

# Request for Qualifications (RFQ)

For a regional agriculture farm viability study.

## Announcement

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (“WestCOG”) has initiated a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process to identify and procure a qualified vendor to evaluate the challenges and opportunities facing future and current farmers in the Region and provide strategies for public and private stakeholders which will support, expand, and establish farming practices in the Region.

## About WestCOG

Founded in 2014, the Western Connecticut Council of Governments is one of nine regional Councils of Governments established pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes §4-124i et seq. WestCOG serves the Western Connecticut Planning Region, the second most populous and fastest growing region in Connecticut, with an estimated population of 620,000. With its location connecting New England to New York, Western Connecticut is an economically dynamic region, with strong cultural, educational, and natural amenities.

WestCOG is governed by the Chief Elected Officials (Mayors and First Selectmen) of its members, comprising three principal cities (Stamford, Norwalk, and Danbury) and fifteen surrounding towns (Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Redding, Ridgefield, Sherman, Weston, Westport, and Wilton).

Connecticut’s Council of Governments (COGs), which are recognized as county equivalents, provide a regional framework for cooperation among local governments and between the latter and state and federal agencies. COGs may “accept or participate in any grant, donation or program available to any political subdivision of the state and may also accept or participate any grant, donation or program made available to counties by any other governmental or private entity.” COGs may further exercise any power that any political subdivision of the state (e.g., municipalities and school districts) do<sup>1</sup>. Which authorities COGs exercise, and the extent to which they do so, is the decision of their governing boards.

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<sup>1</sup> These include but are not limited to: “(1) Engineering; (2) inspectional and planning; (3) economic development; (4) public safety; (5) emergency management; (6) animal control; (7) land use management; (8) tourism promotion; (9) social; (10) health; (11) education; (12) data management; (13) regional sewage; (14) housing; (15) computerized mapping; (16) household hazardous waste collection; (17) recycling; (18) public facility siting; (19) coordination of master planning; (20) vocational training and development; (21) solid waste disposal; (22) fire protection; (23) regional resource protection; (24) regional impact studies; and (25) transportation.” (CGS §8-31b(b))

WestCOG is associated with the WestCOG Foundation, Inc. a 501(c)3 charitable organization, whose mission is to promote environmental, social, and economic vitality and sustainability through regional cooperation and collaboration.

More information on WestCOG is available at <https://westcog.org>; more on the Foundation at <http://westcog.foundation>.

## Project Background

The Western Connecticut Region was once dominated by agriculture, but over the last 75 years, suburban development has resulted in the loss of many farms and decreased the availability and increased the cost of land for new farms, especially of large parcels whose soil and topography are suitable for the types of farming that once defined the region. This decline in the region's agricultural sector has been further hastened by the growth of – and competition from – agriculture in western states and international locations.

While these factors may limit the practicality of large-scale farming in the region, opportunities abound for farming at smaller scales. High land costs go hand-in-hand with market strength, meaning that large acreage may not be necessary to obtain adequate returns. Given the proximity of the region to the largest market in the nation, the NYC metro; the high incomes of the metro area; and growing preferences for fresh, locally grown food, the region is well positioned for an agricultural renaissance. Such new growth would likely diverge from the historical image of agriculture in the region, with a focus on smaller parcels, higher value crops, alternative cultivation methods (including organic and hydroponic), mixed use (e.g., solar array and shade crop colocation, farms with event programming/venues), and visitor experiences. The study will determine actionable best practices for advancing farming in the region under existing conditions.

## Scope of Work

The study shall identify and describe impediments to and opportunities for the growth of farming in the region and propose and facilitate the implementation of best practices and recommendations to realize this growth. The study shall explore the economics of agriculture at the micro and macro level by examining business opportunities, regulatory and technical obstacles, and innovations for growth that may advance farming in western Connecticut.

The study shall be informed by a Study Advisory Committee comprising stakeholders with relevant expertise or interest. Additionally, a survey shall be conducted and distributed throughout the region to collect the necessary data to inform the analyses outlined below. The survey shall be made available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

## Existing Conditions & Market Analysis

Existing agricultural operations and potential agricultural opportunities shall be reviewed to determine what their land and local regulatory needs are, and whether they are economically sustainable and viable. The region has excellent access to the largest and one of the wealthiest metropolitan areas in the country, an area defined by a world class array of restaurants, local and immigrant communities with cosmopolitan and diverse tastes, and households with disposable income. They also have an interest and desire for access to fresh, locally grown foods, including

fruits and vegetables – which the region, given its proximity, can provide. The analysis shall evaluate a broad range of traditional and novel opportunities, including but not limited to:

- Activation of ‘fallow’ public and nonprofit land. Land trusts and municipalities in the region collectively manage thousands of acres of land; much of this land may lend itself to farming. The study shall examine how land trusts and municipalities may integrate farming into underutilized land holdings.
- Farming in industrial and commercial zones. Greenhouse and indoor/rooftop farming can be accommodated in areas where soil quality is poor but utilities (electricity and public water are plentiful). These can help activate vacant industrial and commercial land.
- Farming on private land. Many property owners have underutilized land that could be leased to farmers.
- Agritourism and mixed use, allowing income from multiple sources. Wineries, vineyards, breweries, distilleries, corn mazes, recreational facilities, lodging, event venues and programming, and energy generation (e.g., solar) can provide farmers with important additional revenue.
- Higher value agricultural products, including organic and pesticide/herbicide-free produce, functional foods, and biomedical crops.
- Specialty products to satisfy market niches that are not addressed by national distributors. This may include perishable foods that cannot survive refrigeration, mechanical sorting, or long-distance shipping but can make it to local destinations.
- Commercialization of native plants may require fewer inputs (and thus less cost).

The Existing Conditions and Market Analysis shall:

- Evaluate existing agriculture conditions to create a baseline understanding of farming and agriculture in the region;
- Conduct a market analysis to inventory and identify existing and currently or potentially available farmland for each municipality in the region;
- Analyze the applicability of the inventory to various types of agricultural operations;
- Indicate the degree of viability of existing operations and potential opportunities identified in the region, including what land, regulatory, or other local/regional needs they may require.

## Regulatory Review

Local regulations often act as a barrier to the expansion of agriculture.

The Regulatory Review shall:

- Identify regulations that are an impediment to the types of farming and associated activities (e.g., farmstands/markets, food processing, hospitality, lodging, recreation, and energy generation) that the Market Analysis determined to be economically viable.

- Evaluate regulations in each of the region's eighteen member municipalities and make specific recommendations and proposals for regulatory changes to address these impediments.

### Sustainability Assessment

The globalization of the food system has expanded the impact of agriculture on the climate, given the greenhouse gas emissions associated with shipping (and refrigerating) produce from across the country and planet to the region. Changing farming practices that make local farming viable again can reduce emissions and thus mitigate climate change.

The Study shall evaluate and document the impact of local agriculture, to provide information to climate-aware local decision makers.

### Progress Evaluation Process

Develop a method for the future evaluation of this study. The process should include indicators measuring the progress towards reaching the objectives set forth by this study.

### Deliverables

The outputs of this study shall include:

- A comprehensive report with the following components: Existing Conditions and Market Analysis Report, Regulatory Review, Sustainability Assessment, and Progress Evaluation Process.
- Individualized briefing sheets for each municipality including regulatory updates to consider and other municipal specific opportunities for agriculture viability.
- Regional briefing sheet of actionable recommendations for WestCOG. At a minimum this shall include recommendations on working with area land trusts and municipalities to consider incorporating farming programs and incentives for local farmers and education platforms for residents in their communities.
- Final presentations of the study to potential/existing farmers and identified stakeholders.
- Survey Results

### Expertise Sought

To satisfy the proposed scope and framework, it is expected that the following knowledge, skills, and experience will be needed to complete the project:

- Track record of comparable projects that go to implementation and become self-sustaining, with few to no surprises and a long service life
- Knowledge of agricultural practices in Connecticut and/or New England and/or similar economic and climate environments
- Expertise in agricultural sustainability
- Expertise in governance and financial models
- Experience with economic and marketing analysis
- Expertise in local and state land use practices
- Ability to deliver on time and within budget

- Ability to research, analyze, and provide solutions to complex questions
- Ability to communicate specialized technical, financial, and legal matters to make them understandable by elected officials, civil servants, and to the public
- Ability to facilitate groups and lead them to actionable consensus
- Understanding of intergovernmental relationships and regional governance with experience in Connecticut and/or New England states preferable
- Expertise in marketing and communication during all development phases
- Project management experience

## Application Process

### Format

Each application should include the following components:

1. Cover page with project title; proposing firm; and name, telephone number, and e-mail address for the project manager.
2. Stage-based project approach. Each stage in the project should be briefly described, including timing/duration, output, and associated fee, including any fee options regarding the scope. Assumptions about the scope should be built into the proposal.
3. Work history. Similar or relevant work conducted by proposer in the past, with project outcomes, and client references. Name, title, employer, relationship to the project, telephone number, and e-mail address should be given for each reference.
4. Qualifications. Task assignments and resumes for key staff on project. The total hours each staff person is expected to spend on each task should be documented.
5. Corporate background. Include the history, location(s), length of time in existence, and structure of the firm; and demonstration of the capacity of the firm to carry out the project.
6. If a joint venture is proposed, provide the number of projects that have been conducted under previous joint ventures with the designated firm and the success of those joint ventures as measured by on time, and under budget performance and customer satisfaction with the performance of the work.
7. Signature of a representative of the firm having legal authority to contract for the firm.
8. A completed Organizational Conflict of Interest Statement that either warrants that there are no relevant facts or circumstances that could give rise to organizational conflicts of interest and/or, as applicable, gives a full, written disclosure of any such conflicts of interests.

Material submitted in response to this RFQ and received by WestCOG may be subject to provisions of the Connecticut Freedom of Information law (CGS §1-200 et seq.).

### How to apply

Proposals are due by the end of the application period, Tuesday, October 10, 2023, at 12:00PM ET. Submissions should be directed to Mr. Francis R. Pickering, Executive Director at [grants@westcog.org](mailto:grants@westcog.org), include the RFQ title in the subject line.

Submissions should be provided in PDF format, as a single file. The file may be attached to the e-mail, or, in case of a large submission (larger than 10 megabytes), linked in the e-mail. Recipients should enable delivery and read receipts in their e-mail client. No other confirmation will be given.

### Review and contracting

WestCOG will evaluate proposals received after the close of the application period. At this point, WestCOG may invite additional information from selected proposers, including but not necessarily limited to samples of other work or an in-person interview.

Should WestCOG determine to proceed with a proposal, WestCOG will begin contract negotiations, including on scope and fee, with the respective proposer. Should WestCOG and the selected proposer be unable to come to an agreement, WestCOG may terminate negotiations with that firm and revisit other proposals submitted.

It is expected that proposers will be notified of their submission by Monday, October 30, 2023. WestCOG may award the project in part or in full to one or more proposers, and cancel or reissue this RFQ. Any award will not be final until a contract has been negotiated and executed.

## Communications

### Location of posting

This RFQ may be found online at <https://westcog.org/about/rfps-grant-opportunities/> until October 30, 2023. It is the responsibility of interested parties to retrieve and store a copy of the RFQ beyond this date.

### Pre-bid meeting

A pre-bid meeting will be held on Wednesday, September 20, 2023 at 2:00 PM ET. The meeting will be held via video conference. Parties interested in attending should e-mail [grants@westcog.org](mailto:grants@westcog.org) for an invitation link by September 20, 2023 at 11:00 AM ET, include the RFQ title in the subject line. Attendance is optional and is not required in order to respond to this RFQ.

### Inquiries

Proposers may submit questions on this RFQ by Wednesday, September 20, 2023 at 11:45 PM ET. Questions should be directed to Mr. Francis R. Pickering, Executive Director at [grants@westcog.org](mailto:grants@westcog.org), include the RFQ title in the subject line. Answers will be posted online where WestCOG posted this RFQ on a rolling basis until the close of business on Friday, September 22, 2023.

No questions will be accepted by other forms of communication.

### Addenda and supplements

Should WestCOG amend or adjust this RFQ, such changes will be posted online where WestCOG posted this RFQ. It is the responsibility of proposers to check for changes to the RFQ.

## Conditions

### Legal requirements

Contracts awarded as a result of this RFQ are subject to all applicable federal and state laws, including those concerning civil rights, nondiscrimination, and equal opportunity. Any responses to this RFQ, as well as any work resulting from it, are subject to freedom of information.

### Insurance requirements

Proposers must maintain insurance coverage as required by federal and state law.

### Consortia, joint ventures, and teams

Proposals from consortia, joint ventures, and teams (“groups”) will be accepted. In such cases, a lead firm must be identified for contracting purposes. A work history and statement of qualifications (as described under *Expertise sought*) must be provided for each member of the group.

In designating a lead firm, groups should consider the following:

1. The lead firm should have sufficient experience and expertise to perform or supervise all facets of the project and must have sufficient resources to carry out the contractual responsibilities of the group.
2. The lead firm will be legally responsible to WestCOG for the performance of, and must perform at least 51% of, the total work awarded under any contract issued as a result of this RFQ.
3. Firms that are subsidiaries may not rely on the experience, expertise, or resources of its parent firm to meet these requirements.

### Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBE)

DBE firms are encouraged to respond to this RFQ.

If a DBE firm is proposed, the proposal must clearly identify the DBE firm, the role the DBE will play in the project, and the tasks assigned to the DBE. Proof of Connecticut DBE certification must be submitted with the proposal. Responses that fail to give proof of DBE certification and description of project involvement will not be identified as including DBE participation.

### Nonreimbursement of proposal costs

Costs associated with responses to this RFQ, including proposal development and participation in a selection process, are the sole responsibility of the respondent firms. WestCOG will not reimburse firms for such costs, nor will any selected firms be permitted to negotiate such costs as part of a contract with WestCOG.

### Conflict of interest

All relationships that may pose a conflict of interest, and actions that shall be taken to avoid or mitigate these conflicts, shall be disclosed as part of the response to this RFQ.

*This project is funded in part by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture’s Farm Viability Grant established by the Community Investment Act (C.G.S. Sec. 22-26j).*