no assumptions based on previous contracts you have bid or performed in the past.

- ❑ **Attend the pre-bid tour:** If you have an opportunity to tour the site then take it. It will be the best way to get an accurate idea of the project and will help you prepare the best RFP.
- ❑ **Clarify legal and contractual issues:** Direct any legal or contractual questions to the awarding contracting officer. For example, there are often clauses referenced, but not stated in the solicitation, such as limits on percentage of work subcontracted out or criteria for Hub Zone preference. Generally, Hub Zone projects are solicited only from qualifying contractors. You need to understand these clauses in order to create a competitive bid.
- ❑ **Know who you are working for:** Knowing who wrote the technical specifications in the RFP and who will be administering and inspecting the work on the ground (usually the COR) is the best way to build a good track record and to ensure you are delivering the desired services. It makes sense to contact the COR with any questions on specifications prior to submitting your RFP. Do not be afraid to question unclear or contradictory specifications. Doing this during the pre-bid process will reduce the number of problems you encounter after the award is made.
- ❑ **Create good relationships:** Building a good rapport with the CO or COR is important, even when the work appears to be straightforward. There are three good reasons for doing this: 1) You can find out what they really expect on the project from the person who will determine if the work is satisfactory, 2) CORs often have input into the award selection. Talking to them about the RFP specifications lets them know you are a serious bidder, and 3) It provides you with an opportunity to convey your experience and depth of understanding of the project which does not always come out as clearly in written proposals. But never assume verbal communication is a replacement for what you write in your proposal.

PROPOSAL EVALUATION FACTORS

Generally, when projects are offered through a RFP they are awarded on a *best value* basis instead of lowest bid. Best value contracting allows the agency to consider factors other than price. While contracting officers have a significant amount of discretion in how they construct a best value contract, there are a few general categories that you can expect to be considered when submitting an RFP: 1) Past performance and past experience 2) Technical Approach, and 3) Price.

In making an RFP award using a best value, the contracting officer will weigh the price in relation to the technical competency of the offeror and other specified factors. This means they may award the contract to someone with a bid higher than yours if they believe there is significant difference in what they will get for the price.

Below is some simple advice on what to include in your proposal. Remember, looking at the specific technical components of any solicitation is critical to successfully competing for an RFP contract.

The following factors may be considered in the award of RFPs and should be addressed in your proposal:

Past performance and past experience

- ❑ **Establish your skills:** Provide a history of your work experience which describes the *type of* work you have done that is relevant to the solicitation, as well as the number of years spent doing that type of work. You should also include a description of all related past work, including work on private lands and/or sub-contracts you have performed.
- ❑ **Demonstrate your credibility:** It is important to provide information that will tell the CO how well you performed in your previous contracts. There are three things to include: 1) A list of references for past work, 2) Evidence of compliance on previous contracts, and 3) Explanation of

any defaults, reworks, or claims. If you experienced difficulties on a previous contract then it is important to provide information about the cause and the remedy.

Technical Specifications and Approach

In this section, the CO asks you to describe how you will complete this project. For example, they may ask you to describe how you will minimize ground vegetation and soil impacts, what type of equipment you are using, the number and size of landings, how any material removed will be utilized, or whether or not you are hiring and/or training local or displaced timber workers, etc. How you respond to these criteria, and the cost of your services, will determine whether or not the contract is awarded to you. It is critical that you respond to specific project requirements in your proposal.

- ❑ **Demonstrate understanding of project requirements**
- ❑ **Provide information on the experience and qualifications of key personnel:** Highlighting formal education should not be as important as “on the ground” experience. For example, 20 years of maintaining and operating equipment is more relevant than 4 years of forestry school - so include both. Include specific jobs or contracts that key personnel included in your proposal, have worked on and their references.
- ❑ **Describe how you will implement the project:** Detail how you will accomplish the project and meet the specifications. Include how you will employ innovative techniques and methods, if any.
- ❑ **Describe what type of equipment you will use:** Include all supplies, tools, and equipment, indicating if the equipment will minimize environmental impacts.
- ❑ **Provide a work schedule and/or production plan:** Detail how you will accomplish the work within the contract time period.
- ❑ **Describe how you will meet special objectives in the RFP:** Some contracting provisions emphasize the importance of hiring or training local or displaced timber workers and other social objectives, such as those provided in the National Fire Plan. If the solicitation states these as objectives, be sure to address how you will accomplish those goals.
- ❑ **Describe your quality control and/or a self-inspection plan:** It is important to explain what methods you will use to ensure quality control, including how you will deal with problems if they arise during project implementation. Demonstrating that you have these measures in place will show that you will not be depending on government inspectors for quality control.
- ❑ **Safety and fire plan:** State that all work and equipment will meet or exceed OSHA standards. Detail communication and evacuation plans if operating equipment or climbing.
- ❑ **Administrative cost to the agency:** Cooperative, experienced contractors cost less to administer. Show you will work cooperatively with the agency to accomplish shared goals.
- ❑ **Only propose what you know you can deliver:** Commitments you make in the proposal become part of the contract to which you are legally bound once you sign the contract. Be realistic about what you can offer.

PRICE

- ❑ **Know the minimum (prevailing) wage standards:** You must show that you are compiling with wage standards, including fringe benefits, for the contract.
- ❑ **Bid appropriately:** Remember that RFPs do not have to be awarded to the lowest bidder. The solicitation will show the rankings of the criteria for selection but you need to remember that the contracting officer is looking for the best technical approach for the best price.

DEBRIEFING

If you are not awarded the contract, you are entitled to a debriefing with the contracting officer detailing the award committee’s evaluation of your proposals strengths and weaknesses. This is a good opportunity to get feedback to improve your future proposals. You can request this in person, by phone, or in writing.

If you would like more detailed technical assistance on various contracting tools, contact one of the following organizations for help:

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Sustainable Northwest is a Portland, Oregon-based nonprofit organization dedicated to forging a new economy in the Pacific Northwest – one that reinvests in the people, the communities, and the landscapes of the region. Our Mission is to build partnerships that promote environmentally sound economic development in communities of the Pacific Northwest.

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